

## **S'pore does well in study on racial, religious relations**

***Kok Xing Hui***

***Today***, 19 July 2013

SINGAPORE — Since independence, the Republic's racial and religious harmony has been held up as a model for other countries to emulate. Now, a set of indicators — co-created by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and OnePeople.sg — will make it possible to track the state of racial and religious relations.

And the inaugural scorecard, which was presented yesterday, saw Singapore doing well on most of the 10 indicators, including the absence of minority discrimination in using public services (9.75 out of a highest score of 10), absence of interracial and religious tension (7.99) and absence of minority discrimination in the workplace (7.56).

The indicators with the lowest scores were the presence of close interracial friendships (4.51), absence of minority perception of social exclusion (6.20), interest in intercultural understanding and interaction (6.49) and embracing colour blindness (6.96).

The scores were derived from a national survey of 4,131 Singaporeans who were 18 years old and above.

On how the scores should be interpreted, the study's Principal Investigator, Dr Mathew Mathews, a Research Fellow at IPS, said that while there was room for improvement for certain indicators, there was no failing mark. What the scorecard showed was a gap between the top-ranked indicators and those at the bottom, he said.

The indicators were developed after consultation with stakeholders and consideration of international research. About half of those surveyed ranked the set of 10 indicators among the top five indicators of racial and religious harmony.

As schools commemorate Racial Harmony Day today, the study found that 45 per cent of the respondents had a friend from a different race, although eight out of 10 said they were comfortable with having a close friend from another race or religion.

Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC Member of Parliament Zainudin Nordin, who is also Chairman of OnePeople.sg — a ground-up national body focused on building racial and religious harmony — noted that “you can have a person from the Chinese community who primarily has Chinese friends and it's not his fault” because about three-quarters of Singapore's population is Chinese.

Almost 40 per cent of the respondents felt that Malays and Indians have to work harder to get to top positions in their organisations.

The researchers said: “While experiences of discrimination among minorities in the workplace were confined to the experience of only a small portion, there is a perception that they had more barriers to cross in order to attain top positions.”

They added: "This fact cannot be easily attributed to minority bias since there is empathy from majority members, a third of whom perceive that minorities need to work harder to get to the top." The researchers said that "careful consideration must be made in the employment sector to identify the source of such perceptions and correct them as needed".

Almost half of the respondents said that they had a good idea of someone's behaviour and views once they knew his or her race. This is despite seven out of 10 respondents indicating that someone's race did not affect their interaction with him or her.

NUS sociologist Paulin Straughan felt that a stereotyping behaviour is not always bad. She drew a parallel to seeing a Caucasian and assuming he does not speak Chinese. "What we worry about are negative stereotypes ... but sometimes the kind of relationship that we attribute (to race) are not negative connotations," she said.

Ninety per cent of respondents said they were comfortable with having someone of another race as a neighbour, colleague or employee. Fewer, however, were open to having them as a spouse or marrying into their family.

Nanyang Technological University sociologist Kwok Kian Woon said variables such as age, education and ethnicity could be important considerations. Attitudes are very much tied to family upbringing, he said. "The data bears closer scrutiny, drilling down to a fine grain might be useful," he said.

Associate Professor Kwok also noted that, in general, there is an "asymmetrical" relationship between minority and majority races, where the minority groups "have to be somewhat more cautious about relating to the majority rather than vice versa".

The findings of the study — billed as the first comprehensive racial and religious harmony survey done here — will be presented to policymakers and the public. The next measurement of the indicators will be carried out in three to five years, said Dr Mathews.