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Towards ICCS 2025

Broadening Our Shared Spaces Through Intercultural Dialogue

By Claribel Low

SYNOPSIS

In an increasingly fragmented world, the importance of dialogue in bridging divides cannot be understated. Indeed, interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue has been consistently touted as the primary means of promoting understanding and acceptance among different communities in Singapore. However, as our identities and affiliations extend beyond race and religion, we must consider whether our efforts at dialogue should become more inclusive and all-encompassing. Instead of speaking merely of interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue, it is possible to complement this with an intercultural lens that would allow us to cover any potential blind spots.

COMMENTARY

When speaking about the [importance of preserving social cohesion](#) in light of the Israel-Hamas conflict, the then Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong highlighted the many ways Singapore “regularly promote[s] inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue to bring together different communities and to respectfully discuss sensitive issues of race and religion”. While promoting and engaging in interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue is no doubt essential, our understanding and practice of dialogue could perhaps expand beyond the domains of race and religion.

Multiculturalism and Emerging Multifaceted Identities

Singapore has long taken pride in being a [multicultural nation](#), an identity forged by our history dating back to pre-independence. This continual emphasis on race and religion as key markers of differences is no mere coincidence. It results from a

governance strategy based on [essentialised racial categories](#) inherited from the colonial era.

However, in the last couple of decades, Singapore has witnessed other forms of diversity emerging, even as ethnicity and faith remain the key potential sources of rifts. Our differences are no longer limited to these two attributes; they also manifest in the languages we use, our socioeconomic statuses, nationalities, and generational gaps to name a few. These identities overlap, intersect and interact in shaping our values and worldviews, which in turn have the potential to unite or divide us.

One only has to look at immigration over the past decade to understand how nationality, for example, could be a source of tension. As Singapore continues to welcome immigrants to our shores, cultural differences between local-born citizens and new residents can sometimes result in friction. The state has acknowledged these tensions. In an [interview](#) from 2024, Senior Minister Lee Hsien Loong spoke about the need for “careful calibration to maintain social cohesion” even as Singapore welcomes new immigrants.

More importantly, ethnic and faith identities are not monolithic communities with little or no overlap with members from other mainstream collectives. Today, approximately 1 in 5 marriages involves an [inter-ethnic couple](#). Additionally, around 1 in 3 marriages are [transnational unions](#) between Singaporeans and non-citizens. With that, more citizens and residents now have double-barrelled races and other overlapping identities that do not fit neatly into existing categories. It, therefore, makes sense to consider dialogue as bridging intercultural differences in addition to ethnic or religious differences.

Intercultural Dialogue: Covering the Blind Spots

How should we engage in dialogue if interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue may not address the expanding spectrum of fissures arising from our multifaceted identities? Given our multicultural fabric, dialogue rooted in less rigid ethnic and religious classifications could possibly tackle these emerging schisms. Defined as “the attitudes, behaviour, opinions, etc., of a particular group of people within society” by the [Cambridge English Dictionary](#), culture could very well encompass the values and worldviews we hold as a composite of the multiple identities and affiliations we have, which is more expansive than mere faith or ethnicity.

[UNESCO](#) has defined intercultural dialogue as “[a]n equitable exchange and dialogue among civilisations, cultures, and peoples, based on mutual understanding and respect and the equal dignity of all cultures [that] is the essential prerequisite for constructing social cohesion, reconciliation among peoples and peace among nations”. Even while the modality remains the same, reinforcing interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue with an intercultural prism signals a commitment to becoming more inclusive. It acknowledges that the differences between us are indeed broad-ranging.

The terms we use do matter. For some who profess no religious affiliation, interfaith dialogue could feel daunting or exclusive since they find themselves with no theological background or religious belonging on which they could anchor their contributions. Positioning interfaith dialogue as one of cross-cultural learning could

encourage those in the non-religious community to participate in dialogue more actively. This is significant in Singapore's context, given that according to the [latest census from 2020](#), approximately 20 per cent of Singaporeans considered themselves non-religious. Promoting intercultural dialogue would make these spaces more expansive and inclusive.

Honest and Authentic Conversations

Expanding dialogue to cover demographic attributes that are not strictly rooted in impermeable social identities like ethnicity and faith could allow for more honest and authentic conversations about the divides that Singaporeans are truly concerned about. A [survey](#) jointly commissioned by OnePeople.sg and Channel NewsAsia in 2018 found that it was not race or religion but class differences that worried Singaporeans the most. While numerous ground-up initiatives have sought to create spaces for such conversations, these efforts remain rather nascent, and the need to engage in such dialogues might not have reached most of the citizenry.

Cultivating “Intercultural Mindedness” Through Education

How, then, can we truly promote and engage in intercultural dialogue? The best means to develop awareness and knowledge of intercultural dialogue is through education. While the existing [Character and Citizenship Education syllabus](#) developed by Singapore's Ministry of Education does cover the importance of fostering social cohesion and harmony amidst diversity, there could be a more concerted effort to cultivate a distinct “[intercultural mindedness](#)” in schools.

With that, students and young adults can learn to negotiate conflicts that arise from cultural differences in safe spaces and acquire the ability to “[engage with diversity in contexts characterised by plurality, complexity, uncertainty and inequality](#)”. In a diverse and fragmented world, such competencies will only be ever relevant. For these competencies to be effectively developed, however, a specific pedagogy has to be crafted intentionally, deliberately and conscientiously for this specific purpose.

Conclusion

As Singapore and the world become increasingly diverse, intercultural dialogue presents a complementary tool to address the multifaceted challenges we encounter daily. While interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue remains relevant for bridging ethnic and religious differences, emerging tribal identities necessitate dialogue that would consider all these other forms of diversity. Broadening our notion of dialogue could enable us as a society to be inclusive and engage in more productive conversations, thereby forging more cohesive communities.

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