



The writers concluded from a research project on the basic needs of the elderly that ordinary people acknowledge their common experiences with one another more than they did their differences.
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A budget standard for everyone in a diverse society

How elderly participants from different races found common ground on how much to set aside for wedding gifts.

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President Halimah Yacob spoke recently about the principles necessary to bring about social cohesion in Singapore's ethnically diverse society (What's needed to harness the strengths of social diversity, June 20).

These are: a space for talking about differences respectfully; having dialogue and interactions; and recognising people's shared needs as a "common good" that promotes solidarity.

One example of how ordinary Singaporeans embrace and express these principles was demonstrated by participants in our research project on the elderly. Our project

on "What Older People Need in Singapore: A Household Budgets Study", (Single elderly Singaporeans need \$1,379 a month to meet basic living standard: Study, May 22), included focus group discussions with the elderly on what they ascertained to be basic needs, and then worked out how much those needs would cost. They engaged with one another when discussing suitable amounts to be allocated for their needs.

For most of our discussions on basic needs such as household goods, healthcare, personal care or transportation, differences in cultural practices were not expressed. This reflected that ordinary people acknowledge their common experiences with one another more than they did their differences.

Differences in cultural practices occurred mostly during our conversations with our participants on social participation, food and clothing. When discussing appropriate amounts for food and cultural practices such as how much to give at weddings, participants listened to one another's cultural practices and then came to an agreement on the reasonable amount to include in a budget.

Our participants defined a basic standard of living in Singapore as one that goes beyond housing, food and clothing. They wanted opportunities for education, work, and work-life balance and access to healthcare. They also wanted a sense of belonging, respect, security and independence; and the choice to take part in social activities and freedom to engage in one's cultural and religious practices.

Researchers in other countries have conducted similar research on

minimum household budget standards, such as in Britain, Japan, Mexico and South Africa. However, only in Singapore did participants include the choice and freedom to engage in "one's cultural and religious practices" as a key basic need. This underlines the importance participants place on being a member of their cultural community.

CONSENSUS BEGINS WITH A RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY

In discussing how to translate this definition into everyday practice, participants who come from diverse ethnic, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds took time to hear different views expressed and to acknowledge the importance of different practices, before finding ways to agree on common and shared needs for every older person in Singapore.

We observed this process when our participants talked about being able to attend weddings and the need to give a cash gift to the newlyweds.

Participants from different ethnic groups shared about their own practices and what an adequate gift value would be when they were invited to weddings.

Building consensus was not easy as their personal experiences on attending weddings varied widely. They were mindful that different ethnic weddings have different expectations of the gift value because of the different locations and amount that the couple spent on the catering. Some weddings were held in hotels, some in places of religious worship and some at the void decks of Housing Board flats. Correspondingly, the gift values deemed adequate for each of these different wedding venues differed.

While acknowledging cultural differences, participants also agreed that the amount budgeted for an older person to attend weddings should not differ according to his ethnicity. The budget should allow an older person of any ethnic background to be able to attend any kind of ethnic wedding, held at any venue.

Within the budget that the groups eventually agreed on, an older person could attend any ethnic weddings held at more or less costly venues, but with variations on the frequency.

DIVERSITY MEANS HAVING CHOICES

In our research, we found that embracing diversity involves sensitivity towards varying conditions and the need to pay particular attention to how these can limit choice.

In the discussions on food, for example, participants said that buying from halal stalls in hawker centres or halal ingredients in the supermarket would cost more. This guided our pricing for food items in our budgets, so that older persons would have choices in their budgets, for halal or non-halal food.

Similarly, our participants agreed on clothing budgets that would allow them choices for religious wear, such as the hijab, as well as ethnic attire required for special occasions such as during cultural celebrations. A separate budget is also set aside for house decorations, which our participants said were important and necessary to make the house more festive and welcoming for guests.

Regardless of ethnic or cultural backgrounds, our participants expressed a common desire to remain socially engaged and

continue contributing to society. One of the important forms of contribution is through donations or giving alms to their own religious organisations.

Participants said that having opportunities and choices to participate in cultural and religious activities not only enhanced older people's autonomy and independence, but also enabled a sense of belonging and respect within their respective communities. Being socially engaged also provides older people a sense of purpose in later life.

DIALOGUES ABOUT DIFFERENCES TO BUILD SOLIDARITY

As researchers, we learnt valuable lessons from our participants about how consensus can come about only if people are open to expressing and negotiating differences rather than denying their existence. In the ongoing discussions on deriving minimum income standards, we need to see our diversity as our strength in building solidarity.

Meaningful conversations on basic needs should confront our differences, as well as encourage spaces for different opinions to grow. Our participants also taught us that these conversations must begin with understanding ordinary people's lived experiences. Only then can we build bridges based on shared needs that bind us together.

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