

Social Values and Norms for Inclusiveness: A Report on Dialogues among Community Leaders

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Introduction

Social norms are behavioural expressions of abstract social values that underlie our preferences in a group community in various situations. These norms are developed, often over time and in consensus with the majority of a group of people, to help set members' priorities, choose between alternatives and provide basis for daily living assessments. Both social values and norms are related to the processes of (formal and informal) learning and communication through interactions.

Social values form the basis of norms development. Norms usually refer to specific reactions or behaviours in a particular situation based on widely accepted or circulating social values or standard of desirability in the community. For example, the norm "everyone should queue to board the bus" involves the value of equality, honesty, efficiency and respect for orderliness. Social values can be independent of social norms, but usually not vice versa. In other words, widely accepted social values provide the grounds for accepting or rejecting certain behavioural norms. For example, while the value of personal freedom is valued highly in a society and, hence, condones the norm of speaking one's mind freely, this norm may not be valued as highly in a society that values mutual respect and understanding.

Social values and norms serve several functions in the society:

1. They provide a guideline for expected modes of social behaviour
2. They hold the society together by providing some form of stability and uniformity
3. They create a sense of belonging and bonding with members of the social group and promote cohesiveness
4. They facilitate legal rules making and maintain social order

Although social values and norms serve the above functions in a society, norms are often relative and vary from society to society, or even from group to group (according to age, gender, education level, etc.) within the same society. All norms do not carry the same degree of importance, depending on the values that underlie it. Also, some norms are carried out stricter than the others, and violators are more severely punished socially or

legally. For example, in the Singapore society, jay walking is relatively more acceptable than speaking loudly in public transport, although both rested on the value of social order. And because norm is the outward manifestation of one's adherence to a value accepted by the wider group, norms are very often internalized by members who wish to blend in and to feel accepted, and in some cases, to the effect of forming part of one's personal identity. Due to the various characteristics of social values and norms discussed above, it is not surprising that when a well-accepted social norm is seen constantly being violated, the people who subscribe to these norms also felt their values, and even their identities, suffered similar blow.

Values and norms also often form the foundation on which laws and regulations are developed, and on which development are measured against. When these are violated, the society is perceived to have stepped backwards and its members would be motivated to restore or review these values and norms, and/or redevelop new ones that cater better to changing times and needs.

Social values and norms usually stabilise over time, if without constant external stimuli. Increased trend of immigration is often seen as a challenge to the stability of social norms and values. With the goal to foster a better understanding of the challenges of integration among different immigrant groups, and to find ways for civic organisations to provide leadership in promoting integration, the Institute of Policy Studies convened four closed-door dialogue sessions with leaders of immigrant and local associations between April and May 2013. A total of 40 organisations were represented at these dialogue sessions.

The four dialogue sessions aimed to allow both the local born Singaporean community leaders and the immigration association leaders to clarify their concerns and interests with each other, promote understanding and forge ties among the local born Singaporeans and immigrants with the aim to promote better integration of foreign immigrants into the local society.

Various themes were discussed in these dialogue sessions, one of which is to look into the area of social norms and values. During these dialogue sessions, participants were asked to discuss their thoughts on the following questions in groups: "What are important social norms to follow when living in Singapore?" and "What are some of the social values that are seen as important in the Singapore society?" Each group was to come up with a list of social values and norms that they thought were important to Singapore. In addition, at the end of the dialogue session, each participant was asked to write down on a piece of provided paper the top three norms or values that they think were most important for living in Singapore. There were no given choices to pick from; participants were free to contribute their views.

The data collected from all four sessions were collated and analysed qualitatively. Four distinct sets of social values and norms emerged, pertaining to social values and norms that guides interactional encounters (including respect, tolerance, acceptance, understanding) and those that promote orderly behaviour (orderliness, law abiding, queuing), values that underlie government and social institutions (honesty, transparency, integrity, fairness, sense of justice), as well as values and norms embedded in cultural elements (language identity, common language). The following definitions also emerged through the discussion: values

are culturally defined standards held by individuals or groups about what is desirable, proper, beautiful, good or bad that serve as broad guidelines for social life, whereas norms are rules that a group uses for appropriate and inappropriate attitudes and behaviours. These rules may be explicit or implicit. Failure to follow the rules can result in punishments, including exclusion from the group. The four sets of values and norms were discussed in all four dialogue sessions, although the contents and extent of discussion may vary across the four dialogue sessions and among the two groups of participants. The following sections discuss these findings in more details.

Important Social Norms and Values

Interactional Encounters

Interactional norms and values are those that are applied in situation where one is in contact with another member of the society, where interaction is necessary, and where clashes of cultures, if any, are most likely to happen and be encountered. Data collected from the four closed door dialogue sessions show that participants were most concerned about respecting diversity, including linguistic, religious, cultural, social and national diversities, promoting inclusiveness and harmony, being able to keep an open mind to other cultures, and to accept and adapt to diversity.

The values and norms included in this set were highlighted most, both in the group discussion as well as listed by individual participants on what they think are the three most important norms and values living in Singapore. The result is hardly surprising as there is a natural tendency and urge for one to fit into the society and group that one lives in, and the way this is done or assessed to have been done is through daily interactions. Both local Singaporeans and immigrant participants were appreciative of the diversity found in Singapore, in terms of cultures, food and language, etc., and agreed on the importance of enhancing inclusiveness and harmony in the various dimensions of social life.

The discussion also included finding ways to achieve inclusiveness. One suggestion was for members to be open-minded, willing to learn from each other, accept and adapt to differences, as well as follow well established social etiquette or norms like not raising one's voice in public, keeping the environment clean, and be law-abiding.

Participants from the four dialogue sessions also discussed the need to differentiate between "tolerance" and "acceptance" and to move from the former to the latter in order to enhance inclusiveness. Several participants opined that, when tolerating, one is putting up with something you do not agree or like; whereas in accepting, one understands and respects diversities and differences. It was also agreed that, to foster greater integration, people should be encouraged to take more initiatives in getting to know each other and his/her respective cultures and values. A challenge to this initiative is to consciously find ways to break down barriers and boundaries. A participant recounted his experience of often not being invited to lunch due to his dietary preferences, and how he managed to break the barrier by simply initiating participation instead of passively waiting for his colleagues' invitation:

“...a lot of what we do is on food...it is your culture...A lot of things revolve around food, you guys discuss work stuff over food. I want to be part of that...I made a place for myself because I have a loud mouth...It was not easy to break in.”

~ a newly naturalized Singaporean, since 2005, ethnic Indian

Another suggestion to promote inclusiveness is for participants to join activities at the grass root level to meet and know more about one's neighbours. It is also through the observations of others that one could reflect on one's own values and behaviours, and then work towards building or modifying social norms on a common ground for better integration.

Orderly Behaviours

Norms and values that were named in this category are mainly behaviours that are thought to be condoned by the Singapore society and people at large to maintain an orderly, safe and clean society. These include respecting the rules of law, observing social orderliness and social etiquettes, like queuing, not speaking loudly in public, no littering and no jaywalking. “Singapore is a fine country”, this is a characteristic that many participants identified with, particularly in the legal sense.

The discussion on orderly behaviours was discussed quite a bit in all of the dialogue sessions, focussing on how Singaporeans are generally law-abiding citizens. Both local Singaporeans and immigrant participants agreed that social and legal rules allow for a more efficient and orderly society to develop, they also acknowledged that maintaining orderliness and social etiquettes are important. It was also highlighted that, as with any community of practice, new immigrants may require a transition period to acquire some of these social behaviours. For example, it was highlighted in several dialogue sessions that queuing is not found in some other Asian countries, and came as a shock to some new immigrants when they realized the extent to which it is practised here. However, when these new immigrants have gotten used to it, they appreciate this social norm for its efficiency, orderliness, and fairness.

While there was much appreciation of the safe and efficient society upheld by law abiding citizens, there were questions raised whether Singaporeans were being too conditioned into following the rules and not having enough human touch, and if the Singapore society is too structured by rules and regulations, and without which, the society may not function as well. Another observation shared by participants was that, there can be several interpretations to a social rule/norm, and highlighted the need to have more education to enhance the awareness of the general public of these norms.

Foundational Values for Government and Society

The third set of important social values and norms include fairness, honesty, meritocracy, transparency and integrity. Many immigrants were appreciative of the high level of fairness and transparency upheld in government sectors, the workplace, and the social sphere. Meritocracy, which opens up equal opportunities, was also well received by both the local

Singaporeans and foreign immigrants. Both sides agreed that this is an important value that defines Singapore.

In the dialogue sessions, participants were reminded that fairness is subjective, and can be perceived differently. A dialogue participant shared his view and said:

“...(in the country where I came from) expatriates...normally take top positions in companies. Sometimes we also feel that it is not fair. Why do the foreigners come and take...the position in the top post while we the locals have to work under him...But I feel that, these foreigners compared to locals have their own skill set that isn't available in the locals...this is not happening only in Singapore. It is happening around the world. When foreigners come in here. We are actually working and contributing to the society.”

~ A male Indonesian living in Singapore for the past 9 years

While new immigrants and foreign expatriates find the fair and meritocratic system in Singapore recognizes their hard work and provide job opportunities for them, local born Singaporeans are upset about the competition this brought about, and deem the situation unfair for people who were born and bred here. And so, while meritocracy was accepted and appreciated as strong foundational value for the society, who should be the beneficiaries of this value is being contested.

Cultural Values and Norms

The fourth set of social values and norms is an extension of the first set, in that, participants call for mutual respect of each other's cultures and histories to be connected, through the use of a common language.

There was consensus at the dialogue sessions that speaking a common language would facilitate communication and forge ties, and this has to start with mutual respect of each other's cultures and histories. However, whose culture and history take precedent seem to be a point of contest for the participants. A local born Singaporean shared his view:

“...if our new immigrants, (who are) calling Singapore home, takes the extra effort to pick up one of the most important attributes of integration – (learning to speak) English...not as profound but basic words, simple basic English and understand some of our localities, that will be excellent.”

Another participant, a Chinese national living in Singapore for the past five years pointed out that

“...when new immigrants come in, when they have difficulties, if you are able to help them with their mother tongues, if you are able to offer them a point with the native analogy to understand, you will greatly help them to integrate into the society rather to tell them that, hey, we are diversified.”

From the dialogues, we found that newer immigrants tended to draw a closer link between their cultural heritage and mother tongue, while immigrants whose second or third

generations were born here acknowledged the generational shift in the link between cultural and language identity.

Language is an important tool for interaction, drawing back on the first set of value and norm, participants acknowledged that it is important to accept and respect the cultures of the person whom we are interacting with, at the same time, respecting and adapting to the language environment that we are now in.

Conclusion

Most immigrants were appreciative of the diversities found in Singapore and the efforts to thrive for inclusiveness and harmony in various aspects of life. To maintain these efforts, there is consensus among the local born Singaporeans and immigrants that mutual acceptance is more important than tolerance, so that the different communities understand, respect and embrace each other's' cultures and values.

The discussion of orderliness centered on how Singaporeans are generally law-abiding citizens, and the affirmation that these social and legal rules allow for a more efficient and orderly society to develop. It was also highlighted that the social norm of queuing was not practised in some of the immigrants' originating countries to the extent like in Singapore, and some new immigrants needed some time to get used to it.

The third set of important social values and norms surrounds around fairness, honesty, meritocracy and integrity. Many immigrants were appreciative of the high level of fairness and transparency uphold in the government, the workplace, and the social sphere, as well as the opportunities that were available to them due to the fair and just system. However, fairness can be subjective.

Regarding the norms of language usage in Singapore, there is consensus in the discussion that a common language should preferably be spoken, between new, old and local-born Singaporeans, to facilitate communication and to forge ties, no matter what that language may be.

In the four dialogue sessions, there are no major differences among the local-born and new citizens regarding which social values and norms are most treasured in the Singapore society. Abiding to social values and norms in a society is a learned process and may culminate in one internalising the behaviours, to feel connected and to live one's life meaningfully in the society.

When people holding different values live together, new standards will have to be established for social norms acceptable to the majority. Issues pertaining to both conformity and conflict tend to surface in the process while new sets of social values and norms are being established. Internalised values and behavioural norms that one grew up with may be examined, reviewed, criticised and regulated. No matter which set of norms and values eventually emerge, it is often the attitudes in manifesting these values and norms that count: whether one could see eye-to-eye, hear each other out, and feel heart-to-heart with each other. There must also be the willingness to integrate, to initiate understanding, to embrace differences, and to love the imperfect partner.

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