

Emotions not taking over?

Opinions mixed on survey finding Singaporeans the most emotionless in the world



by Neo Chai Chin
04:45 AM Nov 23, 2012

SINGAPORE - Yes, the Government has a role to play in the emotional well-being of its people and Singaporeans could, perhaps, express more emotion.

This was the general consensus among academics and Members of Parliament whom TODAY spoke to yesterday, a day after the Republic had the ignominy of being dubbed the "most emotionless society" in the world - or among more than 150 countries and areas, to be more specific - following a poll by research and analytics firm Gallup.

And while there were some criticisms about Gallup's methodology, they agreed that the Government could do more in this area, as Gallup called on the Singapore leadership "to include well-being in its overall strategies if it is going to further improve the lives of its citizenry".

A Bloomberg report on the survey results went viral on Wednesday, and became a talking point among Singaporeans.

Gallup published its findings and methodology, as well as an article on the survey's implications late on Wednesday night. Noting that Singapore has one of the lowest unemployment rates and highest gross domestic product per capita rates in the world, Gallup partner Jon Clifton said that the research "shows that the solutions to improve positive emotions or decrease negative emotions do not necessarily go beyond higher incomes".

The survey was done from 2009 to 2011, with about 1,000 individuals from each country polled each year. The respondents were asked if they had experienced five positive and five negative emotions a lot the previous day.

To measure the presence or absence of emotions, Gallup took the average of the percentage of residents in each country who said they experienced each of the 10 positive and negative emotions.

Singapore scored 36 per cent, with countries such as Lithuania, Russia and Nepal also among the lowest scorers; the Philippines was the most emotional with a score of 60 per cent, with countries such as Oman, Colombia and Canada following closely behind.

The implications for an emotionless society are "significant", Mr Clifton said. "Well-being

and daily emotion correlate with some of the most important societal outcomes, such as community attachment and brain gain (acquiring and retaining top talent)," he added.

Findings useful but flawed

Academics said the findings are useful and thought-provoking, but not without flaws. Each country's scores "actually represent the averaged intensity of emotions experienced without regard to the positive or negative valence of the emotions", noted Professor David Chan, Director of the Singapore Management University's Behavioural Sciences Institute.

"So when we distinguish positive and negative emotions and consider them jointly, as we should, Singapore will have a moderate ranking ... on emotional well-being," he pointed out.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser said he would have obtained separate scores on positive and negative emotions felt, and tried to find out if respondents' emotions were due to personality or contextual factors. But he noted that Singapore has ranked well in recent happiness surveys - in Gallup's 2012 World Happiness Report, for instance, Singapore was third in the Asia-Pacific after Australia and New Zealand.

Associate Professor Tan suggested several ways that the Government could indirectly increase emotional well-being. These include creating quality jobs, providing good education, housing, healthcare and transport, as well as reducing social inequality.

Prof Chan also proposed other ways such as building trust and social capital, treating economic growth as means rather than ends, and implementing integrative policies that ensure growth is translated into outcomes that benefit citizens and contribute to well-being.

The Government could leave more room for "compassionate considerations" when applying policies, suggested Member of Parliament Baey Yam Keng. In communicating its decisions to stakeholders, more can be done to show their interests have been taken into account, he said.

But residents too can improve their emotional well-being by showing more neighbourliness and reaching out more to one another, said Mr Baey and fellow MP David Ong.

Mr Ong disagreed with the survey results. He said it could be a Singaporean trait to opt for "less risky" answers in surveys, and that they could be more expressive in certain settings, such as with friends, but not during public events such as concerts. "Maybe it's the culture of not wanting to stand out too much," he said.