

## Inadequacies of a happiness index

To detractors who think Singaporeans are a miserable lot, let it be said the nation came out tops in Asia and 30th worldwide in the United Nations' World Happiness Report released last month.

Singapore's ranking improved three places this year. Neighbours Thailand ranked at 36th, Malaysia at 56th, Indonesia at 76th and the Philippines at 92nd.

The UN report used six factors to determine the scores: real gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, which is the average real income of a resident; healthy life expectancy; generosity (donation to charity); and their perceptions of social support, freedom to make life choices and freedom from corruption.

But before you give yourself a pat on your back, experts say the report does not paint a holistic picture of the state of happiness in Singapore.

Four experts Mind Your Body spoke to said including GDP as a criterion catapults the country higher up the list.

### RESEARCHING HAPPINESS

A more accurate picture of how happy Singaporeans are might be painted from research being done by academics here.

For instance, in a book published by two dons from the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School, *Happiness And Wellbeing: The Singaporean Experience*, one section analyses data collected over three time periods – 1996, 2001 and 2011 – in which respondents rated their satisfaction with various domains and life in general.

Dr Tambyah Siok Kuan, a senior lecturer in marketing at the NUS business school and one of the authors, said: "Surveys conducted over time provide a sense of how a country has been faring over the years and is probably more helpful than surveys that compare across countries. After all, rankings is just a numbers game."

The other author, Associate Professor Tan Soo Jiu from the NUS business school, said cultural nuances are lost in the UN report as specific aspects of living in Singapore were not asked.

**Continued on next page**

## Happiness survey not an exact science

**Continued from previous page**

In their book, however, they charted people's satisfaction with 23 aspects of living in Singapore.

Over the years, Singaporeans continued to be most satisfied with the level of safety and security, the quality of law enforcement and the cleanliness of the country. They were least satisfied with the affordability of cars, properties, health care and cost of living.

In general, Singaporeans were most satisfied with their relationships with parents, children, siblings and romantic partners. In 2011, they were least happy with their income and education – two domains not asked in earlier years.

Singaporeans surveyed in 2011 were more satisfied with life in general but less satisfied with living in Singapore than those surveyed in 2001 and 1996.

The professors also found that compared with 2006, fewer Singaporeans in 2011 said they were happy or enjoying life. Yet more of them reported having a sense of achievement.

Dr Tambyah said people may have channelled their energies into achieving their goals at the expense of doing what they liked.

Associate Professor Christie Napa Scollon, who teaches psychology at the Singapore Management University, found that Singaporeans rated a person who has more material success (earning more than \$10,000 a month) as having better life quality than someone who is low in material success (earning \$2,100 to \$3,000 a month).

Americans' perceptions of people with high or low wealth was less pronounced, she said. Other studies have also shown that Americans perceive a life's desirability to be less dependent on income than on the presence of happiness and meaning in life.

Her study was published in the *Journal Of Cross-Cultural Psychology* last year. She said the results probably reflected the culture here of people being "chronically concerned about how others perceive them".

The same study also led Prof Scollon to conclude that even if Singaporeans did not personally feel that wealth was important for a good life, they were influenced by other people's



**In a 2011 survey, Singaporeans said they were most satisfied with their relationships with parents, children, siblings and romantic partners. They were least happy with their income and education.**

ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

beliefs and conformed. She said large surveys such as the UN report are useful for countries to track their own progress.

But such rankings can also lead one to absurd conclusions – for instance, that the fifth happiest country, Sweden, must be a happier place to live in than the sixth, Canada, as conditions differ across countries.

Also, after last year's Gallup poll in which Singapore landed at the bottom of 148 countries, making it the butt of jokes for having the world's most emotionless people, it did much better this year. Some 70 per cent of Singapore respondents reported experiencing positive emotions last year, up from 46 per cent in 2011.

Like other experts, Prof Scollon thinks the bad publicity from last year's poll prompted people to answer more positively this time round. She said:

"I don't mean they were answering dishonestly, but they may have lowered their threshold for saying 'yes' to questions such as if they smiled yesterday."

Though none of these surveys tracked the causes of unhappiness in Singapore, experts raised several areas in which Singapore can improve on. Mr Halbert Louis, the director of Connect Consultancy and Training which offers mental-wellness workshops for companies, said Singapore would be better without a culture of complaining. He said people here tend to blame others for making them unhappy. He said: "When I teach stress management, I emphasise to participants that the root cause of our stress is an internal problem.

"Your boss or spouse may trigger your emotions, but our stress comes from our rigid thinking of how things should or should not be."

Dr Christopher Cheok, head of the department of psychological medicine at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, said Singapore was an "over-measured society" where all aspects of life, from academic results or work performance to where one lives, are scored. He said people should accept that there will always be others better than themselves and focus on their own goals to be happy.

### A LIFELONG PURSUIT

Dr Albert Liao, associate professor with the Psychological Studies Academic Group at the National Institute of Education and his colleague, Associate Professor Maureen Neihart, head of the Group, are studying the effects of positive interventions on happiness and depressive symptoms in people.

In a study published in the *Journal Of Happiness Studies* last year, Dr Liao found that undergraduates at a Malaysian private university who wrote gratitude letters and recorded three good things a day, and those who identified and used their strengths, had significantly higher levels of happiness than a control group.

They are now conducting similar studies among young people in Singapore.

Experts stressed that achieving happiness is a lifelong pursuit that people need to work hard at.

Dr Wolff von Auer, a counsellor at Counseling and Hypnotherapy Hub at Sime Darby Centre, said: "Rather than wasting our energies trying to gauge how happy we are, we need to recognise that happiness is an unlimited resource and focus on ways in which we can attain more of it."

**Joan Chew**