

Identify 'pain points' of living in unequal society

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We now have a very diverse population because of immigration and because many Singaporeans have had the privilege of going overseas. How do we then curate a future discourse as we are setting the stage for writing the Singapore story? How do we include their narratives? Our traditional Chinese-Malay-Indian model is not going to be enough. We've heard complaints that the Chinese say: "We are not just Chinese – we are Cantonese, we are Hokkien, we come from different parts of China."

How can we keep our cultural roots but, at the same time, contribute to a common pool of an identifiable homogeneous Singaporean identity?

Not easy. And then it gets more complicated. And before the Eurasians have the chance to say the "Others" is not quite us, we start to pad up that "Others" with a lot more other people. And now who constitutes that "Others"?

So, moving forward, I think we have to have very concrete plans as we curate the Singaporean identity to remember that we have bicultural families and new citizens.

When new citizens come on board, we have to remember that we invited them because we believe they can add value to our nation-building endeavour. Surely

when we invite them, we don't expect them to shed their cultural heritage. How are they going to grow roots if we remove their roots to start off with?

We have to be confident, as we speak of an inclusive community and society, that we are not going to be distracted by mischief makers on social media that encourage us that xenophobia is okay, as long as we are talking about foreigners. The minute we allow that, the foreigner-Singaporean divide will soon creep into a new norm, and then we end up hurting the very fabric that makes Singapore a unique and strong society.

I'm a family sociologist; for the longest time I lectured on sociology of family. You can't really talk about family without first defining family. So the first few lectures will always be rested on this notion of: What is family? What exactly are we studying? Family, in sociological jargon, is a social construct. It is just a word, a label, that over time we have given a definition. And because there are no challenges to that definition, over time to the lay community, it becomes an objective definition. It is like you can just look and identify family.

We often start off with an exercise – define family. My students will go out and talk to their friends and as the years go by, the definition of family and my family – there is so much divergence. When we are pressed to define family, many of us

will say married heterosexual couple with biological children. Those who think a bit more will say: "Adopted also can." And if you let that silence sit for a little while, they may go: "Sometimes, there will be divorce involved." And you let that rest a little while and then you go: "Well, sometimes there are single families."

And so it challenges us.

We form many policies based on the recipient family, but that assumes family as a social construct stays stable. So I'm so glad to hear the Minister for Social and Family Development challenge us to expand the definition of family.

ON THE 'LARGER CONCERNS' OF INEQUALITY

University students are constantly stressed out and I can't understand why. Because you are already in university – what's the problem?

They tell me stories of how they look at their parents and what their parents have achieved – they are at a certain level in the hierarchy. And they look at themselves. They sacrifice a lot to stay ahead in the grading curve and then they graduate and go: "I'm now going to be like my parents." Then they find that they are right at the bottom of the pile again when they start working. And then they look ahead and they go: "There is no way I can achieve what my parents have achieved." And it really drowns them. Self-doubt, concerns about

optimism about the future, all that contributes to the incidence of depression among our youth. And we cannot say that is so trivial and frivolous, just snap out of it, because that is the reality they live in.

Singapore being a very small country, there are benefits and challenges. The benefit is that because we are small, the pioneer leaders were able to gather us and, with the limited resources we had, we built a nation in a very short time. And we could bring as many people as possible on board. But because we are small, any differential is magnified.

Standing in between Havelock Road on the Singapore River – on the left, Clarke Quay area, beautiful condos with swimming pools out in the open and people worshipping the sun. Across the road, on the right, up on the hill we have rental flats. It's very jarring and disturbing for me when I stand like that because it is uncomfortable.

So those kinds of comparisons we see every day, the line that differentiates between the haves and have-nots, is not so simple. I think we have to invest resources into distilling the differentials based on an empirical, evidence-based perspective to see where the differences are and where the pain points are.

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