Institute of Policy Studies

Report on Young Singaporeans Conference 2020: Choices

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The Young Singaporeans Conference (YSC) is a marquee biennial event on the IPS calendar. Held from 25 to 27 November 2020, the conference gathers young Singaporeans who have shown leadership or excellence in their respective fields to discuss issues of national interest and public policy. In consideration of the COVID-19 pandemic, YSC 2020 was held online.

This conference is a part of a larger objective to envision what it means to achieve happiness, prosperity, and progress for ourselves and our nation over the next decade taking global economic, geopolitical, and social trends into account. Its outcomes feed into a broader year-long scenario-planning project called "Reimagining Singapore 2030".

Opening Plenary

The YSC opening plenary, moderated by Dr Chew Han Ei from IPS Social Lab, was launched by speakers Ms Amanda Chong, Mr David Hoe, Mr Aaron Maniam and Mr Mohamed Irshad. Drawing from their diverse experiences working in academia, the public sector, non-profit organisations and other areas, the speakers explored the topic of happiness, prosperity and progress (HPP) in Singapore. In his opening remarks, Dr Han shared a sentiment analysis he conducted on the submissions written by participants of the YSC. Most of the essays expressed a positive outlook, especially from female and younger participants. Underlying the positivity, however, was a recognition from most participants of the need for Singaporean society to address growing problems such as mental health issues and climate change.

A key point shared during the session was the three-dimensional nature of HPP and how it could not be easily defined. A useful framework for beginning to approach the concepts would be by breaking them down into four concepts: "Easy" HPP — giving access for all in Singapore to achieve aspects of their aspirations; "Hard" HPP — national solidarity that is hard-earned from going through difficult experiences; "Serious" HPP — helping those in Singapore realise that the journey towards their aspirations are as meaningful as the outcomes they achieve; and finally, "Social" HPP — the meaningful growth that occurs when interacting with others in a community. Based on this framework, speakers also shared that in the original version of Singapore's Pledge, happiness and progress were thought of as being the result of helping one other. Prosperity was added to the final version of the pledge to reflect Singapore's achievement of moving from the Third World to First World country in a single generation. The speakers had thought that prosperity was originally conceptualised in Singapore as a fixed,

linear arc of achieving material wealth. They were heartened that today's youth were leaning towards more collective rather than individualistic visions of how to achieve prosperity.

It was noted, however, that collective prosperity has become very hard to achieve in today's day and age. Internationally, there has been a trend of polarisation as societies have become diverse, with increasingly worrying levels of vitriol expressed online. Participants were urged to continue searching for ways to agree to disagree yet continue to be a harmonious Singapore together that moves in a shared direction. Picking up on the theme of diversity, speakers noted that youth might have differing levels of aspirations based on their backgrounds. To achieve one's aspirations, one has to know what their aspirations are; however, the speakers' experience working with underprivileged youth has shown that some may not be aware of the possibilities open to them due to their lived experiences. The speakers concluded that the best way to learn about HPP was to listen to others' stories and to tell your own with authenticity. The speakers acknowledged that YSC could be an avenue of opportunity to enable this sort of growth.

The Meaning of Happiness, Prosperity, and Progress (HPP)

The first session of this year's Young Singaporeans Conference was titled "Meaning of Me — Why Should the Happiness, Prosperity, and Progress (HPP) of Singapore Matter to Young People?" Facilitating the session were Mr Shazly Zain and Mr Aaron Maniam from IPS and Ministry of Communications and Information, respectively. The speakers for the session were members of academic, policy and civil service sectors. They were Mr David Chua, CEO of the National Youth Council (NYC); Ms Dipa Swaminathan, a professional lawyer who also runs ItsRainingRaincoats, a social initiative for migrant workers welfare; and Ms Melissa Low, a Research Fellow at the Energy Studies Institute who is known for her climate change-related policy work.
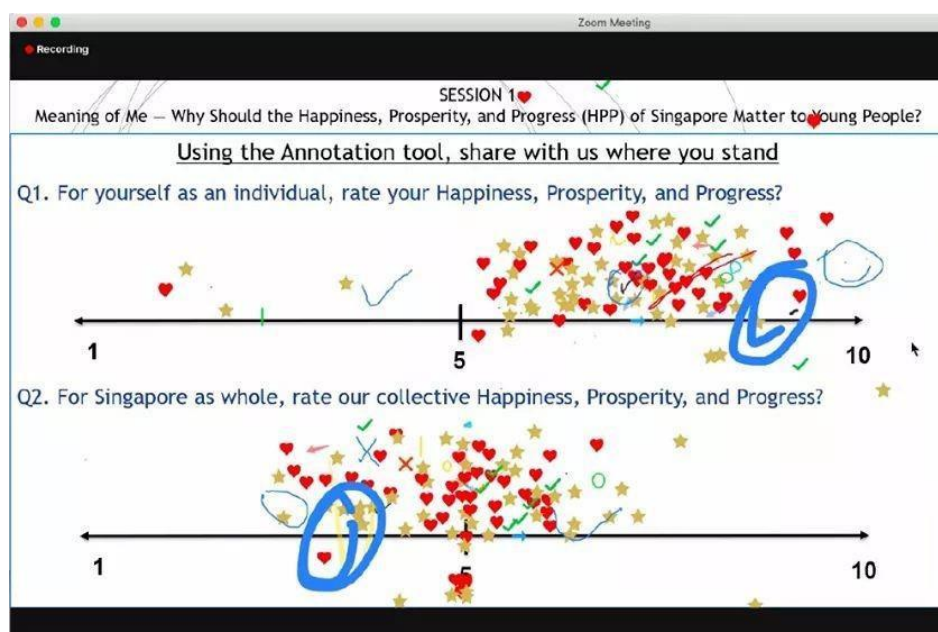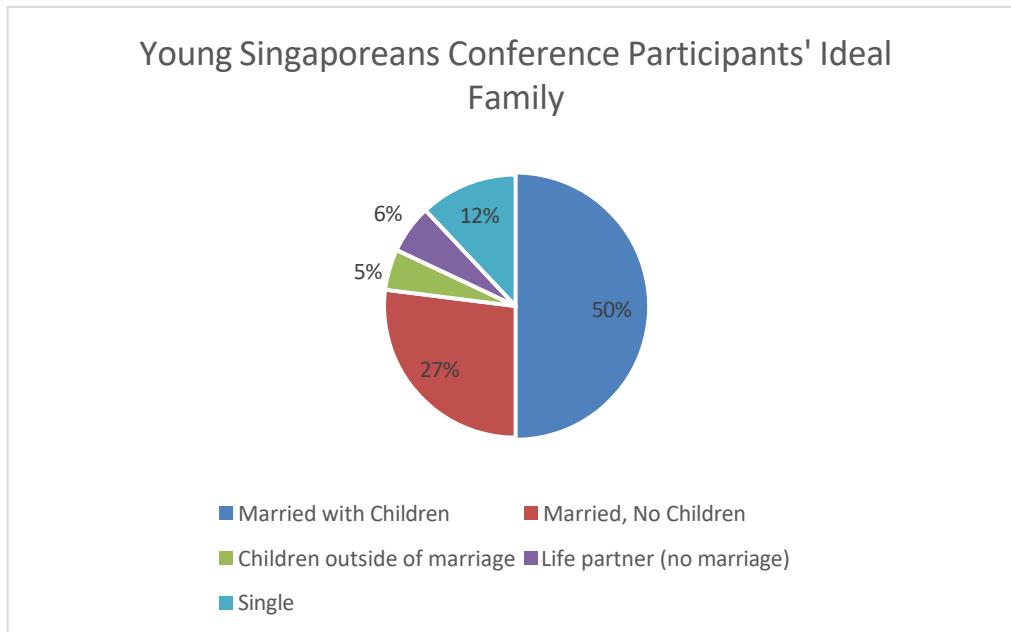

Annotated poll on participants' and Singapore's collective HPP. Disclaimer: The poll is informal and may not represent the true feelings of the participants.

The session started with an interactive poll to determine how participants felt about their own HPP as well as how they felt about Singapore's collective HPP. Participants were asked to rank their HPP on a scale from 1 to 10 and the results were shared online with all participants. The poll generated a somewhat surprising result as individual HPP points were clustered around 5 to 7, while the collective HPP of Singapore was clustered lower at 2.5 to 5. Naturally, the discussion that followed alluded to these results to determine why collective HPP levels seemed lower to participants. This facilitated an intriguing and vibrant discussion about personal and individual happiness as compared with norms valued by society at large. Speakers shared anecdotes of their personal life that deeply resonated with the younger participants who appreciated the candour and allowed for a much more open conversation between participants about how to balance the expectations of society with personal values. Given the diverse backgrounds of participants and speakers, there was a blend of stories of personal experiences and societal and political factors that determined how people were feeling as individuals and as a collective.

Next, the discussion progressed to whether it was possible to define HPP for society. The speakers suggested that there were different levels of HPP that individuals experienced, depending on the challenge or context derived from the activity. HPP may not be a fixed ideal but is in constant evolution through our lives. The speakers agreed and suggested that people could be happy in some aspect of their lives — like in work and in their community — but unhappy in other aspects of their lives like family and meeting societal expectations. Some of the participants built on these feelings by sharing how they believed socially determined values hindered individual well-being. One participant shared that divorce rates in Singapore seemed to be rising, reflecting that individuals may be pressured to conform to the norms of marriage when they were not ready, hence the divorces. Another participant suggested that it was time to challenge ideals held by society to encourage more individualism in determining indicators of success and happiness. A speaker concurred with this view and suggested that the government should not be the only ones defining HPP indicators for people. It is in the hands of individuals to constantly push the existing boundaries and redefine HPP means at the individual, societal, national, and even global levels. While there was no consensus on finding values of HPP as a society, the conversation was constructive, and participants seemed to recognise the need for greater participation in the social debate about happiness. The speakers encouraged the participants to engage with the youth organisations such that their views can be heard in the political sphere of policy making.

The lively discussion was followed by a poll to determine how the younger generation felt about marriage and what they deemed to be an ideal family life. The panel questioned if the poll itself led to societal expectations of what family norms are, and that those that opted for marriage may have been influenced by existing policies and laws. A speaker felt that the poll indicated that people may not want to upset the existing ecosystem of norms and values. However, another speaker shared the importance of ensuring that policies encouraged, not punish those who make different choices. Speakers shared the dangers of microaggressions and how some policies, while balancing trade-offs and supposed societal norms, have unintended consequences on others, making them feel inadequate for not picking "right choices".

Young Singaporeans Conference Participants' Ideal Family

Married with Children: 50%
Married, No Children: 27%
Children outside of marriage: 5%
Life partner (no marriage): 6%
Single: 12%

Disclaimer: The poll is informal and may not represent the true feelings of the participants.

Moving from the institution of marriage, the conversation shifted to gender inequality and roles, and whether gender had affected participants ability to live out their versions of HPP. Rather surprisingly, female participants did not seem to find that their gender had hindered their success. The speakers shared their personal success and a female participant shared how her start-up was able to get some additional marketing awareness because of her role as a female founder. Yet, a fellow participant argued that the fact that her gender was a selling point seemed to indicate an existing inequality. Participants suggested that gender inequalities do not just affect women but also men, a point that was acknowledged by a male participant who felt that men were expected to take on more responsibility and leadership roles. Another viewpoint brought up by participants was that there were other inequalities that deserved more attention in Singapore. Participants pointed to socioeconomic inequalities that result in children of wealthier backgrounds getting a better head start in life due to access to superior tuition and education from a young age.

The session concluded with the speakers commending the younger participants for their views and encouraging them to keep the constructive conversation about HPP going by actively participating in society.

Finding True Prosperity in Life

The second thematic session of YSC, "Making Life Work", was facilitated by poet and co-founder of ReadAble Ms Amanda Chong and IPS Postdoctoral Fellow Dr Teo Kay Key, and featured Mr Chong Zi Liang, author of *Art Science Millennial*, Engineering Good's Mr Johann Annuar, and Mr Ervin Yeo from CapitaLand as panellists. Dr Teo began by sharing the results of a survey that polled audience members on their views towards education and success. The results showed that attendees leaned more towards education being a way to promote social mobility, open pathways and achieve success, and that respondents saw success as linked to academic achievement. However, the poll also demonstrated that respondents believed

success comes more readily to families with means, who had a "leg up" in life. The speakers began their discussion by contemplating what true prosperity means to them, drawing from personal and professional experiences to discuss how their views had changed over the years. There was a focus on the idea of "true prosperity", which goes beyond material possessions. One of the speakers believed that prosperity should refer to feeling successful in one's pursuits, while another speaker described prosperity as being worry-free and answerable to only oneself.

The speakers also raised points about how we tend to focus on creating categories in society, such as educational backgrounds and schools, that lead to stereotypes being made about individuals. Referring to the poll results shown at the beginning of the sessions, the panellists agreed that the current education system, including admissions systems, DSA programmes and scholarships, entrenches inequality. Building on this discussion, attention turned towards the topic of privilege. There was a consensus among the speakers that achieving success without good grades tends to be something only privileged people can manage, and that for many low-income families, good grades are the only way to have social mobility. One speaker highlighted how with tuition and connections, people with means have ways to "boost" themselves beyond grades. The panellists also agreed that being an entrepreneur is typically only possible for those from privileged backgrounds, who do not have as many financial responsibilities and can take more risks. The speakers were also asked about how societal pressures and expectations shaped their choices, particularly in relation to gendered norms. One speaker argued that there tended to be greater expectations placed on women to get married and have children, and that there were assumptions that women sought a heteronormative lifestyle and to reproduce in their "prime". Another panellist raised the point that this norm has to do with ideals shaped by government policies which prioritise heteronormative relationships, legal marriages, and natural births, and that such policies neglect many people who do not follow such expectations.

When asked what public policy changes, they would like to see in the future, most present in the session focused on the topic of mental health, saying that it should be made less of a taboo through public awareness campaigns and support for mental health issues. One of the speakers also pointed out that there were other taboo topics that needed to be discussed more openly, such as miscarriages and female reproductive health. Some of the speakers also stated that another ideal policy change would be to emphasis less on grades and educational background during job applications and interviews. Prompted by a question from a participant, the speakers also shared personal experiences of how they found happiness and purpose in their own lives and careers. Closing the session, the facilitators put a spotlight on the word-cloud that the participants had contributed at the beginning of the session, featuring words and phrases that they associated with success. The three most popular words in the word-cloud were "contentment", "money" and "happiness". Overall, during the session, there was a consensus that true prosperity changes and may differ between individuals, but that it should be inclusive to accommodate for a variety of paths in life.

Creating Constructive Conversations

The third session of the conference, titled "Creating Constructive Conversations — Choices for Making Progress in Civil Society", was facilitated by Mr Mohamed Irshad from Roses of Peace and IPS Research Fellow Dr Kalpana Vignehsa. Speakers Mr Mark Tan from Rice Media, yoga and fitness coach Ms Alyaa Rauff who is also known for her social work on race, and Mr Ho Ren Hua from Thai Wah Public Company Limited were invited to share what constructive dialogue meant to each of them.

The session began with the speakers highlighting the lack of positivity on cyber space, where negativity tends to be more viral. There is the need for safe spaces online, whereby sensitive issues such as religion and race can be properly delved into. Building on the need for interracial dialogue, the speakers shared their personal encounters with racism, e.g., as a dark-complexioned, curly-haired minority in Singapore, and how it taught them the importance of starting conversations about race. They directed the audience's attention to Minority Voices, a local youth-led initiative that foregrounds the invisible experiences of minorities in Singapore. Another speaker highlighted the online aspect of conversations; in their comparison with communication technologies 10 years ago and now, speakers noted that technology may have empowered people with greater knowledge, but also reduced the natural distance needed for reflection and self-awareness.

Speakers raised the need to have constructive conversations on both professional and personal levels. Content creators must be mindful of the potential noise they may be creating, while having empathy and sensitivity to people who would be directly affected by the outcomes of such public discourses. Picking up the "human-centred" focus mentioned, Dr Kalpana said the personal experiences were the key ingredients in finding common ground in the discussion of sensitive issues.

Following the speakers' introduction, participants were divided into breakout sessions to share their views on one of the following topics: 1) Social compact, woke culture and cancel culture; 2) ethnicity, race and religion; 3) sexual assaults; 4) sustainability and climate change; 5) inequality, giving and volunteering; 6) educational pathways and class elitism; 7) Singapore politics; 8) mental health; and 9) xenophobia, integration and foreign workers.

Generally, participants agreed upon the importance and urgency of having constructive conversations, notably in the field of mental health. The participants noted key challenges in two main areas: inclusivity and sustainability. Problems of inclusivity manifest in the perceived divide between advocates and non-advocates, for example, vegetarians and non-vegetarians in climate change discussions, or survivors and non-survivors in sexual assault discussions. Even if the subject at hand raises the interest of the general population, the hype may fade quickly, stalling efforts and leaving beneficiaries in the lurch. Though the participants remained divided on the possible solutions, they recognised that it was the very complexity of such issues that necessitates constructive dialogues. Ultimately, they were hopeful about what the diversity of opinions and experiences shared in this session spelled for Singapore's future.

Conventional vs Unconventional: A false dichotomy?

The final session of YSC 2020 was titled "In Pursuit of 'Happyness' — Unconventional Pathways to Happiness". In keeping with the unconventional theme, this session was held at night. This session was co-facilitated by IPS' Shazly Zain and Mr David Hoe from I Am Talented. Award-winning director Anthony Chen from Giraffe Pictures and mountaineering enthusiast Dr Kumaran Rasappan from Tan Tock Seng Hospital joined the session to give their thoughts in an anecdote-filled session.

The session opened with a simple poll asking if participants felt happy in the moment. The binary choice of "yes" and "no" led to discussions about a false dichotomy between being happy and unhappy. Speakers agreed that one's state of happiness depended on context and point of reference. Happiness is an emotional state that fluctuates so much within a day.

There is also a false dichotomy between taking a conventional path and an unconventional one. Both speakers and participants found it difficult to define conventional and unconventional pathways. While conventional pathways may seem to indicate choices that were in line with societal norms and the so-called "Singapore Dream", the speakers agreed that one's context mattered more and the labelling of pathways as conventional or unconventional seemed arbitrary. Dr Kumaran shared that he was a doctor who loved climbing. Mr Hoe shared that he was an educator, which seems conventional, but was unconventional as his peers from the Normal Technical stream in secondary school did not have similar aspirations. Mr Chen shared about his path as a filmmaker, which seemed unconventional in Singapore's context.

The session also attempted to address the difficulties in making choices. The participants shared how they had wanted to make unconventional choices but ended up making conventional ones. The speakers shared anecdotes about their unconventional choices and how making choices, unconventional or otherwise, depended on the person's context. A person may be amid a certain pathway and decide to stop if he or she does not want to continue. Some people choose to power on. The speakers share that life is a journey and not an end goal; happiness could be discovered during the journey. They also quoted the phrase, "Quitting if done for the right reasons is not giving up, it is the process of growing and self-discovery", which resonated with participants who felt disillusioned by the choices they made.

A key theme that resonated with participants was the fear of failure. The speakers described how they feared failing after spending considerable resources. The fear of the sunk cost fallacy was a difficult issue to overcome. A speaker also shared that one should be open to opportunities. Going down a path may lead to alternative or branching pathways. Self-awareness helps people grow and allows people to know if they are truly happy. A speaker added that he has turned down opportunities that provided considerable finances because these opportunities were not in line with his values, undermining his vision of happiness. These choices were made despite him facing financial constraints at the time.

The speakers also discussed the importance of taking breaks. Concerns over burnout encouraged them to pursue hobbies and other passions. While the fear of missing out ("FOMO") was present as others hurried along to find jobs, the choice of taking a break bore fruit as they found motivation to pursue their professional careers. This theme of breaks resonated well with the participants, with one sharing the unconventional decision she made in not pursuing university education and entering the workforce immediately. She shared her

concerns but through the anecdotes shared during the session, she was reminded about the reasons behind her unconventional choices.

The speakers also talked about the importance of accepting that there were some things in life that one could not change. This was in response to a question by participants on the issue of making undesirable choices and regret. One would have to find meaning and purpose in what they did and make the best out of it, and in that process, one might find happiness. One of the speakers added that it is possible to do both a conventional thing and unconventional thing at the same time. Along the way, one may have different priorities in life, such as taking care of ageing parents or having young children, so the emphasis on finding passion through hobbies may decrease. A participant shared that it is important to come to terms to one's own decision, have the ability to forgive oneself, and regardless of the ups and downs in that season there will always be a valuable lesson to take away.

The panel closed with the speakers sharing the importance of finding one's tribe — people with similar important values as oneself. They also discouraged those present in the session from writing themselves and others off so easily as everyone's journey is different, and everyone takes time to grow. Each person's definition of success and happiness is deeply personal, and it makes little sense to make comparisons or forcefully adhering to strict definitions of happiness. They also reiterated that in one's journey to find happiness, people need to keep in mind the practicalities of life in Singapore.

Closing Plenary

In the closing plenary moderated by Dr Kalpana, the discussion revolved around several topics that were raised in the preceding sessions, like the concept of family and perceptions of progress into approaching more sensitive questions on race, equity, and sexuality. Participants asked if the three themes of "happiness, prosperity and progress" could be re-interpreted to the individual circumstance. The speakers, Minister Edwin Tong from the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, and Non-constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) Hazel Poa from Progress Singapore Party, largely agreed on issues surrounding the need for more conversation in the face of challenges from countries in the region.

More importantly, the speakers debated on basic notions that underpinned prosperity and progress and governance and disagreed respectfully on how they would address issues like opportunities for and societal development. Mr Tong emphasised caution amidst having conversations over the longer-term futures, noting that free speech does not necessarily mean having the right to denigrate others' race and religion while Ms Poa advocated having freer discussion in a constructive manner.

Concluding, Dr Kalpana summarised the conference's discussion as being an ecosystem, that the individual is part of society but is also influenced by greater forces of culture, societal norms, and public policies. Mostly importantly, change may not come from top-down but from individuals impacting the greater policy agenda.

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