I'm a great person; you, on the other hand…

Bertha Henson
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Sometimes I think we're a nation of hypocrites. We believe ourselves to be imbued with great personal values like honesty – but everybody else is kiasi, kiasu, complaining and materialistic and so forth. The survey on values released yesterday didn't reflect many changes in the way Singaporeans see themselves, society or what they want society to be like. The Straits Times tried to make much of fun and humour being added to the top 10 personal values but the news is really – not much news. We're still what we were six years ago.

It's interesting how the Institute of Policy Study researchers viewed the dissonance between personal values and society's behaviour. ST reported Dr Gillian Koh as saying: "When people step out of the door in the morning, when they get to their workplaces or their schools, or whatever it is, it sounds like they have to put on a different persona."

She added that this stems from how some Singaporeans feel that the way their life is structured makes it difficult to exercise their personal values outside of their homes and in society.

Is this so? I doubt if any of the respondents seriously believe they change stripes when they step out of the home. They probably think that everybody else is just quite, quite bad.

The significance of the survey, methinks, is about how "potentially limiting" and destructive those negative traits we have about our society can be. They made up 41 per cent of all attributes, higher than the 37 per cent in 2015. (Complaining got added to the list this year). This is better than Sweden's 44 per cent and Finland's 49 per cent, but worse than Bhutan's 4 per cent, United Arab Emirates' 12 per cent, and Denmark's 21 per cent.

Again, the researchers tried to put a good spin on it. That the higher score could be due to a higher level of self-criticism, rather than a sign of cultural dysfunction.

I like their "positive attitude" which, by the way, has dropped out of the list of personal values.

I wish more was said about the "potentially limiting" effects of our views. What does the phrase mean? Should we try to change some things about ourselves or be more charitable about the way we see others? And what does Assoc Prof Tan Ern Ser, one of the researchers, mean when he said we needed an "affirming culture"?

I can only guess that viewing society in such a negative way merely entrenches, or even justifies, bad societal behavior.

1. If everybody is complaining, you'll stick out like a sore thumb if you say otherwise. So you shut up. (Because courage isn't on your list of personal values)

2. If the buffet table is crowded with kiasu people, you have "no choice" but to join in. (I wonder if the list included "pragmatism".)

3. If everybody is making money out of something, you look stupid if you don't do the same. (Even though you swear you're not materialistic)

What's worse is if we see no sense in doing good because society is "like that" – a mean-spirited, grasping whole.

Another point: I was surprised that the reports did not refer much to how peace and security have dropped out the list of societal values and do not even feature in our ideals for society. Is this now something we take for granted despite repeated calls for vigilance? Isn't safety and security one of the greatest attributes we have?

What also surprised me was how "respect" has edged into the list of ideals, trumping quality of life, peace and employment prospects. What has accounted for this change? Are we referring to respect for each other, regardless of socio-economic status? Is this the result of our debate on meritocracy (which doesn't feature anywhere at all in the survey?) Or maybe it's about respect for society's wishes and desires?

I wish the researchers had shed more light on the findings. Survey results are "fun" but they are useless if they do not tell a story