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### The 5C Challenges of Cohesion

David CHAN

*Singapore Management University*, davidchan@smu.edu.sg

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## **The 5C challenges of cohesion**

In this first part of a two-part article on integration, Professor David Chan discusses social cohesion. The second part on integration efforts and policies will be published tomorrow.

THE outcomes and consequences of population policies affect all areas of Singaporeans' lives. At stake is not just how citizens perceive the Government or view a political party. At stake is the very quality of our lives in physical dimensions such as space and infrastructure support; economic dimensions such as jobs and taxes; and social dimensions such as inter-group relations and commitment to Singapore.

Population and integration challenges cannot be addressed in a top-down manner and by the Government alone. We need a 'whole-of-society' approach where people not only have a voice but can also be part of the solution. Public discourse on this issue, however sensitive or difficult, must continue constructively so it makes a positive difference to the outcome. An honest and thorough national conversation on this helps Singaporeans work together on solutions that will benefit our future and those of our children.

All sides in the discussion must consider what goals we want to achieve as a society. Most of us would agree on the major societal goals. These would include citizen well-being and quality of life; opportunity for all Singaporeans; a compassionate and inclusive society with citizens rooted and committed to Singapore; and an adaptive and resilient society. If we agree on these goals, then integration issues should be framed to influence achieving these societal goals. Challenges of social cohesion can be discussed in terms of five Cs: crowding, clustering, competition, comparisons and conflicts.

### **Crowding**

CROWDING lowers efficiency, well-being and quality of life. A result of a mismatch between the large and rapid influx of foreigners and what our common physical space and infrastructure can comfortably support, the issue of crowding is both physical and psychological. It is not just an increase in absolute numbers or density. Our experience of crowdedness is affected also by the quality of our interactions and sense of familiarity and mutual attitudes with foreigners in our midst.

Improvements in infrastructure and more physical space will mitigate the problem by reducing the number of people per square area. But the underlying psychological and integration issues have to be tackled. So it is a mistake to compare Singapore with Tokyo, which has a highly homogenous population, and to argue that Singapore can therefore comfortably support a larger population of much higher density.

The issue is not optimal density but crowdedness and its impact on effective functioning and well-being.

In any case, physical improvements take time to materialise. We need to tighten the inflow of foreigners and address integration issues urgently and adequately.

A well-integrated population could have a higher quality of life and experience fewer problems of crowdedness than one with equal or lower density but poorer integration.

### **Clustering**

CLUSTERING is a challenge for integration, where the physical congregation of foreigners and their interactions exclude those outside the group. It is human to cluster. But clustering of foreigners tends to signify exclusiveness and discourage Singaporeans to join in the activities and interactions. This reinforces group membership and contributes to the development of a 'us-versus-them' mindset, negative feelings between locals and foreigners and ignorance about each other.

Clustering produces a sense of community within a foreigner group, but it also reduces their need to interact or integrate with locals. With frequent, visible occurrences and on a large scale, clustering produces a vicious circle and negative spiral for the local-foreigner divide.

We need to reduce clustering and promote interactions between locals and foreigners. We need to balance integration with the clustering of newcomer adjustment and social support. We also need to review the mix of the foreigners based on quality and integration outcomes.

### **Competition**

COMPETITION also threatens cohesion. In recent years, the doors were open to foreigners to enlarge the economic pie and create jobs in Singapore. Ironically, responding to the macro-level competition has created the micro-level competition Singaporeans face from foreigners we attracted here. The negative consequences of this micro-level competition affect citizen well-being and threaten cohesion.

Social cohesion is threatened when Singaporeans experience feelings of neglect and react negatively when they perceive, rightly or wrongly, that the competition with foreigners is unfair.

One example is the belief that foreign employers are hiring or promoting foreigners based on similarity or affiliations rather than merit. Another example is the belief that there are jobs which are no longer feasible for Singaporeans because the pay is depressed to a level acceptable only to foreigners.

Competition from foreigners extends to education, health, housing and other tangible public resources. Perceptions of unfairness strongly affect integration and they are contagious - spreading quickly with multiplier effects on other Singaporeans' perceptions.

### **Comparisons**

COMPARISON also influences cohesion. We need to understand the contexts of the comparisons that Singaporeans make to address their anxieties and angst.

Many comparisons appear to be based on cost-benefit analyses of the relative contributions that Singaporeans and foreigners have made to Singapore and the relative benefits they have gained from the economic pie and public policies.

But it is much more than an economic calculation. It involves principles of fairness, social reciprocity, sense of belonging, divergence of interests and beliefs in the rights, responsibilities, privileges and entitlements of citizens and non-citizens.

This is evident in the arguments made in mainstream and alternative media regarding local-foreigner issues.

Examples include national service, quality of talent, hiring and promotion practices, scholarships for foreigners, foreigner influence on income inequality and housing prices, foreigners using Singapore as a stepping stone, and proportion of foreigners in organisations and industries. The concerns over these comparisons are rooted in non-economic values and principles, and cannot be adequately addressed by economic answers alone.

## **Conflict**

CONFLICT threatens cohesion, especially when it increases in frequency, duration and intensity. Conflict over foreigners' disregard of local norms and lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity are emotive and difficult.

But it is also important to examine the contexts and effects of this conflict. For example, the effects of crowding, clustering, competition and comparisons described above intensify friction between foreigners and locals.

Local-foreigner conflicts are manifested publicly, magnified and perceived more negatively as they build on ongoing concerns and underlying tensions of Singaporeans. These negative spirals lead to mutual distrust and disrespect and a divided Singapore.

Without solutions to the contextual problems of crowding, competition and so on, reminders that 'not all foreigners are like that' do not have much effect.

It is not surprising that Singaporeans end up blaming foreigners, policies, policymakers or all of the above for the conflict.

Understanding the 5C challenges of cohesion will help focus attention on the real concerns of Singaporeans about integrating foreigners and provide a framework for efforts towards integration and policy formulation and implementation.

**The writer is director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute and professor of psychology at the Singapore Management University.**