

Why we need to talk about race

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The just-released Channel NewsAsia-Institute of Policy Studies survey on race relations captures the reality of multicultural living in Singapore.

Broadly put, it sheds light on how Singaporeans have — or believe they have — interpreted and exemplified our shared ethos of multiculturalism.

More than 95 per cent of the approximately 2,000 Singaporean residents surveyed agreed that diversity is valuable, and that all races should be treated equally and with respect.

They also reported that they lived peacefully with those of other races, standing up for them and accepting them.

While it is not possible to ascertain the depths of interactions, many respondents said they had friends of other races and attended their cultural celebrations.

Perhaps the Chinese Singaporean, who constitute three-quarters of our citizen population, should get some credit for positive race relations in Singapore.

Despite being an overwhelming majority, only a third of those surveyed supported the statement that “It is only natural that the needs of the majority race should be looked after first before the needs of the minority races”.

By not clamouring for majority rights, the Chinese have allowed the principles of meritocracy to gain substantial ground in Singapore.

This is evident from the 89 per cent of respondents across races in the survey who agreed with the statement that “Everyone who works hard, no matter what race they are, has an equal chance to become rich”.

But the strong endorsement of multicultural principles and relationships does not mean that our society is free from racism.

About a quarter of respondents perceived themselves to be at least mildly racist, while 38 per cent of all respondents rated their close friends similarly.

Asked how racist most Chinese, Malay and Indian Singaporeans were, nearly half of respondents classified each of these generalised groups as at least mildly racist.

Respondents were even more likely to use the racist label when asked to rate new migrants from China, India and the Philippines.

This finding can be explained by social psychological research, which has shown that people often view themselves more favourably.

We judge others based on their actions, but justify our own behaviour by pointing to our good intentions.

Nevertheless, the survey showed that a significant number of people had seen racism on display by others, which reminds us that it still rears its head in our society.

These racist behaviours are likely to be of a mild variety, for few of our respondents, including minorities, in the past two years, had experienced instances of insults, name calling, threats or harassment, which is the standard fare of racism in many societies.

In Singapore, perceptions of racism tend to be based on interpersonal actions that may subtly convey that one group is inferior.

In this regard, more minorities, compared with majority members, agreed that they had experienced incidents where “People have acted as if they think you are not smart”, or “People have acted as if they’re better than you are”.

While two-thirds of minorities who have experienced such incidents attributed these differential experiences to race, quite a number, at the same time, also linked this to their educational or income level. This implies that sometimes it is difficult to tease out the exact source of bias.

Another manifestation of the mild form of racism that respondents cited has to do with the presence of racial stereotypes.

Nearly half of respondents believed that people of some races are more disposed to having negative traits such as violence, getting into trouble and being unfriendly.

While stereotypes can be levelled at all groups, the effects of the stereotypes are different. Being labelled “enterprising”, “afraid to lose” and “money-minded” may be regarded as necessary traits for success in competitive market environments.

But to be viewed as “overly religious”, “boisterous”, “lazy” or “smelly” may have rather dire consequences in how one is treated, and might inhibit entry and progress in a profession.

It can sometimes also convey that one’s racial and cultural background is essentially second class and subject to derision.

Some have contended that racism can also be seen when people prefer a member of their race to fulfil certain roles. The survey results confirmed that most people are more comfortable with someone who is racially similar when it comes to marrying into the family, sharing personal problems, managing one’s own business, and the appointment of the Prime Minister and President.

Such preferences seem to be etched deep into our being, with some recent research claiming that even babies demonstrate such an in-group bias in choosing which other baby in their playgroup they will help.

However, in-group bias is not always adaptive. Thus, many more minorities, compared with majority respondents, reported their acceptance of the majority race fulfilling many roles — only 38 per cent of Chinese respondents would be accepting of a Malay Singaporean helping to manage their business, while practically all Chinese respondents would accept a fellow Chinese in that role.

However, 82 per cent of Malay respondents said they would accept a Singapore Chinese in that role.

This is because minorities who live in a space with many more majority members are aware that it is simply not tenable to expect only members of their race to fulfil important roles and relationships.

But in our increasingly cosmopolitan city, majority members also should realise that it may no longer be useful even for them to accept only those who are racially similar to themselves in many relationships.

The character of racism that exists in Singapore was not shaped by acrimonious histories that have plagued a number of societies, where specific groups have been actively subjugated, sometimes through slavery, and worse still, genocide.

Rather, the vestiges of racism here stem from our innate in-group preferences, which have sometimes left us lacking in sensitivity and self-awareness when we interact with those who are ethnically different.

If we are to overcome this, we need to talk about our differences, as much as we talk about our commonalities. It is through this process of frank discussion and an openness to understand others that we can eliminate unfair stereotypes and biases. With that, we can go beyond simply agreeing with our multicultural ideals to actually realising them in practice.

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