Source: *TODAY*, p12
Date: 28 June 2016

BRINGING AN 'OUTSIDER' INTO ONE'S HOME MAY BLUR THE DIVIDE BETWEEN 'THEM' AND 'US'

The paradox of strong family ties in the integration of immigrants



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There is a general consensus that Singaporeans are not xenophobic, but we have, in recent years, seen cases of negative behaviour towards foreigners.

Take, for example, the vitriolic comments against groups from specific countries on social media, protests at Hong Lim Park against the influx of foreigners into Singapore, and anti-foreigner speeches at election rallies.

Observers and experts have suggested that these attitudes may be due to anxiety — Singaporeans feel suspicious of foreigners because they compete with us for space, resources and jobs.

Then there is the question of whether foreigners are a threat to our still-evolving cultural identity.

Our research on Singaporeans' attitudes to immigration has shown that one way to counter anti-immigrant sentiment is to strengthen Singaporeans' confidence in their cultural identity, economic well-being and any individual aspect of life they hold dear.

But interestingly, our research also showed that strong family bonds do not necessarily facilitate a more inclusive attitude towards foreigners.

Rather, findings from the 2012 IPS survey on Social Markers of Integration, which polled 2,000 Singapore residents, found that respondents who said they have strong bonds with their families also felt more threatened by the presence of foreigners.

Why this paradox? This may be partly attributed to an established negative relationship between family ties and social trust in Asian cultures.

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"Trust" in this context refers to people's willingness to cooperate with people beyond the family circle. Family-centric Asian countries such as China, South Korea, India and Thailand display low trust alongside strong family ties.

The 2015 National Values Assessment, which surveyed 2,000 Singapore residents, found that respondents consider family to be the top personal value, but perceive society to be competitive, self-centred and eager to blame others. This suggests low confidence in society despite strong family values. These perceptions could thus be impeding multiculturalism and immigrant integration in Singapore.

Strong family ties are no doubt a good thing, but improving the level of trust in outsiders is important if we are to achieve a fully inclusive and harmonious society.

One way to do this without weakening family ties is to broaden the boundaries of the family. By this we mean creating more opportunities for the inclusion of strangers, especially immigrants, into situations or activities normally reserved for family members.

Homestays are an example of such opportunities. In other multicultural societies such as Canada and New Zealand, homestays are a common practice in which a local family hosts a foreign visitor — usually a student — in their home and acts as a foster family of sorts, providing food and lodging, and helping them adjust to the local culture.

Willing families register to be potential hosts, and an agency, which could be a private or a government-linked body, matches them with arriving homestayers.

Depending on the contract arrangement between host and tenant, the latter can either pay a nominal fee or none at all. This experience seems to have made Canadians receptive to foreigners, judging by the relatively smooth resettlement of Syrian migrants in Canada, with some Canadians opening their homes to these refugees.

In Singapore, there are a few private homeowners who offer short homestays, or an opportunity to experience local, home-cooked meals.

In general, it is not a well-established practice — perhaps because our living spaces here are smaller compared with those in Canada and New Zealand — and largely commercial.

It would take a multi-pronged effort to make homestays more commonplace. One concern would be the heightened security threat due to the recent wave of terrorist attacks worldwide, which may act as a deterrent to opening our homes to strangers.

But proper government regulation of homestay assignments, and awareness of what one is getting into can ensure a safe and enriching homestay experience for both host and tenant.

Educational institutions can establish and facilitate homestays as an accommodation option for their foreign students.

Students in need of boarding would be open to living with a Singaporean family during their stay here, especially if it comes at a lower cost than hostels or student dormitories.

To encourage this, the Government can provide subsidies and support for setting up such programmes or standalone homestay agencies.

Of course, none of this will work if families in Singapore are not willing to open their homes. Families can be incentivised by tax reliefs or rebates, similar to what homeowners who host a foreign student for at least a year get.

This is similar to the Qualifying Child Relief or Parenthood Tax Rebate income tax schemes. In return, families must assume custodian responsibilities, and actively involve the homestayer in their family activities.

This helps the homestayer to integrate into Singapore society, and will hopefully also help families cultivate a mindset of inclusiveness.

Taking in an "outsider" into the family blurs the stark dividing boundary between "them" and "us".

The ensuing cultural exchange will promote greater understanding of diversity. This is in line with our multicultural ideals, and can only be good for integration and social cohesion.

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