

HomeGround

How to deal with differences in identity politics

One way is to downplay differences over issues like race or sexual identity. Another is to acknowledge differences exist while trying to treat all equally. Or one can accept that some identities are more powerful than others.



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This week, identity issues took centre stage at a conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

The conference on identity issues comes at a time when race, religion, gender and sexuality, and their impact on the political sphere, are on the public agenda.

I watched the videos of the conference, which was held on Tuesday. Here's an outline of what I found salient, and what more needs to be discussed in future forums on such issues.

WHERE WE ARE NOW

First, some definitions.

All over the world, concern is being raised about identity politics taking root, polarising societies.

Identity politics takes place when people organise around identity (such as race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or other attributes) to lobby for political action. It is human to seek comfort among like-minded folks, but identity politics has a tendency to become exclusionary and zero-sum: for example, a group championing one religion or cultural group may want its practices legislated for inclusion in the workplace and schools, to the exclusion of others. Political parties that play up identity politics can drive wedges through societies.

Government leaders have been addressing such concerns for some time. Race and religion was a major theme in Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally this year.

As Finance Minister Lawrence Wong highlighted in his keynote address at the conference, conflict over identity issues is by no means new. Many Singaporeans know about the racial riots between Chinese and Malays in 1964 that killed 36 people. But the deadliest riots in Singapore took place a century before. The 1854 riots between Hokkiens and Teochews killed around 400. As Mr Wong observed, it may seem astounding today, but back then, dialect identities among Chinese people in Singapore and China "trumped their racial, cultural or national identity as Chinese".

Today, new forms of what Mr Wong called tribalism are emerging, and Singapore has to take care that they do not destroy the social harmony so hard-won in Singapore that remains on a "knife edge".

For example, issues over gender and sexual identity now feature alongside traditional identity issues of race and religion. These can become polarising if not managed well.

"The challenge is to acknowledge and do our best to address the legitimate concerns of every 'tribe', without allowing our politics to be based exclusively on identities or tribal allegiances," he said.

Mr Wong suggested five ways to find common ground with one another, adding that his remarks were more "in the nature of notes to prompt further discussion than

"a fully worked exposition".

The first three rules involve interacting with others: to strengthen human relationships; and avoid stereotyping people based on single traits; and choose cooperation and mutual benefit over conflict when working together.

Next, as a society, Singapore must give hope to all by having targeted support for marginalised groups while ensuring universal coverage on essential items.

And finally, the Government must act as a fair, honest broker in these interactions. He said: "We will never let any group feel boxed in or ostracised. All must feel they are part of the Singapore conversation, all must feel they are part of the Singapore family, all must feel there is hope for the future."

In the discussions that followed, panellists at the conference agreed that a person has multiple identities. Identity is multi-dimensional, malleable and multi-group, said Professor David Chan, director of the Singapore Management University's Behavioural Sciences Initiative.

It was thus important to focus on what is common among different groups, several panellists concurred. For example, focusing on a sense of shared humanity can help people bridge divides, said Professor Vineeta Sinha, sociologist at the National University of Singapore's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

I would say this is where Singapore as a society is right now on identity issues. We uphold the importance of cohesion. We recognise there are more, and more complex and overlapping, identity issues that need to be discussed publicly. We recognise the need to acknowledge these differences and want to live with differences in a harmonious manner.

But we are unsure just how to deal with differences.

DEALING WITH DIFFERENCES 101

One way to deal with differences is to downplay them.

This has been Singapore's approach to race for over 50 years, when we preached racial harmony, and patted ourselves on our backs for our achievement. But in recent years, many young people from minority communities have spoken up passionately about how sweeping differences under the carpet has meant not educating majority-race Singaporeans about the need for sensitivity, leaving minorities to face the kind of casual racism that represents a thousand tiny cuts during daily interactions.

Downplaying differences is no longer a viable way to deal with issues that may divide society. The second way to deal with differences is to acknowledge them and assure everyone they have space to air their views. Elaborating on how to deal with differences, Prof Vineeta said differences are normal and natural among people. This means they should neither be downplayed nor over-emphasised.

For example, humans do have differences in skin tones. Things become problematic only when people ascribe characteristics to those differences, for example, if they say people of certain skin tones are dirty. The key is to discuss differences without judgment or hierarchy, she said. Such an approach might be what Mr Wong had in mind when he promised that no group would be unheard, ignored or excluded.

But does this mean that every identity group will have a seat at the table of discussion on how to forge a common future in Singapore? How realistic is that

expectation? Will each group have an equal voice in participation? Will each have an equal say on the outcome?

After all, while the idealist says that differences are natural and can be accommodated, the realist knows that not all differences are equal. The scale of identity politics has different weights.

For example, while all of us have multiple identities, some identities have more power than others.

Being male is more powerful (jokes about men fearful of their wives notwithstanding). Being Chinese in majority Chinese Singapore is more powerful than being Malay or Indian.

Within each person's identity kit bag are also different-powered identities. For example, in warning against stereotyping people and viewing them through the lens of one identity attribute such as race, Mr Wong questioned the notion of "Chinese privilege", saying a poor Chinese woman would have a "vastly different lived experience" from a wealthy Chinese man.

But what Mr Wong failed to add is that belonging to the majority Chinese race does give said poor woman a certain majority privilege. When she applies for a job, for example, she is unlikely to be asked if she is really Singaporean; on the MRT, the empty seat next to her is unlikely to be shunned because of her race.

As Prof Vineeta put it, one aspect of privilege is the freedom not to be marked by one's identity markers.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE MAJORITY

For the discussion on identity issues to move forward, it is important for majority communities not to deny their own advantage and privilege, or deny minorities their lived

experiences. Power imbalances are as central to human society as the desire to belong to identity groups.

Those in positions of majority privilege, or in positions of power and dominance, must have the honesty to face up to their own privilege, and then the courage to use that privilege to extend the rights of those who are powerless.

This can form the basis of a third and more realistic way to address differences: acknowledge differences are natural and human; welcome people to the table of discussion; and treat all as equal, while understanding that some come with more privilege, others with more disadvantages and even some trauma.

Just as the discussion on social mobility and inequality has sensitised Singapore to give more targeted assistance to low-income families so that their children can break out of poverty, so discussions around identity issues have to offer safe spaces to those who are most marginalised or ostracised, to speak without fear of being ridiculed or dismissed.

Such an attitude by the majority will then encourage the airing of views. Conversely, it is important for minorities to speak truthfully with candour, without embellishment or unfair blaming.

In his August rally speech, PM Lee had also addressed this issue when he stressed the importance of accommodating differences in identities, to preserve inter-racial harmony. He said that minority races are the ones most affected by racial discrimination and urged the majority to be more sensitive to their concerns and have the moral courage to take a stand against racist behaviour.

In another speech on race in June, Mr Wong specifically called on the majority community to recognise that it is harder to be a

minority than a majority in a multiracial society. He urged the majority to "do more and take the extra step" to be sensitive to and conscious of the needs of minorities.

This rule of majority responsibility should be hard coded into Singapore's DNA on how to deal with identity politics. Such an attitude from the majority is crucial to preserve social cohesion as Singapore society engages in painful, honest conversations that allow minorities to air their views and express their emotions. Once minorities feel safe and heard by the majority community, both groups can work to enlarge the common ground.

Being the majority or any other dominant group in a society is a privilege and a responsibility.

Chinese Singaporeans can recognise their own privileged position as the dominant ethnic group, without subscribing to the controversial views of critical race theory, which teaches that racial discrimination is historical and built into social structures and institutions.

That view might have resonance in America, with its history of Black slavery and legacy of coercive racist laws that privileged the White majority and targeted others. Such laws include those that enforced racial segregation in public spaces like buses and schools between Whites and persons of colour from 1877 to the mid-1950s; and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act suspending Chinese immigration.

When a Black American decries systemic discrimination and speaks of "white privilege", that cry comes from a historical and cultural context very different from Singapore.

So those wary of importing the idea of "white privilege", and conflating it with "Chinese privilege", straight into Singapore are right to be cautious.

But one can understand the US-specific context of critical race theory as something foreign to Singapore, and still be alive to the general point that being a member of a dominant social group that holds most economic and political power, puts one in an advantaged position over someone from a minority group.

Recognising such a privilege should make us pause and cause us to give to others the respect we want given to us. This then requires us to exercise that privilege responsibly, and to use it to extend protection and shelter to those less privileged than ourselves.

Just as many societies teach men to both respect and protect women and children, so majority identity groups should use their dominance to hold space and create shelter for minorities.

For the majority, the key is to listen to the lived experiences with empathy and check ourselves for bias. Minorities too can help their own cause when they voice their experiences in a way that does not unfairly accuse their listeners.

Some Singaporeans may avoid such conversations for fear of importing polarising Western-style culture wars into Singapore. But that is classic slippery-slope, sloppy thinking based on catastrophic projection, which is when you refuse to start doing something because you project it will end badly (for example, you read about patricide and decide you won't have children).

Recognising the excesses of another society's polemical debates is no reason to stop our own from doing the right thing and beginning to set ourselves on a better path. Instead, we should be smart and intentional to avoid the mistakes other societies have made on identity issues.

For example, we must constantly make sure minorities are not discriminated against in the workplace so they become marginalised into poverty. Instead, national efforts are needed to broaden and deepen the social safety net to cover minorities, whether of race, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

Mr Wong hoped his "notes" on tribalism would prompt further discussion. He outlined a very practical and useful list of five steps to counter tribalist instincts. The principle of majority responsibility should be added to that framework.

So girded, Singapore society can then prepare for the next phase of discussions on identity issues, which is to address the sense of injustice felt by minorities and talk about how to address them. In this phase, the role of the Government as fair, honest broker will be pivotal.

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