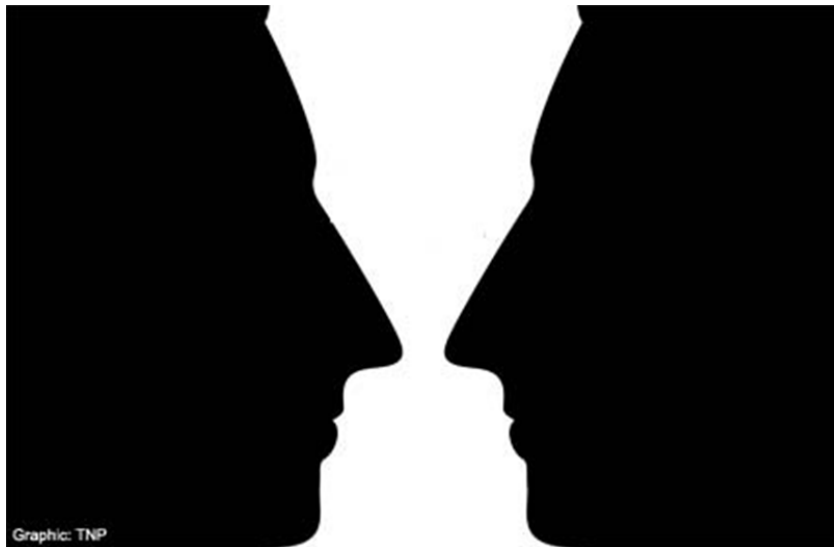


Neighbourhood may not be the right place



Esther Ng
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Look at the above illustration carefully. At first glance, it looks like two people facing each other. Look again and it's an hourglass. It's apt because new immigrants are part of the solution as time catches up with us and we age. But, they can be part of the problem if they don't integrate well.

An Institute of Policy Studies seminar on integration came up with some interesting results.

What Singaporeans think make for successful integration:

Respondents were asked to rate importance of each item from a list of 30. Here are the top six:

1. Respects multiracial and multi-religious practices (87 per cent)
2. Gets on well with neighbours (81 per cent)
3. Is gainfully employed (78 per cent)
4. Gets on well with workplace colleagues (75 per cent)
5. Able to speak conversational English (71 per cent)
6. Male child completes national service (69 per cent)

What new citizens think make for successful integration:

Respondents were asked to rate importance of each item from a list of 30. Here are the top six:

1. Respects multiracial and multi-religious practices (76 per cent)
2. Gets on well with neighbours (59 per cent)
3. Belongs to one of Singapore's main ethnic groups (57 per cent)
4. Is gainfully employed (55 per cent)
5. Owns residential property in Singapore (55 per cent)
6. Male child completes national service (43 per cent)

NOTE: 1,001 local-born citizens and 1,000 foreign-born citizens were interviewed between July and December 2010.

SOURCE: Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore

Q: Is the neighbourhood the right place for integration?

Dr Mathew Mathews, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that the neighbourhood is not the place for integration.

The neighbourhood or home is a haven for Singaporeans from the stresses of their workplace. And new immigrants in the neighbourhood bring the "unfamiliar to the doorstep", Dr Mathews said at an IPS conference on integration at Orchard Hotel yesterday.

For some Singaporeans, it is a "sense of threat at the heart of the neighbourhood".

A better approach would be to have "broad-based programmes" to encourage neighbourliness and make local-born Singaporeans feel secure that foreigners are not a threat to their jobs, Dr Mathews said.

National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Straughan felt that Dr Mathew's approach made sense.

"Work has dominated our everyday life, even our school children spend really long hours, and when Singaporeans come home at night, they want to spend time with their families," said Associate Professor Straughan.

Q: Is improving the Total Fertility Rate on the back burner?

Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Chan Chun Sing, who was present at the conference, reiterated that the Government had not abandoned improving the Total Fertility Rate (TFR).

Said Mr Chan: "It's not true, and it's never been true that we have only gone on one track of the strategy, which is to bring in immigrants."

Instead, the Government has "at different levels" tried to do three things together: Boosting the TFR, increasing labour and capital productivity and increasing immigration.

Q: What do economic model do Singaporeans want?

Mr Chan said Singaporeans must ask themselves now in 10 to 20 years' time what they need to do to provide meaningful opportunities for young people, and have people to look after the elderly.

Would we, for instance, prefer to have 10 highly educated Singaporeans as bankers, lawyers, doctors, traders, and hire three foreign workers to clean our streets and look after the elderly?

Or would we want the Japanese model - 10 highly-educated Japanese, but invest in three of them for cleaning and childcare and pay them a wage almost or equal to the other seven? The trade-off with the Japanese model is slower growth.

"If you're big and you're a bit slower, it's quite all right. If you're small and you're too slow, then we have a bit of a challenge," he said.

A foreign investor faced with the choice of investing between a "big-slow and a small-slow would put his money in a big-slow", Mr Chan said.