



IPS Closed-Door Discussion: Social Capital and Inclusion

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ON 9 FEBRUARY 2018, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held a closed-door discussion on “Social Capital and Inclusion”. A panel of speakers, comprising Associate Professor (A/P) Vincent Chua, A/P Tan Ern Ser, both of the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, and Ms Lydia Lim, who is Head of Training and Development at *The Straits Times*, made opening remarks. Dr Gillian Koh, IPS Deputy Director (Research), moderated the panel.

The discussion brought 21 academics, leaders from the voluntary welfare sector, public servants and IPS researchers together to discuss the findings and implications of the IPS survey — [A Study of Social Capital in Singapore \(2017\)](#). The study was conducted by A/Ps Chua and Tan, and Dr Koh. The discussion invited ideas on ways to address the class divide in social mixing and foster greater social inclusion in Singapore.

PANEL PRESENTATIONS

A/P Vincent Chua

A/P Chua presented the major findings of the survey. First, respondents were asked whom they interacted with, based on a list of 14 social scenarios — for example, whom they confided in for important matters; whom they relied on to look after their homes when they were away; and with whom they pursued recreational activities.

When compared to interactions across social categories like race, religion, age and gender, there were fewer interactions between those who self-identified as coming from “elite” schools and those from “non-elite” schools. A/P Chua shared that this was true even after statistical adjustments to the data to account for the unequal sizes of the two class groups.

Similarly, there were fewer interactions between those who lived in private and those from public housing, after the same adjustments.

In other words, Singaporeans tend not to interact with others who are distinctly different from themselves in terms of types of education and housing, revealing a salient class divide in Singapore. They are more likely, by comparison, to interact across gender, age, race, religion and nationality.

Second, the data illustrated a consistently positive correlation between different types of network diversity and sense of national identity and trust, with network diversity in terms of class having the strongest positive effects.

Third, the data also revealed education, workplace, participation in voluntary, cultural and sports activities to be significant drivers of a wide range of network diversities.

From this, A/P Chua drew three conclusions. First, he argued that while propagating “shared values” was important for national identity, there is also a need to recognise the role and value of everyday relations in the formation of national identity. “Shared conversations” with diverse others are important alongside shared values for shaping a sense of belonging to the nation, he added. Second, network diversity plays a crucial role in producing national identity, but a specific kind of class diversity in networks is lacking in Singapore. There must be fresh impetus to improve on this. Third, he suggested that fostering behaviour where diversity is celebrated as part of our national culture will help to do that.



(L-R) A/P Tan Ern Ser and A/P Vincent Chua, who were two of the three researchers behind the IPS project titled, “A Study of Social Capital in Singapore”.

Ms Lydia Lim

In her speech, Ms Lim made three points. First, she mentioned the key role that values play in creating network diversity; if one sees value in interacting with diverse others, one would be more likely to do so. Recounting what a colleague once told her, she said that one suffers “a poverty of experience” by only interacting with people in one’s class bubble, because the world is made up of people of different backgrounds.

Second, Ms Lim pointed out that while it is not necessarily a good idea for the state to impose “shared values” on everyone, one value that is perhaps worth sharing is that of respecting the “dignity of the human person”, which is part of the United Nation’s Declaration of Human Rights.

This could induce people to step out of their respective class bubbles and engage diverse others far more.

Third, she espoused the value of the arts and volunteering as spaces where bridging ties between people of different classes could occur. She urged the state to maintain these spaces of cross-group interactions, and to think creatively of ways to encourage more of such ties.

A/P Tan Ern Ser

Going through academic literature on the concept of “class”, A/P Tan clarified that the Marxian concepts of “class consciousness” and “class conflict” are not applicable to Singapore. He also discussed the notion of equality of opportunity, stating that while meritocracy provides for that, one cannot assume it will lead to an equality of outcome.

Next, he discussed the Weberian definition of “class”, which defines it as life chances or the probability of access to a certain quality of life. There are unequal life chances in Singapore, and any sense of relative deprivation can sow discontent towards the state and lead to “class envy”. Hence, while it is important to equalise opportunity, he said it was even more important to develop multiple pathways to success, facilitate upward social mobility, and strengthen social safety nets.

To foster social cohesion, A/P Tan said that there is a need to go beyond merely social mixing and instead, to facilitate collaboration on achieving common, overarching goals that benefit all parties involved, under the condition of equal status among the participants. Collaboration between diverse groups brings about mindset change, paving the way for a more egalitarian ethos that can reduce the class divide. Regarding initiatives for social inclusion, he reiterated that the goal is not about demolishing privilege among the elites but lifting those at the bottom, with the ultimate aim of being a broadly middle-class society.



(Right) Ms Lydia Lim, Head of Training and Development at The Straits Times, sharing her views on interacting with diverse others. Dr Gillian Koh (left), moderated the closed-door discussion.

DISCUSSION

Assumptions about Organisations Facilitating Social Mixing

A participant pointed out that not all social organisations promote mixing between diverse groups of people. Take for example, the effect of country clubs versus that of the scouting movement; the former represents interactions within a relatively closed social circle and the latter seeks to reach out to young people across society. Another participant highlighted a need to examine social organisations in their variety — e.g., to consider what resources are required for involvement, what sorts of interests are pursued, which will indicate who would be included and excluded from participating and whether it would foster social mixing.

Dismantling Privileges of the Elite

A participant said that many privileges of the elite are embedded within the school system and act as barriers that keep others out. To foster greater network diversity, these privileges have to be unlocked or dismantled. These include affiliation policies for entry at Primary 1, schemes that give priority admission to children whose parents volunteer at the schools, and the Direct School Admission (DSA) programme, which is meant to diversify the student body of elite schools but has resulted instead in the admission of students from a narrow background. Another participant concurred and added that the education system has created unequal opportunities that have exacerbated unequal outcomes. However, he wondered if the dismantling of such privileges was at all easy to achieve.

The Ethnic Dimension

A few participants raised the ethnic dimension. One highlighted divisions of class within ethnic groups, giving anecdotes of upper-middle-class Malay parents telling their children not to mix with lower-class Malay children. Another participant chimed in that this happens within the Indian population and is further aggravated by divides between local and foreign-born Indians.

Two other participants added that ethnic divisions must not be neglected, and were doubtful that Singaporeans would be able to overcome their “primordial attachments” based on ethnicity. Where “common spaces” were available, one participant explained that there was clustering on the basis of ethnicity; in fact, there would also be departure from those spaces in order to revert to being in homogeneous circles. One offered the example of Chinese parents pulling their children out of a Malay-majority student care centre into an all-Chinese one when it was available, explaining how those parents thought that an all-Chinese student care centre provided “a better study environment”. Another said that National Service promotes ethnic segregation by having a policy of placing Malays primarily in certain types of service.

Personal Challenges of Interacting With Diverse Others

A participant noted that at the individual level, it takes significant effort to interact with diverse others. Hence, there is a need to shape social structures to aid such interaction. Another said individuals have to learn to live with the discomfort that such interaction brings — it is a value that individuals should adopt. Another pointed out that language barriers and differences in interests are barriers to cross-class interactions; English-speaking Chinese have difficulty

engaging the Chinese-speaking Chinese. The higher-class Chinese-speaking Chinese face similar difficulties, because the activities they are interested in may not interest the lower class.

Potential Pitfalls of Interaction — Quality Matters

Participants cautioned that interactions between high- and low-income groups could actually create more resentment between the classes, especially if done in an obligatory, patronising or condescending way. A/P Chua queried if “class envy” from the low-income groups would be an obstacle to cross-class interactions. A participant responded that it is people in the low-income group who are generally more receptive to such interactions and also suggested framing such interactions as a “two-way” collaborative interaction, rather than a “one-way” interaction that emanates from, say, the high-income to the low-income or the other round.

Impetus for Change

A number of participants questioned whether there is impetus to bring about greater social interaction and inclusion in terms of class. Were we preaching to the converted at the discussion, he asked? Indeed, there may not seem to be a “burning platform”, said another participant. One participant doubted whether there is a significant problem with regard to the class divide. Another said that there is little impetus for change even from lower-income families — many of whom are fatalistic about their situation and life chances, which leads them to acquiesce to the situations they find themselves in. Another said that this is the practical approach among the low-income group because they feel they have little chance of upward social mobility, so “why fight it”? Furthermore, the participant hypothesised that perhaps people in the low-income group are so disconnected from the high-income that they are not even aware of what they lack in comparison. Another participant argued that this could be the influence of ideology — the lower-income have to accept what they have, believing that it is all that they deserve — which rigidifies the class divide.

CLOSING REMARKS

A/P Tan Ern Ser

A/P Tan noted that intergroup interactions are just one measure, among others, for fostering inclusion. He cautioned that intergroup interactions, if not done well, could lead to conflict rather than collaboration between groups. If forced, it could also lead to the better-off groups relocating to places where they can form exclusive communities, without the inclusion of low-income groups. He does not think an egalitarian society is possible, but that we could inculcate an egalitarian ethos while developing a middle-class society.

Ms Lydia Lim

Ms Lim agreed with a participant’s suggestion of shifting the focus from competition to collaboration between schools, to foster collaborative intergroup interactions. She also addressed doubts regarding the impetus for change, arguing that bridging the class divide is in fact a pressing concern. It is necessary to try to equalise life chances and opportunities; otherwise, the lack of social mobility may result in the lack of aspiration for a better life among low-income Singaporeans.

A/P Vincent Chua

A/P Chua re-emphasised the need to build a culture of diversity because of the immense rewards of greater national identity and social trust that it produces, despite the significant effort it takes for one to interact with diverse others. Social mixing creates a stronger society as it fosters bonds of trust across groups, and creates a sense of belonging to Singapore society. He also agreed more research needs to be done to examine the different types of social capital produced by various social organisations — while voluntary participation fosters a more connected society, the specific forms of bonding and bridging, i.e., how organisations unite and divide groups, need systematic study.

Dr Gillian Koh

Dr Koh said that the impetus for change lies in the fact that Singapore is socially, extremely diverse, and if this diversity is not managed, Singapore will become a divided nation. To avoid such fragmentation, steps are needed to mitigate the emerging class divide in social networks. She noted that government officials seem to be aware of this, citing the rationale it offered previously for ensuring that 40 spaces are available for children of people who are not affiliated to “brand-name schools” in the enrolment process at Primary 1. This is presented as a way to ensure that the system does not reinforce closed social circles. The question then is whether the solution is a matter of doing far more of the same or whether a qualitative shift in approach or even a different approach is needed to foster greater social integration across Singapore.

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