DUNMAN HIGH SCHOOL
Year 4 English 2023
Singapore Issues – Race

SOCRATIC SEMINAR – RACE
Essential Questions: • **What is racism?** • **Why does racism exist and how does it affect the society?** • **Is the issue of racism a relevant topic in Singapore today?** **Is the CMIO model still relevant in Singapore today?** • **Are there equal opportunities (eg. Education, employment) for the different races in Singapore?** • **Is there casual racism apparent? What can be done about it?**
With reference to the attached resource material, as well as your own research, construct a reasoned response on this issue, paying particular attention to the depth, breadth and fair-mindedness of your views. You are not limited to discussing the essential questions above. You may dig deeper into the issues by asking critical questions to your fellow panelists, or lead the discussion into a specific perspective or angle.

Contents:

Exhibit 1

What is racism - and what can be done about it?

June 18th, 2020, BBC Newsround

With protests and demonstrations taking place around the globe in recent weeks, it's likely you've heard the word 'racism' a lot recently.

Racism is where someone treats another person differently because their skin colour is not the same as theirs, they speak a different language or have different religious beliefs, for example.

In this guide, you're going to find out what racism is, where it comes from and what you can do if you see or suffer from racism.

What is racism?

Racism can be most simply understood as someone behaving differently to another person based on the colour of their skin or culture. Some people are picked on because they look different or speak a different language. Some people wear certain styles of clothing because of their religion and may get bullied because of this.

Racism includes picking on people who are from a different country too.

Racism is felt by lots of different groups. For example, Jewish people have been persecuted - this is called anti-Semitism.

The UK is full of people who follow lots of different faiths and religions. Most of the time they all get along and people are free to live the way they want to. However, some groups are targeted because of their beliefs, and because of events that people blame them for - even if this is incorrect. For example, Islamophobia is when Muslims are the victims of attacks just because of their religion.

Why is it wrong to be racist?

It is a crime to be racist to someone in the United Kingdom. According to UK law, a person is committing a 'hate crime' if they direct hostile behaviour at someone based on that person's race and they can face criminal charges.

In 2019, there were almost 80,000 hate crimes in the UK. That's 10% more than the year before.

One of the biggest anti-racism charities in the UK is Show Racism the Red Card (SRTRC). It says the main reason why it's wrong to be racist is because "for the person experiencing racism it can be really damaging to their wellbeing".

Racism is known to cause feelings of sadness, anger and depression.

Why are some people racist?

"Nobody is born racist", according to SRTRC.

The charity says that there are three main things that influence people to act out or say racist things:

- Our experiences in life.
- The people we interact with.
- The society we grow up in.

For example, if someone in your family says racist things while you're growing up, you might start to think that's acceptable behaviour. Unless something is done about that behaviour, you may keep those views throughout your life.

You might also grow up around people - and go to school with people - who are from the same culture as you, speak the same language as you and have the same interests as you. That sense of belonging to a group has both positive and negative outcomes. The negative outcome is that it can set up differences between other groups and, over time, might lead to you to thinking that your group is better than others.

If you grow up in a society where you have advantages over people from other groups, this also could lead to you thinking you are better than others.

White people have advantages over non-white people in society and this is called 'white privilege'.

Where does racism come from?

Some people believe that they are better than others - just because of the colour of their skin. But racism can come from ignorance too - some people might not even know they are being racist in how they are acting. That's because they might have made assumptions based on another person's colour or culture. This is sometimes called 'racial discrimination'.

A lot of racism comes from history - for centuries, white Europeans were in charge of much of the world and thought they were better than people from other countries. Over time, their white culture was seen as 'normal' and anything else seen as different.

Black history expert, Professor Kehinde Andrews, says racism is built into British society and is "the product of centuries of history". He said a lot of where racism comes from is to do with what children in the UK are taught in schools. "If you look at how we understand the history of slavery, it's not really part of the UK school curriculum and that means it's not part of the discussion", he explained.

Learning about non-white history is not something that has to be taught in British schools - but some people are campaigning to change that. "I think sometimes we focus on the individual racist attitudes rather than the bigger problem because it's harder to pin down the wider problem," Professor Andrews added.

Racism in history - slavery

History is very important when looking at racism. For hundreds of years, until the 1800s, millions of black people were taken from Africa and transported by white Europeans to become slaves. Slave ships from Britain left ports like London, Liverpool and Bristol for West Africa, carrying goods such as cloth and guns to be traded. These goods were traded for men, women and children who had been kidnapped then sold to slave traders or bought from African chiefs.

Millions of families were separated. They were then tightly packed onto slave ships and travelled for months to the Caribbean or to North and South America. Many people died on the journey because the conditions were so bad. It is thought at least 24 million Africans were sold to slave traders around the world.

There were lots of attempts by enslaved people to fight back against slave owners. In 1832, an enslaved Jamaican man called Sam Sharpe led the biggest ever slave rebellion called the "Baptist War". 20,000 enslaved people fought in the conflict and it took over a month for the British Empire's army to gain back full control. Experts believe that this rebellion, and others like it, helped bring about the abolition of slavery across the British Empire by 1838.

Racism in history - Stephen Lawrence

In 1993, a black teenager called Stephen Lawrence was killed by a group of white men in an unprovoked racist attack in London. There was a huge investigation into his death which resulted in a really important document being published called the "Macpherson Report".

The report concluded that the police treated Stephen's case differently because he was black - and that some officers acted in a racist way, which led to the murder trial against the suspects collapsing. This incident was just one example of the difficult relationship between police and non-white people in the recent history of the UK.

What is institutional racism?
This is where racial discrimination is established as a normal behaviour within organisations that make up a society. Put more simply, it's the suggestion that people from black or other minority backgrounds have to work harder in society in order to get the same results as white people.

A report looking at the death of Stephen Lawrence suggested the case had been handled in an institutionally racist way by the police because the investigation had not been handled with the same care that a case involving a white person would have been.

Racism in history – protests

Protests against racism have often brought change - in the late 18th Century a movement called the abolitionists campaigned for an end to slavery, though it took many years for that to happen.

In the United States in the 1960s, the civil rights movement successfully campaigned for laws to be changed to bring about more equality - black people were still treated as second class citizens with fewer rights than white people.

This was the case in the UK as well. In 1963, the West Indian population of Bristol led a four-month boycott of buses in the city after the Bristol Omnibus Company refused to employ any Black or Asian workers. At that point in time, there was nothing in law to prevent racial discrimination when hiring people for jobs. Two years later, this was made illegal through the establishment of the Race Relations Act in the UK.

However, racism is still widespread and in recent years there have been many more protests as people continue to fight for an end to racism. In the US, an organisation called Black Lives Matter (BLM) was formed with the goal of ending violence against black people. It was set up following a number of deaths of black people at the hands of police. In 2020, protests were held by BLM all over the world following the death of an unarmed black man called George Floyd after he was stopped by police in the US.

What should you do if you've experienced racism?

If you've experienced racism, you shouldn't keep it to yourself. There are lots of websites where you can find help and advice. On its website, Show Racism the Red Card says: "If you think someone is being unfair to you or is bullying you because of your race or colour, you should tell somebody as soon as possible." This could be your parents, a teacher or another adult that you trust. Remember, being racist is against the law and your teacher or parents may choose to get the police involved.

The children's charity, Childline, says it's really important you stay safe: "If someone is being racist towards you, walk away to keep safe and don't retaliate or respond." Adding to this advice, SRTRC, say: "Even though you might want to, you shouldn't rise to the problem. Answering back or getting into fights will only make things worse. Instead, try to get help and talk to someone about it."

Reference: https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/52965984

Exhibit 2

The scapegoating of Asian Americans

By Liz Mineo, March 24th, 2021, The Harvard Gazette

The Atlanta shootings that killed eight people, six of them Asian women, took place amid an upsurge in anti-Asian violence during the pandemic. Authorities say the suspect, a 21-year-old white man, has confessed to the attacks and blames a sex addiction for his actions. They have not yet charged him with hate crimes, and legal experts say such a case may be difficult to establish. But for Courtney Sato, a postdoctoral fellow in The Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History, the general rise in hostility that serves as the tragedy's backdrop is part of the nation's long history of brutal bigotry against Asian Americans.

"The important thing to remember is that this is really not an exceptional moment by any means," said Sato. "But it's really part of a much longer genealogy of anti-Asian violence that reaches as far back as the 19th century." Sato pointed to the Chinese massacre of 1871, when a mob in Los Angeles' Chinatown attacked and murdered 19 Chinese residents, including a 15-year-old boy, a reflection of the growing anti-Asian sentiment that came to its climax with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The act banned the immigration of Chinese laborers, much as

the Page Exclusion Act of 1875, the nation's first restrictive immigration law, had prohibited the entry of Chinese women.

Sato said the Page Exclusion Act is a precursor to the dehumanizing narratives and tropes that render Asian woman as objects of sexual fetishization and unworthy of being part of the national consciousness. "In the 1875 Act, we see the ways in which race and gender are beginning to be entangled and codified in the law, and how Asian women were deemed to be bringing in sexual deviancy," said Sato. "That far back, we can see how racism and sexism were being conflated."

In modern American history, Asian Americans have been regularly scapegoated during periods of national duress. World War II saw the forced internment of about 120,000 Japanese Americans on the West Coast — an estimated 62 percent of whom were U.S. citizens — in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor. After the Vietnam War, refugees from Southeast Asia faced routine discrimination and hate, including attacks by Ku Klux Klan members on shrimpers in Texas. And in 1982, Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was beaten to death by two Detroit autoworkers who thought he was Japanese. The killing took place during a recession that was partly blamed on the rise of the Japanese auto industry.

In a letter to the Harvard community, President Larry Bacow condemned the Atlanta shootings and stressed that the University stands against anti-Asian racism and all kinds of hate and bigotry. "For the past year, Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders have been blamed for the pandemic — slander born of xenophobia and ignorance," wrote Bacow. "Harvard must stand as a bulwark against hatred and bigotry. We welcome and embrace individuals from every background because it makes us a better community, a stronger community. An attack on any group of us is an attack on all of us — and on everything we represent as an institution.

"To Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders in our community: We stand together with you today and every day going forward," Bacow wrote.

President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, whose mother is a South Asian immigrant, also condemned the attacks. "Racism is real in America, and it has always been," said Harris before meeting with community leaders and the families of the victims in Atlanta. "Xenophobia is real in America and always has been. Sexism, too."

Between March 2020 and February 2021, Stop AAPI Hate, an initiative supporting Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander communities led by several Asian American advocacy groups and the Asian American Studies Department of San Francisco State University, reported nearly 3,800 anti-Asian hate incidents in the U.S.

Asian Americans have been physically attacked, verbally harassed, spat upon, and subjected to racial slurs. In February, an 84-yeard old Thai man died after he was shoved to the ground in Oakland, California's Chinatown. Since the start of the pandemic, Asian Americans have become the target of xenophobic attacks, much like Muslims were blamed and scapegoated after the 9/11 attacks.

In a survey from the Pew Research Center, three in 10 Asian Americans reported having been subjected to racist slurs or jokes since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent study found that former President Donald Trump's description of COVID-19 as the

“Chinese virus” led to a rise in anti-Asian hate online. Trump also used the racist term “Kung Flu” at a youth rally in Arizona.

Last March, Vivian Shaw, a College Fellow in the Department of Sociology, and Jason Beckfield, professor of sociology, launched the AAPI COVID-19 Project to examine the pandemic’s impact on the AAPI communities. UNESCO is now a partner in the research project. The project’s latest report, based on interviews conducted between June and October of 2020, found that Asian Americans are dealing with multiple forms of risk, including the threat of anti-Asian violence, in their daily lives. Some Asian American grocery-store owners reported being conflicted about forcing customers to wear face masks because they were afraid of violent reactions, despite their fear of exposure to the virus. The pandemic has also exacerbated social inequities as some Asian Americans — many of them immigrants — work in the underground economy, can’t access unemployment benefits, lack health insurance, and may be subjected to police harassment.

“This pandemic has affected the most vulnerable of the vulnerable,” said Shaw, the lead researcher for the project. “When we talk about anti-Asian racism, it’s not within a vacuum. It’s within the context of these broader structures: race, gender, immigration status, socio-economic condition. All of that impacts people.”

Beckfield said that while the project’s goal is to study the pandemic’s effects on the Asian American community at large, it also looks to elevate their voices and find recommendations to fight anti-Asian racism and all xenophobia.

“We have to recognize that anti-racism is not just the burden or the project of the people who are being targeted by those in power,” said Beckfield. “It ought to be the project of people who are in power too.”

On March 18, after the Atlanta killings, the Harvard-Radcliffe Asian American Association, along with other Harvard affinity groups, conducted a vigil and started a fundraiser to support Asian American advocacy groups in Boston and Atlanta, and two nationwide organizations.

Sun-Jung Yum ’23 and Racheal Lama ’23, co-presidents of the Harvard-Radcliffe Asian American Association, said the Atlanta killings have shaken the community, but that they have found strength in joining forces and working together. “It’s taking a toll on our Asian and Asian American peers in a way that people don’t realize,” said Lama. “But it’s amazing seeing how this younger generation is coming together and standing up for their parents and their older family members.”

Yum hopes that the Harvard community seizes the opportunity to continue the conversation about anti-Asian racism and not let it slip away. “It’s really important that not only do we donate now, but that we also keep on talking about this,” said Yum. “This is a great opportunity for us to not let it slide this time. I really hope that the Harvard community really continues to push advocacy and activism in this area.”

For Sato, the expert in Asian American Studies who is a postdoctoral fellow in the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History, it’s a critical moment for Americans to learn about the history of anti-Asian violence in the country and realize how it’s connected to the mistreatment of other ethnic minorities.

“Once again, this is really not an exceptional case,” said Sato, “but it’s deeply linked to the broader conversation we have been having in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. This is a very much connected history, and we need to really think about how this violence is not only impacting the Asian American community, but also Blacks, Indigenous, Latinx and other vulnerable communities.”

Reference: https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/03/a-long-history-of-bigotry-against-asian-americans/

Exhibit 3

Majority of S'pore residents feel racism is an important problem: Survey

by Choo Yun Ting, The Straits Times, 3 April 2022

SINGAPORE - A majority of Singapore residents feel that racism remains an important problem today, and those who feel this way tend to be younger and more highly educated, according to a recent survey.

About 56.2 per cent of those polled think that racism remains an important problem, higher than the 46.3 per cent of respondents who felt this way in a 2016 edition of the survey.

This was surfaced in the findings of the latest CNA-Institute of Policy Studies survey on race relations published on Saturday (April 2).

More than 2,000 Singapore residents aged 21 and above were polled between November 2021 and January 2022, with an over-representation of Malay and Indian respondents by twice their national proportions to ensure minorities were well represented in the survey.

The survey also showed that respondents have grown more open to the idea of a non-Chinese prime minister or president over the last five years.

Most of those surveyed were accepting of a Singaporean Malay (82.2 per cent) or Singaporean Indian (82 per cent) as the president, up from 65.5 per cent and 70.6 per cent, respectively, in 2016.

On the other hand, respondents were very uncomfortable with the idea of a new citizen from any country taking on the role of prime minister or president.

Overall, younger respondents were found to be more likely than older ones to feel that racism is an important problem today - 63 per cent of those between 21 and 50 years old felt this way, compared with 46.8 per cent of those aged between 51 and 65, and 47.4 per cent of those above 65.

"The stronger focus on racism among younger respondents may be due to their greater exposure to commentary about race issues on social media, where woke and cancel culture encourage minorities in particular to call out examples of casual racism. Older respondents tend to have lower levels of engagement with online media," the report noted.

Those with higher education levels were also shown to be more likely to think racism is an important problem, with the difference more pronounced among Chinese and Malay respondents.

Some 68.3 per cent of Chinese degree holders felt racism is an important problem, compared with 34.2 per cent with below secondary education. For Malay respondents, 85.4 per cent of graduates believe racism is an important problem, compared with 50.9 per cent with below secondary education.

It was less differentiated for Indian respondents, with 63 per cent of graduates and 51.7 per cent of those with below secondary education feeling this way.

Views on the persistence of racism

Statement about race: Racism may have been a problem in the past, but it is not an important problem today.

Table with 5 columns and 5 rows. Currently displaying rows 1 to 5.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Overall	16.7% (10.6%)	39.5% (35.7%)	40.1% (43.4%)	3.7% (10.4%)
Chinese	16.5% (9.7%)	39.6% (36.9%)	40.1% (43.7%)	3.8% (9.7%)
Malay	20.1% (12.5%)	34.6% (33.4%)	42.7% (46.3%)	2.5% (7.7%)
Indian	16.8% (13.2%)	37% (33.8%)	40.7% (40.2%)	5.5% (12.8%)
Others	7.4% (19.1%)	66.7% (28.5%)	25.9% (30.9%)	0% (21.5%)

NOTE: Figures in brackets are from 2016 survey

Table: STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS Source: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

The findings also showed that most respondents of all races believe that success in Singapore is not contingent on race, similar to sentiments in the 2016 survey.

At the same time, 97 per cent of those surveyed were optimistic about the future of meritocracy for minorities, believing that things would either stay the same or improve with regards to minorities being viewed based on merit rather than race.

But there was a divided response on whether there is majority privilege in Singapore. About 53.9 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that being of the majority race is an advantage in Singapore society, similar to the 2016 findings.

This division was also reflected in sentiments on whether the majority race has more resources and opportunities than other races.

However, minority race respondents were found to have different thoughts on majority privilege - most Malay and Indian respondents agreed or strongly agreed that members of the majority race generally have more resources and opportunities than other races, compared with just 42.6 per cent of Chinese respondents.

The survey also found that respondents have become slightly more accepting of Singaporean Malays and Indians as family members as compared with five years ago, and the level of comfort with new citizens marrying into the family has also risen.

When it came to professional relationships, respondents demonstrated approximately the same level of acceptance for Singaporean Chinese, Malays and Indians as colleagues or subordinates. However, they showed lower acceptance of new citizens as co-workers.

In addition, those polled showed mostly positive reception towards economic-related policies of the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) and self-help groups, with over 77 per cent saying the EIP helps to preserve racial harmony in Singapore.

The EIP determines the racial quota in Housing Board blocks or housing neighbourhoods.

When it came to policies related to politics, respondents showed more positive sentiments towards the group representation constituency (GRC) system than the reserved presidency.

Respondents felt that the GRC was more likely to help preserve racial harmony in Singapore and safeguard minority rights, and less likely to disadvantage the majority race and minorities. In particular, 77.1 per cent of those polled felt the GRC helps to preserve racial harmony, while 70.4 per cent felt the same about the reserved presidency.

Meanwhile, many respondents were found to be indifferent about potential future developments to do with race in Singapore, with the proportions who indicated that a given development would make no difference ranging from 40 per cent to 55 per cent. But 62.9 per cent of respondents felt that greater intercultural understanding would be good or very good.

They were split over whether it would be beneficial for society if people felt able to speak up freely about their ethnic identity not being properly respected, or about problems with different ethnic cultures. This indicates ambivalence about greater and more open national discourse on racial issues, the report noted.

It also noted the survey shows that while work remains to be done in race relations, Singapore and its people have the willingness to continue the journey together.

Reference:https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/most-spore-residents-especially-those-younger-and-better-educated-feel-racism-is-an-important-problem-survey

Exhibit 4

The Big Read: High time to talk about racism, but Singapore society ill-equipped after decades of treating it as taboo

by Nabilah Awang & SM Naheswari, June 19th , 2021, Channel News Asia

When former national sprinter Canagasabai Kunalan and his wife, Madam Chong Yoong Yin, both 79, saw the viral video of a polytechnic lecturer making racist remarks to an interracial couple two weeks ago, they couldn't believe their eyes. The video evoked memories of 1964, when the couple were given the ultimatum by their families to end their relationship or leave their homes — because one of them was Indian and the other was Chinese — amid the racial tensions that were gripping Singapore.

“Singaporeans now are so educated … how can we still think like this?” said Mr Kunalan.

The racial riots between the Malays and Chinese in Singapore following its merger with Malaysia in 1963 plunged the country into nationwide violence. Houses were burnt down, the police were deployed to enforce curfews and people were beaten and killed. Yet, even in the most uncertain of times, there were also people of different ethnic groups standing together regardless of race. Older generations of Singaporeans recounted how people stepped up in solidarity when emotive racial conflicts shattered the peace.

Mr Kunalan, who was then a 22-year-old sprinter preparing for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, said: “The riots were happening in different areas in Singapore. Surprisingly, in my kampung (village), it was peaceful. There were no tensions at all. Or maybe we just didn’t know what was happening on the other side.”

Mr Lionel de Souza, 78, a former police officer who worked as a community liaison officer in Geylang during the 1964 racial riots, recalled how Singaporeans volunteered in droves for “goodwill committees” as well as the Vigilante Corps to help keep the peace in volatile areas during curfew hours. Comprising an equal number of Chinese and Malay volunteers, they and Mr de Souza would patrol their beat in Kampung Kim Hong and talk to residents in coffee shops and town halls to help dispel suspicion between the different Chinese and Malay groups that were then segregated in different villages.

“There were allegations that people on one side were shooting fire arrows at the other, and rumours were flying everywhere,” said Mr de Souza of the situation then.

Singapore has since come a long way from those dark days of violent racial conflict, having taken early steps as a newly independent nation to abandon colonial-era race-based policies, and pledging to not let racial fault lines divide society. Following its independence, the young Republic embarked on a unique path among nations of the time as a multiracial and

multicultural country, one that affirms its ethnic diversity as a strength and recognises the rights of minorities.

Dr Janil Puthucheary, Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information, said in an interview with TODAY: “Many societies have had to wrestle with (race, racism and multiculturalism) around the world, but the place that multiculturalism has in our aspirations as a people is quite special. It is fundamentally why we became an independent country.”

Because of Singapore’s diverse society and the dynamics among the major cultural and ethnic groups, the topic of race is present in every discussion, every issue, and every policy. “You need to then understand our social context, our historical context and our future in order to have a dialogue about race productively in Singapore,” said Dr Janil.

Yet, the topic of racism has returned to the fore once again following recent events, including the street confrontation between the Ngee Ann Polytechnic lecturer and an inter-ethnic couple as well as other viral videos of racially-charged encounters. Commenting on the video, Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam had said in a Facebook post: “I used to believe that Singapore was moving in the right direction on racial tolerance and harmony. Based on recent events, I am not so sure anymore.”

Activists, community organisers and academics spoken to agree that the conversations of race need to move forward productively in the age of social media where tensions are inflamed easily. And when the heat surrounding the recent incidents fades away, some good may emerge from these episodes if Singaporeans can understand the experiences of others and engage with each other in good faith, several said.

Associate Professor Chong Ja Ian, a political scientist from the National University of Singapore (NUS), said: “It is important, in my opinion, to identify these biases and stereotypes and understand where they come from and how they link to the various fears, anxieties, suspicions, frustrations that people have. Some of this will look ugly, but if we can start addressing them bit by bit, with understanding, there is a good chance we can move forward.”

Pondering about what the recent racist incidents say about the state and direction of Singapore’s hard-won racial harmony, older Singaporeans such as Mr Kunalan and Mr de Souza know that the stakes are high. “We never want that (racial riots) to happen again, which is why we should all feel strongly about protecting our racial harmony,” said Mr de Souza.

WHAT IS RACISM?

The Oxford English Dictionary today defines racism as acts of prejudice, discrimination and antagonism by a person, community or institution against a person or people based on their race and ethnic identity.And by this definition, racism is usually experienced by people from minority racial groups that are subjected to such acts of discrimination.

But as contributing writer Ben Zimmer for The Atlantic magazine wrote, even dictionaries had to revise their definitions about racism. Before 2020, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary primarily defined racism as “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race”.

It was also defined as “a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles”. This secondary definition was refined to “the systemic

oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another", following the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States last year.

Mr Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, founding board member of the Centre for Interfaith Understanding (CIFU) in Singapore, said that racism is essentially formed from two components — that a race has essential traits and characteristics, and whether these are behind the inequalities and disparities between the races in society. "Therefore, racism is any act, system or policy that appeals to or reinforces 'essentialised' perceptions of racial groups that strengthens the political, economic or cultural inequalities between the races in society," he said.

Regardless of which definition is best, the debate of what racism is, and what makes an action or speech racist, has also emerged in Singapore in recent days. In May, an Indian woman was called racial slurs and kicked in the chest by a Chinese man while brisk-walking along Choa Chu Kang Drive. He had insisted she wear a mask even though she was exercising. A month later, Ngee Ann Polytechnic lecturer Tan Boon Lee was seen in a viral video confronting and making racist remarks towards an inter-ethnic couple, while proclaiming to be a racist himself. Allegations by a former student that he had made Islamophobic remarks in class surfaced a week later. The polytechnic has since said it would sack Mr Tan, after completing investigations into the two matters. Another video was uploaded the same week of a Chinese woman hitting a small gong repeatedly while an Indian man was ringing a prayer bell outside his public housing flat as part of his daily prayers.

But the debate about what constitutes racism grew loudest online in the case of Ms Sarah Bagharib, who had called out the People's Association for using a cutout of her wedding photo — sans the couple's faces — as part of Hari Raya decorations without her permission.

Netizens were split on the issue. Some claimed that the matter is not a case of racism but one of cultural insensitivity. Others were wont to point out that racism does not exist in Singapore, which prides itself on its multiracial society. Another viewpoint was that the blunder was made because of a lack of understanding of the Malay culture that had stemmed from ignorance that needed to be dismantled.

As Dr Nazry Bahrawi, a senior lecturer at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, put it, two narratives have emerged about the state of race relations here — one says Singapore is racially harmonious, and another says that it is still not quite there. "The first has been the official position reproduced on many occasions and in many spheres, while the latter is a position that has received less airing because it is perceived to be less valid, making those who raise it seem like they are troublemakers or have an agenda to divide society," said Dr Nazry.

For race discourse to be productive, Singaporeans from all walks of life must first be able to establish that racist acts are not condoned by society. "Because, if so, then it would be considered outlandish that people who call out racism are seen as playing the race card," he said, adding that these people might be commenting from a position of privilege as they may not have experienced racism.

Asked about this, Dr Janil, who is also the chairperson of the non-profit OnePeople.sg (OPSG), said it is not a bad thing that there are people who state that they have never experienced racism or have never seen it happen. The turning point is when they find out that because not

everyone shares this view, they may be “energised” to improve the experiences of others, he said. “The uncharitable view is to say ‘hello, wake up, you don’t know what’s going on and you don’t recognise (racism)... But the glass half-full version is, aren’t we lucky that there are some people who have actually had this experience in Singapore, it’s a sign ... that maybe we’ve made some progress.”

Such views are also heard among people who participate in OPSG’s initiatives on race as well, especially among younger participants who have been “blessed with a positive experience about race”, but also could learn about the negative experiences of others, Dr Janil added.

The Singapore Government has taken the approach that racism exists here, he emphasised. “What we want to be sure of is that our policies, our systems, our approach, is to understand that there is racism, and we must always push against it,” said Dr Janil.

Comparing indicators of racial and religious harmony from 2013 and 2018, a study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and OPSG in 2019 found that while racism exists, it is not widespread in Singapore. Lead researcher Dr Mathew Mathews said about 10 per cent of Chinese respondents in the study and around 20 per cent of minorities said that they had experienced racial tension in the 2018 study. There was little change from the results of the 2013 findings. “When asked about specific incidents, most cited they had felt insulted at how perhaps social/mainstream media had portrayed their race or cultural practices – so there is certainly some racism here, but it is not rampant,” said Dr Mathews.

WHY SOME STILL CONSIDER IT TABOO

On the other hand, some people felt that the recent spate of racist incidents is an indication that racism in Singapore not only exists but has been gathering speed for some time, though hidden from view because of a lack of discourse and the difficulty in detecting unintentional and unconscious forms of racism.

Dr Peter Chew, a senior lecturer of psychology at the James Cook University, explained that overt racism tends to be low in Singapore due to the function of laws that protect racial harmony here, such as the Sedition Act. The Act makes it illegal for anyone in Singapore to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population. Laws like these do well to keep overt racism in check but also have an effect of quieting discourse about race, he said.

“This reluctance could be due to a misunderstanding of what constitutes racism. Anecdotally, some individuals think that talking about race or pointing out racist incidents is, by their very nature, racist,” said Dr Chew.

A 2016 CNA and IPS study, which was also led by Dr Mathews, found that two-thirds of respondents felt that discussions of race could lead to tension. Raising such issues may be deemed “too sensitive”, and so issues about race and culture tend to be thought of as private matters rather than meant for broader conversations, said the researcher.

Agreeing, Mr Gosteloa Spencer, founder of community group Not OK SG, said this could be due to generations of Singaporeans suppressing talk of racism, discrimination, and racial inequality for fear of creating rifts among the different ethnic communities. He believes it is this inhibition that led to casual racism, where people make jokes, off-handed comments, or exclusionary body language based on race. These acts also often go unnoticed and unaddressed. “Just

because it's casual, does it make it okay to pass a racist comment?" he added. "Racism is racism, no matter what form it takes."

Mr Sharvesh Leatchmanan, co-founder and editor of Minority Voices, which serves as a platform for minorities who have faced discrimination to come forth and share their experiences, said the concept of racial tolerance that is entrenched in the Singapore identity has also been problematic. "Over time, this tolerance runs out … as can be seen from the recent acts of racism on social media. We need to move away from tolerance to acceptance and celebration."

But while Singaporeans may have held back on talking about race in the past, some said that this is rapidly changing in the age of social media, where racially charged incidents can be quickly shared online and go viral. And these incidents also encourage others to speak up and to call out racist acts publicly.

Mr Sharvesh, 24, said he received more than a hundred submissions from people sharing their stories of discrimination over the past week. Ms Priyahnisha, who goes by one name, is the founder of non-profit organisation Mental ACT, which champions mental health services in the Indian community. She noted the overwhelming response recently to any content on racism that she or her organisation put up on social media. The 29-year-old full-time professional counsellor at a social service agency added: "As soon as we post, the likes, comments and shares really escalate and it has actually been way off the charts as compared to any of the other content we have put up in the past couple of months".

The problem is that when people talk about race, their past inexperience means they lack the language and protocols needed to discuss it in a constructive manner, said those interviewed.

NUS' Assoc Prof Chong said: "Singaporeans are not the best-equipped to handle such discussions because we have put them aside for so long." "But there are opportunities to learn … What is important is to not hastily conclude that the other side has bad faith, especially if the other party is engaging from a position of relative weakness and vulnerability," he added. "It is through such engagement that we develop a vocabulary and approach suitable for our society."

'SAFE AND BRAVE' SPACES … NOT JUST BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Earlier this month, Mr Jose Raymond started the Call It Out SG movement with three others to raise awareness of issues pertaining to race following the slew of racist incidents here. "This is simply a case of minorities saying that enough is enough and that racism is inexcusable," he said. "Perhaps in the past, when minorities faced racism, we didn't have the tools to articulate ourselves properly or the courage to call it out. Now we do," added the former Singapore People's Party chairman.

The movement urges people to call out instances of racism that they see, and has gained momentum in the light of the recent incidents. On the flipside, while the process of publicly calling for accountability and boycotting if nothing else seems to work, has become an important tool of social justice, Mr Spencer said it is difficult to control the extent of it and make sure things do not go out of hand. Associate Professor Daniel Goh, an NUS sociologist specialising in race relations, noted that it is people's "duty to call out racism when we see it". "The question is how we do it," he said. "We should do it in a respectful way that seeks to educate each other and deepen intercultural understanding, and the large part of the burden should not fall on the

victims or members of ethnic minorities to do so, members of the ethnic majority should do so too."

For more severe forms of discrimination, such as getting fired from a job, physical violence, or the shaming of ethnic minorities in a classroom setting, for example, victims should call for institutional and legal redress, said the former Workers' Party (WP) Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP). "The key calculus for me is how to balance education with redress, and my hope is that the victim is not alone in calculating this and can depend on witnesses and friends, especially those from the ethnic majority, for help and support," said Assoc Prof Goh, who had stepped down from WP's leadership due to health reasons but remains a party member.

Referring to the parliamentary replies to MP Faisal Manap (WP-Aljunied) earlier this year on the issue of the tudung, Assoc Prof Goh said the authorities rely on "back channels" for discussions and resolutions, and to manage racial relations in a pragmatic and careful way. Mr Faisal had asked in Parliament whether the Government would relook allowing Muslim women in uniformed services to don the tudung. In response, Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Masagos Zulkifli said the topics that involve racial and religious insensitivities have to be discussed away from the glare of the public. Mr Masagos said this is because "public aggressive pressure" can only make compromise harder and any government concession to religious pressure would also cause other groups to adopt similarly aggressive postures.

Assoc Prof Goh highlighted examples of safe spaces where such issues could be discussed, such as the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles. "A space is safe when all participants can come to speak confidently and freely of their experiences with the expectation that everyone will listen and seek deeper understanding as equals and peers, all in a respectful manner without fear of discrimination, harassment, criticism or emotional violence," said Assoc Prof Goh. But the Government would have to adapt to changing trends in internet culture, social media and social justice. He noted that for younger generations of Singaporeans, the internet and social media make up "the natural space for their articulation (on issues of concern) … not back channels".

Mr Raymond agreed, stating that racism does not hide behind closed doors.

Responding, Dr Janil, who is from the ruling People's Action Party, said there will always be a need for both public discussions and private dialogues. "It is not an either-or. Race is a multifaceted issue," he said.

OPSG, for example, has moved its activities online in the course of the pandemic. Despite the usual people-to-people nature of its engagements, it has been able to maintain participation rates and in some cases, reach out to new spaces for people to be involved in. Outside of the non-profit, Dr Janil observed that in the last five years, there are already increasing numbers of Singaporeans engaging in the online space to push back against extreme views. "(They are) basically saying, 'hey look, here's the middle ground, let's find a way to bring peace to this'. So in that sense I guess they are trying to create some safe space online and it's tough because the online space is often dominated by extreme views," said Dr Janil.

Aside from safe spaces, CIFU's Mr Imran also urged the creation of "brave spaces" for people to confront their own views while listening to the experience of those at the receiving ends of racism. "A brave space involves the willingness to interrogate our own assumptions and take a

stand to correct our inability to see privilege and other blindspots that we have. A safe space opens up the conversation. But a brave space ensures that the conversation becomes transformative and not a mere exchange of stories," he said.

POLICIES WHICH SHAPED SOCIETY

In its history, Singapore has relied on a panoply of policies to maintain a harmonious state, and to ensure minority representation in the highest echelons of governance. The Housing and Development Board's Ethnic Integration Policy, for example, helps to ensure a balanced mix of various ethnic communities in public housing estates and prevent the formation of racial enclaves. The four self-help groups — the Chinese Development Assistance Council, Eurasian Association, Singapore Indian Development Association and Yayasan Mendaki — were also conceived to build resilient communities.The Group Representation Constituency (GRC) scheme, along with the reserved presidential election, was implemented to enshrine minority representation in leadership positions and Parliament.

These policies and laws are part of what builds a brand of "active and inclusive multiculturalism", as described by then Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam in 2017. Such an approach is distinct from the "live and let live" mindset in many other countries, which has resulted in communities elsewhere that are living apart and also growing apart, he said. The key is not to dilute or weaken the various cultures in the hope of developing a single, common culture, nor is it to strengthen each separate culture. The former will likely create a confused cultural identity, while the latter will not foster a strong national identity, Mr Tharman had said.

But following the recent spate of racist incidents, some people have also questioned whether it was still useful to retain the traditional Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) framework, the foundation on which many policies have been based upon.

Speaking in a webinar organised by Academia.sg website last week, Dr Lai Ah-Eng, an adjunct senior fellow associate at NUS' University Scholars Programme, said the CMIO model imposes a racialised lens and tends to ignore "hybridities" such as mixed marriages. "Do we throw out this CMIO framework as some people have argued for, or should we do a more reduced and careful referencing by ethnicity, bearing in mind that some groups at least still want their ethnic identities as part of a larger range of multiple identities," said Dr Lai.

Associate Professor Anju Mary Paul, an international migration scholar from the Yale-NUS College, said in the webinar that the CMIO model serves as a neat and a simple model which helps people go about their daily lives. "But as Singapore society becomes increasingly complex, this model is showing some strain," she said.

As of 2018, more than one in five couples who tie the knot are in mixed marriages, according to official statistics.

Dr Nazry said it is important to understand that racism is not "natural" because race itself is a social construct, as many scholars have said. "Now, this does not mean that the sense of belonging to an ethnic community is not real — this is influenced by our context, family, society and personal experiences. I think we can begin with the acknowledgement that diversity exists within our own ethnic community ... This sounds simple, but it is not as practised as it should be," Dr Nazry said.

Dr Janil said that the CMIO framework is a policy tool and should not be conflated with the goals of multiculturalism in Singapore. Any social policy or social intervention that is based on a racial categorisation will need such a framework, he added. “You can remove racial categorisation from your (NRIC), but that is not going to prevent someone knowing what you look like when you sit across from them at an interview table or pass them on the street,” he said.

Experts said what is needed is a keener interest in each other’s cultures, which is something that has to be established from young. Mr Mohamed Irshad, former Nominated MP and founder of interfaith group Roses of Peace, highlighted the importance of cultural education as a possible way to move forward in the race discourse. “We know about all the different public holidays of various races and religious groups … Beyond that do people know the various non-public holiday events and occasions that the different racial and religious groups observe?” said Mr Irshad, 31. “As a country, we can do a lot more in educating people about the various cultural nuances across various ethnic groups.” Such engagement must be a constant effort in schools and workplaces, and not just something done on Racial Harmony Day, he added.

ROLE MODEL SOCIETY NEEDS TO FIND ITS OWN WAY, AGAIN

Singapore may have come a long way from the 1964 riots to build a multiracial and multicultural society, but it is clear that this is always a work-in-progress for the country, said people interviewed.

Former national sprinter Mr Kunalan said he was thankful that even interracial marriages like his are celebrated now, despite the noise. Though he believes this racial progress will continue, he is worried that recent cases of racism may fuel anger among Singaporeans. “Because there was a lot of anger and when you have anger, there is always a danger that something might explode,” he added, speaking from his experiences back in the day.

CIFU’s Mr Imran reiterated that the stakes for Singapore are high: “We cannot allow racism to fester and divide society. Striving for racial equality even if it cannot be fully realised, is crucial. The national pledge that says ‘regardless of race, language or religion to build a democratic society’ should continue to be our guiding principle.”

With racial tensions flaring up in many countries today, there are also few positive examples of multiculturalism that Singapore can learn from. Dr Janil said: “We took that unprecedented step in 1965 when we set out on this path … There is no one else with our unique history, and there's no one else that has gone down this road before. But we have been down this road for many decades and we should learn our own lessons first.”

In 2013, former Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong gave a lecture to the Singapore Academy of Law on the growth of multiculturalism in Singapore. He said that if demography is destiny, then Singapore’s destiny is to be a multicultural state. “If its citizens are unable to share a common space suffused with shared values, the people will forever be unable to forge a nation that can survive and prosper,” Mr Chan said then.

In an email to TODAY, Mr Chan, 83, agreed that the recent racist incidents have highlighted how racism is innate in Singapore’s society. Positive dialogue is sorely needed to move the topic forward constructively, he said.

After decades of being held up around the world as a role model society for multiculturalism and multiracialism, Singapore seems to be at a crossroads — and it now needs to find its own way

again, having blazed the trail for others. Surely though, it is doing so from a position of strength, said several academics interviewed. While some believe that the recent incidents reveal deeper issues that need to be addressed, there is little doubt that inter-racial ties in Singapore are built on a solid foundation, and Singaporeans also need to be careful to ensure that societal fault lines are not exploited by nefarious forces within and outside the country.

Looking back, media consultant Ian de Cotta, 62, attributed this foundation to the kampung spirit which had its heyday in the aftermath of the 1964 racial riots. “Our neighbours’ doors were always open, even at night, and people would just walk in to chit chat and have coffee,” he said. “This kampung spirit that was so deeply rooted in our people was something that worked in Singapore’s favour.” Agreeing, Mr Kunalan added: “To live harmoniously like in the kampung ... there must be understanding and there must be forgiveness.”

With Singapore’s kampung days long gone, the younger generations would do well to remember the adage as they find their own way forward.

Reference: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/the-big-read-racism-singapore-society-race-interracial-1955501