

Study reveals more positive view of life in Singapore; Still some way to go towards achieving ideal society: Respondents

Joy Fang

TODAY (Singapore), 24 July 2015

Residents of Singapore are describing society here in more positive terms such as “peace” and “educational opportunities” compared with three years ago, a survey assessing national values has found.

But even as terms like “elitist” and “deteriorating values” have been dropped from the list of terms picked by Singapore residents to describe society, there is still some way to go in achieving their ideal society, with several of the desired values selected by respondents, such as “compassion” and “quality of life”, missing from their assessment of society currently.

The National Values Assessment, conducted by Barrett Values Centre and aAdvantage Consulting Group, polled 2,000 citizens and permanent residents from March to June this year, asking them which words best reflect who they are, Singapore society today, and what they desire of the country and the workplace. The results were released at a closed-door discussion organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) yesterday.

In assessing themselves, several of the attributes that came up in the survey in 2012 remained, such as “family”, “caring” and “respect”, while new ones — “compassion” and “positive attitude” — also emerged. These replaced the values of “well-being” and “work-home balance”, which suggests a shift “from self-interest to caring for and looking after others”, said Mr Phil Clothier, chief executive officer of Barrett Values Centre, which has conducted the study in several countries.

While the findings indicate that people are acknowledging improvements in some areas, it does not mean that the previous attributes selected have disappeared from society; it just meant “people experience other factors more strongly”, he added.

In terms of how respondents viewed society, the attributes of “deteriorating values”, “elitist” and “uncertainty about the future”, which were picked by respondents in 2012, did not make the list, while new this year are “peace”, “education opportunities” and “effective healthcare”. But still on the list are terms such as “kiasu”, “kiasi”, “competitive”, “materialistic” and “self-centred”, which are considered “potentially limiting” to society.

Dr Gillian Koh, IPS’ Senior Research Fellow, said the emergence of more positive values about society show that government efforts have paid off. “There have been many policy shifts and many new policy initiatives to deal with some of the concerns Singaporeans have over the past few years,” said Dr Koh, who was one of the speakers at the closed-door discussion yesterday. People also appreciate the peace in Singapore more now, given the lack of peace and security around the world, she noted.

Former head of Civil Service Lim Siong Guan, who was also a speaker, said attributes such as “materialism” or “self-centredness” are outcomes of a “meritocracy gone wrong”. “Meritocracy has to be tempered with the precept of ‘enlightened self-interest’, where the success of the group and Singapore is also success for the individual ... otherwise meritocracy brings itself down to pride, disdain of others, condescension and sense of entitlement,” said

Mr Lim, who is also chairman of Honour (Singapore), a non-profit group advocating a culture of honour. Schools, authorities and employers should “create good conditions for these positive self-perceptions to be manifested in public and good behaviour”, he suggested.

As for what people desired in society, “affordable housing”, “caring for the elderly”, “effective healthcare” and “compassion” still ranked high. Mr Clothier said “this reflects the global consciousness about what is necessary to create good life conditions for all”.

The survey also measured Singapore’s level of “cultural entropy”, or the degree of a society’s dysfunction. Thirty-seven per cent of the attributes selected by respondents here were “potentially limiting” ones that can be destructive and unproductive for society, down from 41 per cent three years ago. This is better than Sweden’s 43 per cent and the United States’ 56 per cent, but worse than Switzerland’s 26 per cent and the UAE’s 12 per cent.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser said the unfavourable responses in the 2012 survey could have stemmed from concerns about housing, healthcare, transportation and immigration at the time. “Since then, there is some confidence that these things have been or are being addressed by the Government, resulting in a more positive feeling of well-being, and thereby an inclination towards being less self-focused,” he said.

For the workplace, respondents desired personal and relational values such as “work-home balance”, “employee recognition” and “teamwork”. However, they assessed their workplaces as focused on performance, selecting attributes as “brand image”, “long hours”, “results-orientation”, “profit” and “cost reduction”.

Mr Clothier said attributes such as “long hours” and “cost reduction” are attributes that could create negative energy if they persist.