

S'poreans see society as "kiasu", competitive, self-centred: survey

By Qiuyi Tan | Posted: 23 August 2012 2110 hrs



Pedestrians cross the street along the Orchard Road shopping area in Singapore. (AFP Photo/Roslan Rahman)

SINGAPORE: Singapore society has often been described as "kiasu" - a term used to refer to Singaporeans' innate fear of losing out.

This label still sticks, according to an independent survey by local consulting firm aAdvantage and the Barrett Values Centre.

Singapore residents were asked what values and behaviours described Singapore today.

Besides being "kiasu", Singapore was seen to be competitive, self-centred, defined by material needs, and "kiasi", a term which literally means being afraid of death.

The study polled 2,000 Singapore citizens and Permanent Residents representing different gender, ages and living in different housing types.

Experts behind the study said these are potentially-limiting values - not necessarily negative, but possibly so if sustained in the long term.

CEO of Barrett Values Centre, Phil Clothier, said: "One of the numbers we look at is the total percentage of all the limiting values that respondents picked out. Some nations would have limiting values like corruption, blame, manipulation. The total percentage can range anywhere from the high end like 60-70 per cent, to as low as 4 per cent, which is in fact the figure for Bhutan. Singapore's number is 41 per cent, which means it's actually in the lower areas.

"One thing that's interesting about the Singapore current culture, those limiting values particularly, is that they're much more of a psychological nature, rather than, on the street really seeing trouble. So we don't see words like crime and violence, and corruption."

Mr Clothier thinks Singapore residents' honesty in acknowledging these potentially-limiting values is a good sign that they are open to change and improvement.

Mr Baey Yam Keng, deputy chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Information, Communications and the Arts, agreed.

He said: "I think it's a reflection that Singaporeans can also be self-critical, and realise our own shortcomings and there are certain areas we need to improve. I think it's not necessarily bad, because it means we're being honest, and hopefully we can turn ourselves in the direction that we can all improve as a society in the way we think, in the way we behave."

The survey comes as the government recently announced that it wants to kick off a national conversation on the future of the country.

Respondents were also asked what values and behaviours best described themselves.

And these were family, friendship, health, happiness and being caring.

But when asked what residents desired in Singapore society, the top five answers that came up were: affordable housing, caring for the elderly, effective health care, caring for the disadvantaged and compassion.

But some said the survey findings don't paint the full picture.

Director of Behavioral Sciences Institute at Singapore Management University, Professor David Chan, pointed to the survey methodology asking respondents to pick 10 values out of a prepared list of about 90.

He said: "I think it's timely to do a survey as this is to find out values. But at the same time, we should be very cautious about the findings of this particular survey.

"My understanding is that there are important values such as religious freedom, freedom of religion, religious harmony, rule of law which are not included in the list provided. So it would never have been able to be endorsed. And these are values which I think are quite important, as shown by previous surveys done in Singapore."

Additionally, the survey sought to find out how Singaporeans see their current and desired workplaces.

Respondents in the private sector saw their current workplaces being defined by customer satisfaction, cost reduction and team work.

Those in the public sector picked team work, bureaucracy and customer satisfaction.

But it was work-life balance, along with employee recognition and team work, that came up most often when asked what they desired of their workplace.



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However as Singapore gears up for a national dialogue, most observers agree the survey findings offer compelling food for thought.

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