# SINGAPOREAN YOUTH AND SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY

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Policy Report

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# Executive Summary

In Singapore, there is a commonly shared belief that upward socioeconomic mobility (either intra or intergenerational) is attainable through the practice of meritocracy, alongside an investment in education and citizens' hard work (sometimes referred to as the "Singapore Dream"). A study by the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) in 2016/17 examined perceptions of socioeconomic mobility among Singaporean youth.

### Core Questions

(1) How do Singaporean youths in polytechnics understand socioeconomic mobility?

(2) Is there a shared belief that upward socioeconomic mobility is attainable through meritocratic values and practices?

(3) How do youths capture (or not) the significance of ethnicity-, class- and gender- based constraints on the process of upward socioeconomic mobility?

### Findings

(1) Socioeconomic mobility was understood by the interviewees in three forms: (i) financial success, (ii) social status, and (iii) equality of opportunity.

(2) The dominant perception was that that upward socioeconomic mobility should be possible within Singapore's meritocratic society.

(3) However, upward socioeconomic mobility was perceived to be negatively affected in practice by (i) ethnicity; (ii) class, (iii) gender, and (iv) education.

### Policy Implications

Three policy implications emerge from these findings:

(1) There is a need to triangulate the findings of this study with others to understand whether the perceptions of ethnic, class, gender, and educational disadvantages manifest in reality.

(2) If further study does not show that the perceptions manifest in reality, there is a need to correct these false perceptions. As the ability to ensure upward socioeconomic mobility (either intra or

intergenerational) is sometimes referred to as a "civil religion" holding societies together, perceived dissatisfaction may lead to social fractures.

(3) If further study does indeed reveal that reality matches the perceptions, policy attention is called for owing to the importance of meritocracy and socioeconomic mobility to Singapore's social contract.

# I. Introduction

In Singapore, there is a commonly shared belief that upward socioeconomic mobility (either intra or intergenerational) is attainable through the practice of meritocracy alongside an investment in education and citizens' hard work.

However, there are concerns that individuals are entrenched in their respective socioeconomic classes. The gap between the highest and lowest socioeconomic groups leads to "increasingly dissimilar starting points of children from different family backgrounds".[1] The Singapore government has acknowledged the need to reduce inequality and socioeconomic stratification to prevent a fractious society.[2] An Oxfam report ranked Singapore among the bottom 10 countries for efforts to reduce inequality, a result attributed to low personal income and corporate tax rates that reduce revenues available to address inequality.[3] In a recent quantitative study and documentary, income inequality was seen as most likely to cause a social divide in Singapore, compared to race, religion, sexuality and country of origin.[4]

This report is based on a study by the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) conducted in 2016/17, which examines the perceptions of socioeconomic mobility among Singaporean youth. Subjects for the study were Singaporean polytechnic students in their final year of study and about to enter the workforce.

This study is important as perception influences action — the failure to believe in the possibility of socioeconomic mobility can challenge its very possibility. Moreover, a polity is often built on the optimism and energy of its youth. As such, youths' belief in upward socioeconomic mobility can influence Singapore's economic future and success in building a progressive society.

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[1]  Wong Pei Ting, "Tackling inequality, forging an inclusive society key to S'pore's future: President Halimah," Todayonline.com, May 7, 2018, https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/tackling-inequality-forging-inclusive-society-key-spores-future-president-halimah-yacob.

[2]  Ong Ye Kung, "Tackling inequality will always be a work in progress and all Singaporeans have a part to play," May 15, 2018, https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/every-one-has-part-play-singapores-unfinished-business-tackling-inequality#cxrecs_s.

[3]  This ranking was contested by the Singapore government. See Oxfam, "The Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index 2018," 2018, https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620553/rr-commitment-reducing-inequality-index-2018-091018-en.pdf; Faris Mokhtar, "Oxfam's Ranking of Singapore: More Important to Look at Outcomes When Fighting Inequality, Says Desmond Lee," Today, October 9, 2018, https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/oxfams-ranking-singapore-more-important-look-outcomes-when-combating-inequality-says.

[4]  Janil Puthucheary, "Regardless of Class," October 10, 2018, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/video-on-demand/regardless-of-class/regardless-of-class-10751776?cid=fbins.

**Core Questions**

    (1)   How do Singaporean youths in polytechnics define socioeconomic mobility in Singapore?

    (2)   Is there a shared belief that upward socioeconomic mobility is attainable through meritocratic values and practices?

    (3)   How do youths capture (or not) the significance of ethnicity-, class- and gender- based constraints on the process of upward socioeconomic mobility?

**Methodology**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted from August to December 2016 with 30 final year polytechnic undergraduates aged between 20 and 25. All participants were Singapore citizens (including naturalised citizens) and had lived in Singapore for at least 10 years, whether continuously or in stages.[5]

Participants were recruited through publicity flyers posted on campus noticeboards, e-mailers sent through the respective departments and snowball sampling. Interviews were recorded, anonymised and transcribed for analysis.

Qualitative text analysis was employed to analyse themes, and differences and similarities between participants. Interview data was coded in several cycles and accounted for first-level codes (descriptive), second-level codes (analytic) and in vivo codes (vernacular used by participants) used to establish patterns, themes and possible disparities across the data.

Quantitative data provided a complementary understanding of the salience and resonance of certain responses, the percentages of which are recorded within the findings. Matrix comparisons were conducted between nodes (themes and categories) to establish relationships, contradictions and overlaps across responses.

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[5]  Demographic representation of race was not sought as the objective of the study was to uncover how socioeconomic mobility is generally perceived. Nevertheless, the majority of the interviewees were Chinese, followed by Malays and Indians, with none falling in the "Others" category, a ratio which largely reflects Singapore's racial breakdown. The initial objective was to attain an even distribution of male and female interviewees. However, we received a slightly larger number of female participants.

# II. Findings

**(1)  How do Singaporean youths in polytechnics understand socioeconomic mobility in Singapore?**

Socioeconomic mobility was understood by the interviewees in three forms: (i) financial success, (ii) social status, and (iii) equality of opportunity.

The primary measure for socioeconomic mobility was **financial success** (52%). The interviewees largely described financial success as purchasing power, that is, having the freedom to purchase larger property and/or property within an ideal residential location, owning a car, and attaining a higher income though job promotions.

A minority (8%) of interviewees included **social status** in their measure of socioeconomic mobility. Social status was understood by the interviewees as having financial support for education and job opportunities and holding particular types of jobs.

In some cases, the possibility of upward socioeconomic mobility was seen as **equality of opportunity** in Singaporean society (conversely, not having the possibility for upward socioeconomic mobility indicated inequality). Relatedly, the interviewees described socioeconomic mobility as having the opportunity to break out of one's economic class through hard work and deservedness.

**(2)  Is there a shared belief that upward socioeconomic mobility is attainable through meritocratic values and practices?**

There was a shared belief among the interviewees that upward socioeconomic mobility is logically attainable through meritocratic values and practices, with reward accorded based on hard work and achievement.

While sharing the belief that socioeconomic mobility should be attainable in theory, two differing positions emerged about the existence and practice of meritocracy and in Singapore. These are: (i) Meritocracy exists; and (ii) Meritocracy does not or may not exist.

First, the dominant perception was that **meritocracy exists** in Singapore (76%) and, hence, upward socioeconomic mobility is possible. However, it should be noted that this perception was not unqualified as meritocracy was seen to be negatively affected in practice by factors such as ethnicity, class,

gender and education. The next section discusses how these factors were perceived to negatively affect socioeconomic mobility.

Some participants saw a positive association between meritocracy in the education system, opportunities, and upward mobility. Similar responses expressed how structural barriers can be broken through Singapore's meritocratic education system, through mechanisms including the SkillsFuture and Edusave schemes.

Among the 76%, there was an overwhelming belief that individual effort determines job prospects and economic wellbeing (93%). Interviewees who recognised the existence of meritocracy in Singapore also related its success directly to hard work, which was seen to supersede socioeconomic class and academic setbacks, including failing examinations, being streamed into EM3, and enrolment in an Institute of Technical Education (ITE).[6] Equally, the lack of hard work may affect those born into higher socioeconomic positions if they fail to make full use of their advantages. Moreover, routes to upward mobility were seen to include individuals' resourcefulness in seeking out job opportunities. The association between success and hard work was variously applied in relation to educational accolades, job attainments and promotions, and financial rewards.

Second, 24% of the interviewees perceived upward socioeconomic mobility to be difficult as **meritocracy does not exist, or were ambivalent about its existence**. Positive benefits, in their view, are not a natural result of hard work. While hard work was generally perceived to complement meritocracy, ambivalent or negative attitudes towards meritocracy suggest a concern about an imbalance between input and reward. The amount of effort needed was seen to be unequal across groups, with those in lower socioeconomic groups having to work harder to achieve the same results or access the same opportunities as those in the higher socioeconomic strata.

**(3)   How do youths capture (or not) the impact of ethnicity-, class- and gender- based constraints on the process of upward socioeconomic mobility?**

**(3.1)   Ethnicity**

The interviewees stressed the different constitutive elements of

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[6]  Students in Singapore are segregated according to their learning abilities at various stages of their education. In primary school, those who do best during their examinations are "banded" into EM1, with the others being banded into EM2 or EM3. These refer to English and Mother Tongue at first, second and third language levels, respectively. Both EM3 and ITEs are often stigmatised as lower tiers within Singapore's competitive education system.

ethnicity — that is race, religion, and language — as having negative impacts on meritocracy and, following from this, socioeconomic mobility.

**(3.2)  Race**

Overall, the interviewees were unsure whether race affects job and educational opportunities. Among the 30 interviewees, four individuals unequivocally stated that race does not affect job and educational opportunities, and three unequivocally stated that race does affect job and educational opportunities. The others were ambivalent, contradicting themselves at various stages of the interview. For instance, eight interviewees said at one point that race does not affect opportunities but at a later stage of the interview stated that it does.

While the interviewees were unsure whether race affects education and employment opportunities, they observed that cultural stereotypes may affect employment opportunities for ethnic minorities. Cultural stereotypes articulated included that of Malays being lazy and Indians being verbose. Among interviewees who also or only argued that racial inequality exists in Singapore, the same cultural stereotypes were used to explain why racial minorities may lack the same opportunities as Chinese-Singaporeans.

**(3.3)  Religion**

Few interviewees identified religion as affecting socioeconomic mobility in Singapore (16%). Specifically, Muslims were the only group referred to as being treated differently owing to religion. Different treatment of Muslims was perceived to take place in the workplace, with their religious needs seen to set them apart from their non-Muslim colleagues, consequently excluding them from networking opportunities and, therefore, opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility. To illustrate, an interviewee pointed out that "Those Muslims, they don't go to lunch as often as the rest of the Chinese workers, with the boss … the Muslims will go to another food area, which has a lot of halal choices. So, well, during lunch, there is a lot of conversation going, and that's when you get to talk to your boss sometimes. … Yeah, network. And … communicate, so, I guess, for me, that point, they will, might lose out a little."

Other reasons cited for Muslims being treated differently included the perceived national security threat arising from terrorism.

Regarding the perceived lack of Muslim pilots in the Singapore Air Force, one interviewee stated that Muslims are excluded because "they are easily influenced by their religion… if he were to be a pilot right, imagine he was fine for the first few years then suddenly he start to become very radicalised then he just, parliament building blow [sic]." This response illustrates how access to employment was perceived to be differentiated, where certain employment options and, by extension, opportunities for socioeconomic mobility are closed off for individuals of particular religious backgrounds.

**(3.4) Language**

Of the 22 interviewees who discussed racial inequality in Singapore, 14 (63%) mentioned preferential hiring practices favouring Mandarin language speakers. The interviewees saw this preference as a given result of Singapore's racial demographic, substantial business relations with China, job requirements calling for Mandarin speakers, familiar ethno-linguistic bonds between members of the Chinese community, and increasing business relationships with new Chinese migrants. As a function of ethno-linguistic preferences, observations about language were often associated with that of race. An interviewee illustrated such a conflation: "… some jobs would want people to… have… the ability to converse in Mandarin, you know, it will be easier for them *lah*, if they cannot then… that's too bad, I guess. And then… 'cause I think… they're more comfortable with Chinese, rather than the Malay? You can see that there is a gap *lah*, between race."

**(3.5) Class**

A majority of the interviewees (76%) perceived class differences as affecting job and educational opportunities. The interviewees referred to class in terms such as "rich" or "poor". When asked to elaborate, they drew on indicators such as type of housing, place of residence, income, education and financial backing. The same indicators were used as reference points in discussions of the rich-poor gap, which most interviewees recognised as present and visible in Singapore and unlikely to change in the near future.

Among interviewees who stated that meritocracy exists in Singapore, 73% held the perception that better opportunities are available for individuals from wealthier families. Being "rich" was

often related to the financial ability to travel and study abroad, reflective of a privileged class with more access to education and lifestyle options. The interviewees also discussed how job opportunities and promotions came easier to those with parents able to provide industry footholds.

The perceived class differential was attributed to different starting points. Some interviewees explained being born into a particular status as a matter of luck. Others described it as giving unequal access to opportunities and connections, and requiring unequal degrees of effort to move up the socioeconomic ladder. Generally, the interviewees reflected that being from wealthier backgrounds inculcates particular attitudes in individuals, contributing to an advantageous starting point, compared to individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Several interviewees also highlighted how students from the lower socioeconomic strata are unable to focus on their studies owing to existential, familial and financial worries, which place responsibilities of care upon them.

### (3.6) Gender

When prompted, all the interviewees stated that gender does not affect job and educational opportunities, referring to the effectiveness of Singapore's meritocratic system and its emphasis on individual performance.

However, the interviewees generally revealed a gender bias. They perceived the different treatment of men and women in employment as natural and attributed male biases in the workplace to physical strength and stereotypically masculine character traits such as ambition and the capacity for leadership. For example, the interviewees saw industries such as firefighting and career paths in leadership roles as naturally suited to men. Drawing on feminine traits, some interviewees cited jobs such as teaching and management roles as more suited for women as opposed to jobs requiring manual labour.

### (3.7) Education

While the study focused on perceptions of ethnicity, class and gender, the interviewees also expressed the perception that meritocracy in Singapore favours those who first succeed academically as opposed to late bloomers, students streamed into "Special" or "Express" streams as opposed to the "Normal Technical" stream, those enrolled in "branded schools" as

opposed to "neighbourhood schools" perceived to be of a lesser social status, junior colleges as opposed to polytechnics and ITEs, and academically-inclined students as opposed to "underachievers" and "practical learners". Students falling in the former categories were perceived to have more opportunities available to them because of the way the education system is structured and the greater emphasis that society places on academic achievements at the expense of other talents such as excellence in sport. The interviewees perceived Singapore's meritocratic system as bounded by the competition posed by peers and the effects of employing a bell curve within the education system. This sentiment was expressed independently and in response to a question regarding changes to the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) system, which no longer relies on a bell curve as part of its grading system.

## III. Policy Implications

Overall, the dominant perception was that upward socioeconomic mobility is possible within Singapore's meritocratic society. However, this perception was not unqualified as meritocracy was perceived to be affected in practice by (i) class, (ii) ethnicity, (iii) gender and (iv) education.

Three policy implications emerge from these findings:

(1)   There is a need to triangulate the findings of this study with others to understand whether the perception of class, ethnic, gender and educational disadvantage manifests in reality.

(2)   If further study does not reveal the perception as manifest in reality, there is a need to correct false perceptions. As the ability to ensure upward socioeconomic mobility (either intra or intergenerational) is sometimes referred to as a "civil religion" holding societies together, perceived dissatisfaction could lead to social fractures as well as affect the success of Singapore's national narrative of meritocracy in cultivating a progressive, optimistic society.

(3)   If further study does indeed reveal the perception to be true in reality, it demands policy attention owing to the importance of meritocracy and socioeconomic mobility to Singapore's social contract. As such, if impediments to socioeconomic mobility revealed in this study bear out in future studies, issues that have to be addressed through policy would

be, for example, how best the demand for Mandarin fluency in the market can be attended to. It should be noted that several issues raised in this study are currently being addressed through policy. For example, in the case of uneven starting points, initiatives such as KidSTART seek to encourage pre-school participation among children from vulnerable families.

## V. Conclusion

Overall, the study concludes that upward socioeconomic mobility is generally perceived as possible in Singapore. However, based on the findings of this study, upward socioeconomic mobility for all is perceived to be more difficult in practice for some as meritocracy is not seen to be uniformly applied to all.

## Acknowledgments

# About the Authors

**Terri-Anne Teo** is a Research Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore. She holds a PhD in Politics and an MSc in International Relations from the University of Bristol.

Her research addresses the nexus between citizenship, governance and identity through sociological theory, and postcolonial and poststructuralist frameworks. She is specifically interested in understanding the exclusions of citizenship and affected communities in urban societies, including racial, religious and sexual minorities, and low-waged migrant workers. While calling attention to inequalities and practices of exclusion, she considers forms of redress from institutional and normative perspectives. Her work is grounded in empirical work and interdisciplinary methods motivated by sociological traditions, media studies and human geography. Building on this research, she is currently working on a monograph that examines multiculturalism in Singapore, and is the co-editor of a volume on postcolonial governmentalities.

Terri-Anne has taught courses on multiculturalism, international relations and political theory, and will be teaching Citizenship, Immigration and Globalisation (AS6042) in the upcoming term.

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*Chinese, Africans, and Jews* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), editor of *Social Resilience in Singapore: Reflections from the London Bombings* (Select Publishing, 2007), co-editor of Nations, *National Narratives and Communities in the Asia Pacific* (Routledge, 2014) as well as *Immigration in Singapore* (Amsterdam University Press, 2015). His research on multiculturalism, ethnic relations, narratives of governance, citizenship, immigration and national security have been published in journals such as *Asian Survey, Asian Ethnicity, Journal of Comparative Asian Development* and *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* and in a number of edited volumes. He was a Fulbright Fellow with the Center for Strategic Communication, Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, in 2012.

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Pravin has penned several commentaries, articles and book chapters on meritocracy, multiculturalism, identity politics, ethno-religious nationalism, civil society and local politics on various platforms. He has also delivered lectures and tutored modules with the Political Science and South Asian Studies departments at NUS and has conducted training programmes on multiculturalism and secularism for government agencies.

His research interests include state-society relations, ethno-nationalism, secularism, multiculturalism, communal relations, immigration and the experiences of diasporic communities.

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The **Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS)** is a research unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

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CENS is multinational in composition, comprising both Singaporeans and foreign analysts who are specialists in various aspects of national and homeland security affairs. Besides the work undertaken by its full-time analysts, CENS boosts its research capacity and keeps abreast of cutting-edge global trends in national security research by maintaining and encouraging a steady stream of Visiting Fellows.

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