



Panelists at the IPS-RSIS forum on identity this week included (from left) Associate Professor Zhang Weiyu from the National University of Singapore's communications and new media department; Mr Joel Lim, managing director of Zyrup Media; and Ms Chan Chi Ling, chief operations officer of non-profit technology organisation better.sg. PHOTO: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

# How best to bridge divides and strengthen a common national identity?

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At a time when people are rediscovering their "tribes" and reasserting different facets of their identities, it feels harder than ever to forge a common Singapore identity everyone feels they have a share in.

This is especially the case when friction arises between groups with different lived experiences, which can lead to people turning inwards and doubling down on their positions, rather than reaching out in reciprocity and compromise.

These were some of the issues raised at a conference on identity organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) on Tuesday.

Insight looks at three approaches to tackle such tensions.

## CARVING OUT SPACE FOR DEBATE

If disagreements arise because people are ignorant of what other people feel strongly about, then creating spaces for discussion might help both sides reach a common understanding. These could include conferences involving academics and civil society voices, as well as small-group dialogues.

In September last year, the Conversations on Singapore Women's Development was launched to understand women's concerns, with the resultant feedback to be compiled into a White Paper.

For such platforms to be effective, they must be made available, accessible and attractive for people to take part in, said Professor David Chan, a psychologist and director of Singapore Management University's Behavioural Sciences Initiative, who was a panel-

list at the IPS-RSIS forum.

But timing and context matter, especially when the issues under discussion involve irreconcilable differences in values and are likely to stir up strong emotions, Prof Chan said. A discussion that is badly timed, poorly planned and hastily implemented can hurt instead of help.

When such discussions do go according to plan, there are benefits.

Associate Professor Yow Wei Quin, from the Singapore University of Technology and Design's arts and social sciences cluster, said people become more aware of their unconscious thinking. They may also become more cognisant of how their actions may impact or be influenced by others, she added.

But what about groups that are left out of mainstream discussions, or are not ready to engage in debate with the wider society?

Women, for instance, have historically been excluded from such debate, said Associate Professor Zhang Weiyu from the National University of Singapore's communications and new media department. In many cases, these groups then formed their own safe spaces to share experiences and form social identities. "And these safer deliberation spaces became foundations upon which these social groups can reach out... to the larger society," she said.

## LEANING ON THE LAW

Another option is to spell out in law behaviour that Singapore deems unacceptable, with penalties – or at least mandatory rehabilitation – for those who run afoul of the rules. In August, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that Singapore will introduce a Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act to consolidate existing laws dealing with racial issues, which

are currently under various pieces of legislation. While such laws may not make people get along with one another, PM Lee said, they signal what society considers right or wrong and "nudge people over time to behave better".

Singapore is also working on new anti-discrimination laws, with a Tripartite Committee on Workplace Fairness making recommendations on this legislation. These are expected to cover areas set out in existing guidelines on fair employment practices, such as age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language, marital status, or disability.

But civil society groups have suggested that legal protections be extended to prevent discrimination based on categories such as sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

Having laws in place will make it mandatory for offenders to undergo a rehabilitative regime, said Associate Professor Adrian Kwek from the Singapore University of Social Sciences' Centre for University Core. But they may also mean that people treat one another well because they fear punishment – rather than internalising values that motivate them to behave that way.

"The result will be a fragile societal harmony, where one's restraint depends on whether one will get into trouble with the law."

Dr Carol Soon, one of the moderators at the IPS forum, pointed out that social media, with its low barrier to entry, has become the space for identity expression and contestation. But given that these platforms have been plagued by problems ranging from cyber bullying to disinformation, some degree of regulation is needed. The challenge is finding the right balance.

"Too little, and society would be the poorer, given the repercus-

sions – such as distrust, or worse, hate between communities," said the senior research fellow and head of society and culture at IPS.

"Too much, and it may inhibit self-expression, which could lead to repression within the self and the community."

One way to manage this might be for influential people on social media – who "own" the space – to set and enforce codes of conduct for themselves and their communities, she suggested.

## A HANDS-OFF APPROACH?

There is the option of letting debates on identity run their course, without attempting to shape them or arbitrate in any way.

On Tuesday, Finance Minister Lawrence Wong said Singaporeans will always find a "fair and honest broker" in the Government, which will strive to make sure all groups feel heard and included.

But Assistant Professor Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, from Nanyang Technological University's School of Social Sciences, said the Government does not need to intervene in every debate. "It can take a step back and let people discuss and have a robust discussion, sometimes even on issues they would find hard to let go of," he said.

Under this hands-off approach, what would happen when people clash over fundamental differences such as value systems?

Prof Kwek suggested an approach first put forth by philosopher John Rawls that operates based on an "overlapping consensus". Instead of building harmony based on shared values – which may differ from person to person, and even give rise to conflict – it taps each individual's values to build a consensus on norms the entire society believes in. This approach is less fragile than one based entirely on self-interest, he said, adding that norms which facilitate social harmony include kindness and tolerance.

Any framework to manage social harmony should ensure that places where people often acquire values – such as schools and religious organisations – align in transmitting values that affirm such norms, he said. This framework should also teach and model scientifically supported, productive methods of disagreement.

The topic of disagreement came

up at Tuesday's forum, during which Singaporean writer Ng Yi-Sheng responded to Prof Chan's suggestion that people should refrain from becoming "too angry" when disagreeing on a topic.

Rage can be productive and people have the right to be angry when there is injustice, Mr Ng said.

In response, Prof Chan agreed that anger arising from value violations such as unfair treatment is understandable, legitimate and at times even useful, but it is important to be calm and composed when making one's points because visceral expression can lead to "unintended negative consequences".

"If we don't have the humility to change our strategies and beliefs... in the light of new information, I think we are no longer adaptive. And what we do is a disservice to the group that we are representing... because it will backfire."

He called instead for the creation of an overall climate in which people remain respectful, even where strong disagreements exist.

This means raising issues in a way that is "sincere, humble and with good intentions, intellectual honesty and a learning orientation, not engaging in sarcasm and character assassination, both actual and perceived", he said.

Prof Chan added: "It will be counterproductive if our anger, conviction or passion is not translated into constructive actions that solve problems. So regardless of who we are and the views we hold, we need to learn how to reduce negativity, produce positivity and co-create solutions."

But that does not mean shying away from disagreement.

On the contrary, it is important for people to engage more with those who they disagree with, and to approach these differences with openness rather than trying to shut them down, Prof Walid said.

"The moment we start saying, 'Oh, you disagree with me, and therefore you are less moral than me' – I think that's a recipe for societal disaster, because we will never be able to build a cohesive society."

"We can disagree completely and robustly with people. But the mechanism to settling those differences has to be more openness in terms of debate and dialogue."

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