VALUES SURVEY

S'pore: The ideal vs reality

Gap between how Singapore residents perceive society today, and what they want it to be

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SINGAPORE — Singaporeans perceive today's society to be kiasu, competitive and self-centred — among other adjectives — but desire for the country to be a place where housing is affordable and healthcare is effective.

These were among the findings of a survey of 2,000 Singapore citizens and permanent residents aged 15 and above. From three lists of about 90 terms each, they picked 10 values they attach to themselves, society and the workplace.

Conducted in June and last month by corporate development consultancy aAdvantage and the United States-based Barrett Values Centre, respondents were surveyed in person and online.

The stark distinction between terms used to describe society today — eight of the 10 most-cited terms were dubbed potentially limiting — and its desired state, however, did not alarm academics and those from the public and private sector who attended a roundtable discussion yesterday.

The responses might have to be understood from Singaporeans' general orientation of being a self-deprecating people, felt Dr Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

"We don't give ourselves enough credit, we do see citizens showing compassion when there is need, rais-

WORDS USED TO DESCRIBE SINGAPORE

How respondents perceive Singapore society today	Terms associated with their desired Singapore society
*Kiasu (afraid of losing)	Affordable housing
*Competitive	Caring for the elderly
*Self-centred	Effective healthcare
Material needs	Caring for the disadvantaged
*Kiasi (afraid of death)	Compassion
*Deteriorating values	Concern for future generations
*Elitism	Quality of life
*Blame	Equal opportunities
*Uncertainty about the future	Social responsibility
Security	Employment opportunities

***Potentially limiting values (negative when taken to the extreme).**
SOURCE: AADVANTAGE AND BARRETT VALUES CENTRE

41%
OF TERMS CITED BY PARTICIPANTS WERE ABOUT POTENTIALLY LIMITING VALUES AND BEHAVIOUR

ing issues of social responsibility even now," said Dr Koh, speaking to TODAY after chairing the roundtable.

Member of Parliament Baey Yam Keng said it was "all right for us to be self-critical" and it provided room for individuals and society to improve.

While potentially limiting values and behaviours made up 41 per cent of terms cited by respondents about Singapore society today, the figure compares favourably against countries like Finland (48 per cent) and the US (56 per cent) where similar studies have been conducted, noted Chief Executive of Barrett Values Centre, Mr Phil Clothier.

Differences between the values attached to the current and the desired society are not unusual, he added.

While some roundtable participants agreed the survey provided valuable input to the national conversation on the Republic's future, psychology professor David Chan of the Singapore Management University pointed out some limitations.

Some values and beliefs like pragmatism, religious harmony and filial piety that are commonly believed to be widely held here were not on the list, he said.

Noting that the list contained terms from categories ranging from basic values to personal characteristics and thinking styles, Prof Chan said: "It is not very meaningful and can often produce misleading results when we ask people to compare and rank the importance of concepts when the concepts belong to different types of categories."

Prof Chan said the discussion on Singapore's future needs to be focused and driven by societal end-goals we want to achieve as a country, while a banker felt Singapore was "at the crossroads" as citizens increasingly do not want the Government to make decisions on their behalf, but may not know what they want.

The survey also found that Singapore residents considered family, friendship, health and happiness as values and behaviours that best described themselves.

Customer satisfaction, teamwork, cost reduction and long hours were most cited for current workplaces, while home-work balance, teamwork, employee recognition and employee fulfilment were the top four cited for desired workplaces.