

SINGAPORE'S STRIDE FORWARD WOULD BE MUCH FIRMER WITH IMAGINATIVE RESEARCH

Social sciences matter, but so do humanities

NAZRY BAHRAWI



Much of SG50 has been about celebrating and debating our past, but it is just as crucial to be passionate about our future. This is why we need to talk about the forthcoming Social Science Research Council (SSRC) — a laudable move, but one that is not quite enough. For a better future, Singapore also needs a council for humanities research.

Announced last week, the SSRC is to develop new ways to sustain a vibrant, fair and resilient society, in the words of the Deputy Prime Min-

ister and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam. This piece of news should matter not only to policymakers and academics, but also Singapore residents whose lives its research output is set to change.

More significantly, the SSRC reflects a fundamental shift in the way we think about the meaning of “the good life” in this city-state.

It acknowledges the fact that Singaporeans are increasingly focused on leading a meaningful existence, rather than the blind pursuit of material goods. Just consider the numerous campaigns by our civil society or the rising number of causes championed at Hong Lim Park compared with a decade ago.

As Mr Tharman rightly points out when he launched the SSRC, value in today’s world is not only defined by “technical sophistication”, but also “ideas, emotions and subtle connections to human experience”.

However, this is also where the SSRC falls short. It can only partially explain social issues. A fuller picture can emerge only if social science projects are complemented with humanities research.

This has to do with their differing nature. While both fields seek to understand the human condition, they differ in their approach and goal. As an approach, the social sciences rely on the scientific method while the humanities are philosophical. As a goal, the

● Nazry Bahrawi is a lecturer at the Singapore University of Technology and Design and a research fellow at the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore.

former produces knowledge, while the latter wisdom. Let us go into details.

THE DOWNSIDE OF DATA

Like the fields of traditional sciences, what ultimately matters in the social sciences is empirical data. In many cases, sociologists often rely on interviews and surveys, economists mull over market statistics, while political scientists consider election patterns and governmental structures. The list goes on.

Yes, such studies are crucial in shaping social policies. They help us see things as they really are so we do not make uninformed decisions about

● CONTINUED ON PAGE 17

Social sciences matter, but so do humanities

● CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14

our future. We do this in daily life too such as when we are buying a new flat or in simple tasks such as planning our journey.

However, there is also a downside to data-centric studies. Let us consider the example of an oft-cited Institute of Policy Studies survey released last year, which suggests that more than 70 per cent of about 4,000 Singaporeans surveyed believe that same-sex relations are wrong.

The conclusion drawn from the survey is that Singaporeans are a conservative lot. However, we have also seen the Pink Dot gathering in support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) rights grow year by year. To complicate things further, we have also hailed Singapore as a model multicultural state.

Something is amiss. Little doubt then that questions have been raised about the survey's methodology. Can we truly say that those surveyed were representative of Singaporeans? How were the questions phrased?

If we wish to rely solely on data in this case, then Singapore certainly cannot claim to be a multicultural society. As I have argued in a previous commentary, multiculturalism in the wider world is premised on the inclusivity of minorities regardless of race, class, religion, gender and sexuality.

This example suggests that data can be misleading when read wrongly. How can we read, or interpret, better? Various humanities research areas such as cultural and literary theory, hermeneutics and ethics have explored this puzzle. If communicated well, the findings of such researches can benefit Singaporeans from all walks of life.

GO BIG ON BIG IDEAS

If Singapore is serious about pursuing a better future that takes into account "ideas, emotions and subtle connections to human experience", then we also require an ingredient that social scientists do not often deal with — imagination.

If the social sciences study societies as they are, the humanities explore how they could be.

This is best illustrated by recognising the crucial role of big ideas in our life. In any society, big ideas such as democracy or justice matter. However, big ideas are not borne out of data analysis alone. They are imaginative acts that are best investigated through humanities subjects such as philosophy, theology and literature.

Singapore has become what it is today on the back of several big, universal ideas such as meritocracy, multi-racialism and economic pragmatism.

These ideas must always be questioned if we want a progressive society whose members are not blinded by dogma. Debating big ideas is the business of humanities research. It is

a business that we need to invest in.

Practically, what could a humanities research institute do here? It could commission studies that explore issues relevant to Singapore and the region, such as the role of religion in society, the links between science and tradition and comparative cultures. It could build up Singapore's expertise in the humanities by offering grants and scholarships and encourage collaboration between our universities and international universities. Above

“ If Singapore is serious about pursuing a better future that takes into account "ideas, emotions and subtle connections to human experience", then we also require an ingredient that social scientists do not often deal with — imagination.

all, it must engage with the public.

Sceptics might like to know that the idea of a humanities research in-

stitution is not without precedence. Other strong economies have established such an outfit in one form or another. There is the National Endowment for the Humanities in the United States, the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the United Kingdom and the National Institutes for the Humanities in Japan.

While the SSRC is a laudable step in the right direction for Singapore, our stride forward would be much firmer with humanities research.