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Citation

CHAN, David, "Singaporeans' well-being: It's not just about emotions" (2012). *Research Collection School of Social Sciences*. Paper 1352.

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Singaporeans' well-being: It's not just about emotions

David Chan

Published in Straits Times, 28 November 2012, p. A24

The mixed reactions to the recent Gallup global survey, which ranked Singapore as the most emotionless society ("Strong feelings over 'emotionless S'poreans"; Nov 23), are partly due to the way that Gallup and a Bloomberg Businessweek report - on Nov 20 - chose to present the results.

The Gallup ranking of countries was based on the averaged percentage of residents in each country who said they experienced each of 10 emotions daily.

Of these 10 emotions, five are positive emotions such as enjoyment and five are negative emotions such as anger. The Gallup report then used this ranking list to make inferences on emotional well-being in Singapore. Gallup partner Jon Clifton was reported as saying Singapore is "a place where residents barely experience any positive emotions".

But what the Gallup researchers in fact did was produce a ranking list of countries by emotional intensity, not emotional well-being.

The emotional intensity score, which ranked Singapore as lowest globally, is not the correct index to represent emotional well-being. Using only emotional intensity to make claims about emotional well-being is misleading if one does not know if the emotions experienced are positive or negative.

Consider the hypothetical example of a country in which the averaged percentage of residents who said they experienced each of the five positive emotions is 70 per cent and the corresponding averaged percentage for each of the five negative emotions is 10 per cent.

Most of us could agree that this country is doing moderately well on emotional well-being. Gallup's computation of emotional intensity will produce a score of 40 per cent (the average of 70 per cent and 10 per cent) for this country. But emotional intensity per se is not emotional well-being.

Emotional well-being is characterised by the relative presence of positive emotions and absence of negative emotions. To represent emotional well-being, one should compute the net score, by subtracting the averaged percentage of negative emotions from the averaged percentage of positive emotions. So in our hypothetical example, the emotional well-being score is 60 per cent (70 per cent minus 10 per cent).

In fact, the Gallup survey showed that Singapore respondents do not score high on both positive and negative emotions, compared to other countries. If we subtract the averaged negative emotion score from the averaged positive emotion score to produce a net score to represent emotional well-being, which is often done in scientific studies on emotions, Singapore will rank moderately high on this net score.

So the results are quite clear - when one distinguishes between positive and negative emotions and considers them jointly, as one should, Singapore in fact has at least a moderately high global ranking on emotional well-being.

In fact, several other recent surveys, including the World Happiness Report released by the United

Nations in 2012, which was based on Gallup polls taken from 2005-2011, showed that Singapore is consistently ranked moderately high on subjective well-being in terms of how people think and feel about their lives. Specifically, Singapore ranked 33rd globally among 155 countries.

However, the Gallup report is right to state that increasing gross domestic product per capita rates or lowering unemployment, by themselves, do not always lead to a corresponding increase in well-being or quality of life.

Singapore needs a restructured economy in which healthy economic growth is sustainable because of the choice and nature of the growth drivers and how we manage them. Such drivers include realistic rates of increased productivity, innovation that solves practical problems, relevance of skills upgrading and value-added jobs. The quality of the foreigner inflow needs to increase and industries need to be more driven by a Singaporean core.

The country also needs integrative policies that ensure GDP and economic growth are effectively translated into outcomes that benefit citizens and contribute to their well-being. Economic growth should be a means to achieve ends that are citizen-centric.

Not every challenge needs to be construed as a win-lose trade-off situation between economic growth and social goals. What matters is that the formulation and implementation of growth policies must be sensitive to the economic-social linkages that influence the kind of society that Singaporeans end up with as a country. So it need not, and should not, be an adversarial contest between economic growth and subjective well-being.

Measuring how people feel and experience their daily lives is of course useful, and it rightly signals concerns if citizens score low on these measures despite "good" GDP and employment numbers.

But what Singapore really needs is a more holistic conception of citizen well-being. What are the dimensions of well-being that matter to citizens? How do they vary across different segments of the population? Which dimensions may change over time, and how? Singapore needs to identify the predictors, correlates and outcomes of well-being.

Finally, scientific studies of well-being can only provide the empirical evidence on what matters to citizens. To enhance citizen well-being, Singapore needs to restructure its economy for sustainable and inclusive growth, but it also needs to build trust and social capital. That means that the country needs principled adaptive leadership and policies that effectively address citizens' concerns and aspirations.

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