

Chinese Singaporean attitudes towards poverty and inequality: a comparative analysis

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Abstract

Based on a survey of 191 Chinese respondents, this article discusses the attitudes of Singaporean Chinese toward poverty, inequality and government intervention. Using the Z-Test for two proportions and cluster analysis, findings were compared with similar studies in the USA and the UK. Chinese Singaporeans were found to be very aware of the growing inequality, but they adopted a narrower definition of poverty than British respondents. This might be the reason why they were more sympathetic toward the poor and supportive of more government anti-poverty efforts than were American respondents. From the cluster analysis, the Singaporean sample produced a third group who were ‘satisfied but concerned’, on top of the two polar groups, ‘sceptics’ and ‘liberals’, present in the British study. A majority of respondents also supported the view that more should be done to help the poor, and were willing to pay more taxes to do so.

Introduction

Historically, poverty-related studies have been done on objective realities and measures of poverty. However, in recent years, there has been increasing interest in understanding attitudes toward poverty and inequality, a more subjective type of poverty study. This might be especially important in countries where there is growing civic participation and where public opinion matters to the government in their policymaking (Zukin, 2006).

In a wealthy country like Singapore that has traditionally been anti-welfare (Peh, 2006), how do members of the public view poverty and the role of the government? With increasing inequality and stagnating wages (Ministry of Finance, 2010), are Singaporeans more sympathetic towards poor members of the society or do they espouse the government’s emphasis on self-reliance and minimum government assistance? This exploratory study on Chinese Singaporeans’ attitudes towards poverty, inequality and social assistance provides a

start in answering these questions. Chinese make up 74.2 per cent of the population (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2009), and their views have important bearing on policymaking. No similar study has been done in Singapore, and knowing Singaporeans' attitudes provides important insights for charting the direction of social welfare policy and designing programmes to help individuals in poverty.

Poverty attitudes around the world

'Subjective' attitude studies provide a better understanding of citizens' sentiments regarding the state of poverty in their country and of their perspectives on what their governments are doing and should be doing. People's beliefs about the causes of poverty affect their support for more government intervention (Pierson, 1993). Those who see poverty as a result of individual laziness would prefer a less interventionist approach, emphasising individual responsibility. Those who think that poverty is the result of systems and situations, such as discrimination, market forces and social conditions, would see the need for macro-level changes in helping the poor (Rice, 2001). Some researchers even consider their results from attitude surveys as advice from the citizens to the government on how much effort the government should put into tackling poverty (Hennessy & Yalnizyan, 2008). While recognising the value of attitude studies, conclusions from these studies should be qualified by the recognition that public attitudes are known to be complex, often ambiguous and sometimes contradictory (Orton & Rowlingson, 2007).

A major theory used in the various country studies of poverty attitudes includes an early work by Feagin (1972) which created a classification of attributions for poverty, namely individualistic, societal or situational. The individualistic category explains poverty in terms of the characteristics of poor people, such as laziness or being incapable of holding down a job. The societal category attributes poverty to unfavourable socioeconomic forces, such as

exploitation or a lack of opportunities. The third category explains poverty in terms of illness or catastrophic incidents that people have no control over. This three-fold classification was referred to in existing country studies, such as in America (National Public Radio, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, & John F. Kennedy School of Government, 2001) and Britain (Taylor-Gooby & Martin, 2008).

In the American study, a key finding was that many people had unfavourable views about poor people. Respondents were split about halfway in their attribution of poverty to individualistic factors and how much welfare recipients need help. However, low-income respondents were more likely than higher income respondents to support more welfare and to attribute financial hardship to circumstances other than the individual self. There was stronger support for government programmes to help the poor among Democrats than Republicans.

Britain has been surveying attitudes on poverty as part of its British social attitudes surveys since the 1980s. At the time of writing, the latest survey on poverty attitudes was conducted in 2006, and the report (Taylor-Gooby & Martin, 2008: 251) concluded that while attitudes toward the poor had not changed through the years, views on what the government should do had 'shifted markedly'. This was attributed to new government initiatives that had reduced poverty substantially. Compared with the US study, findings from the study in Britain reflected a less harsh attitude toward the poor, where the percentage that attributed poverty to individualistic factors (27%) was less than the percentage in the American study (48%). However, similar to the American findings, opinions differed by class and political affiliation. Respondents from lower income groups and Labour party supporters were most strongly sympathetic to the poor. In a cluster analysis done on the 2003 survey sample (Park, Philips & Robinson, 2007), perceptions were found to be split between 'sceptics', who attributed poverty more to individuals, and 'liberals', who felt that government intervention

was insufficient.

Some key findings from studies in other countries provide a valuable reinforcement or contradictions to the findings from the US and UK. In a recent Canadian study, inequality was seen as a big problem and there was strong support for the government to take concrete action in the next few years to reduce the problem of poverty and inequality (Hennessy & Yalnizyan, 2008). In an Australian study, there was great concern about poverty in the country, although the authors felt that there was incomplete understanding of the nature, causes and extent of poverty (Johnson & Taylor, 2000). In an Irish study, people in lower social classes were significantly more inclined to attach importance to social factors in explaining poverty or wealth, and more likely to give negative individualist accounts of wealth, for example that wealth was due to dishonesty (Hardiman, McCashin & Payne, 2004).

In contrast, a study in Hong Kong on welfare attitudes – not poverty attitudes – found that Hong Kong respondents were overwhelmingly supportive of a welfare state, and no differences in attitudes by class were found (Wong, Wan & Law, 2009). Among the explanations given were a rising inequality and a middle class that had been adversely affected by economic regionalisation and globalisation. That is, as people saw their gains from economic contribution being eroded, they became more supportive of welfare provision. This was particularly so since tax rates in Hong Kong have been low.

In general, we see two categories of attributions for poverty: individualistic and societal. Except in Hong Kong, lower income respondents also seem more likely to attribute poverty to societal reasons. Although there seems to be generally strong support for welfare in the various countries, the US and UK findings suggest that there are distinct groups in terms of the extent of support.

The Singapore context

The question of whether attitudes in Singapore are more similar to those in the Western countries or to Hong Kong needs to be placed within the context of the historical and economic development of this small Asian country. While Singapore is an Asian society, as is the case with Hong Kong, its political leanings may be closer to those of the USA or the UK.

Singapore has experienced phenomenal economic growth since its independence in 1965. Despite its limited resources and several regional and global economic crises, Singapore has continued to prosper economically, becoming the world's seventh most prosperous economy in the world (Ketels, Lall & Neo, 2009). The Singapore government has adopted a twin emphasis of providing equal opportunities, on the one hand, and emphasising meritocracy and hard work as a main ideological stance, on the other (Tan, 2008). Singaporeans are expected to work hard and take personal responsibility to care of their families and themselves (Ngiam, 2004).

With an absence of extreme desperation seen in many developing countries and the general affluence of the majority of Singaporeans, poverty in Singapore might appear to be largely invisible, tucked away in social service agencies, in the work spheres of social workers and welfare officers. However, in recent years, the plight of the poor has been receiving more media attention (e.g. Ee, 2010; Othman, 2010; Toh, 2009). Homelessness has also become recognised as a social problem. From none, three homeless shelters have been set up since 2007 (Leong, 2010). The increasing difficulties of low-income households to sustain their livelihood has been attributed to the effects of globalisation, which has depressed the wages of low-skilled workers due to the relocation of jobs to cheaper countries and the influx of foreign workers (Ng, 2010).

Therefore, inequality is also of increasing concern. Among countries with very high

human development, Singapore had the second highest rich–poor income gap, with the richest 10 per cent of the country owning 32.8 per cent of the nation’s wealth and the poorest 10 per cent owning a mere 1.9 per cent (United Nations Development Programme, 2009). This comes up to a ratio of income and expenditure where the share of those in the top 10 per cent to those in the lowest 10 per cent is 17.7:1. While government schemes like the Resilience Package have helped to narrow the rich–poor income gap (Ketels, Lall & Neo, 2009), inequality remains a lived reality for many Singaporeans (Chua & Tan, 1995). Inequality has potential impacts on a nation’s social stability and cohesiveness (Wilkinson, 2005).

The Singapore government recognises the needs of the ‘new poor’ who, although working, are lagging farther and farther behind. It has introduced financial assistance programmes for low-earning households. In 2006, it introduced a workfare bonus that became a permanent programme called Workfare Income Supplement in 2007 (Ministry of Finance, 2007). The programme supplements the earnings of individuals who earn S\$1,700 or less per month, are 35 years old and above, and who reside in a property that has an annual value of \$10,000 or less (Central Provident Fund Board 2010, Budget 2010). In 2010, the Singapore government also espoused ‘inclusive growth’, vowing to raise the productivity and hence the wages of low-earners through continuing education, innovations and decreased reliance on foreign workers (Chia, 2010). However, all these programmes premise on individuals being able to work and upgrade their skills. Some have noted the immense challenge of raising the skills and productivity of this group (Tan, 2010). While efforts to help the working poor have expanded, the efforts have centred on the value of self-reliance, of individuals helping themselves.

Do the social policies and the values underlying them reflect the general sentiment of the populace? What is the general sentiment towards poverty and social welfare policies in

Singapore? Since the citizenry's response exerts some influence on the political process of policymaking (Ho, 2003), their attitudes are important. Through understanding people's attitudes and mapping the values underlying people's current positions, future political action can be better informed by sentiments at grassroots level. If attitudes towards the poor are negative and support for government intervention is low, expansion of anti-poverty strategies will meet with great resistance. If, on the other hand, the electorate are sympathetic towards the poor and support greater government intervention, then a government that continues with a restrictive residual approach to poverty alleviation is misaligned with the general sentiment. In Singapore, where policymaking is largely top-down, the latter scenario is likely. Whether the former or latter scenarios are likely, it is time for such a study in Singapore.

Given the context just outlined, two hypotheses were formulated in the study. First, most Singaporeans are unaware of poverty and feel that existing government intervention is sufficient. Second, there is a smaller but substantial group that is increasingly concerned about poverty and inequality, and wants greater government intervention.

Methodology

This study sought to uncover and understand the attitudes that Chinese Singaporeans have towards poverty and inequality. It is based on a survey with 36 questions adapted from the studies on poverty attitudes in the United States (National Public Radio, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation & John F. Kennedy School of Government, 2001) and Great Britain (Park, Phillips & Robinson, 2007). The questions covered five areas: meaning, prevalence, causes, attitudes toward the poor, and perceptions about government intervention. The American study surveyed by telephone a random representative sample of 1,952 respondents in 2001. The British study surveyed by face-to-face interviews a random representative sample of 4,291 respondents in 2006 (National Centre for Social Research, 2008) and 4,432

respondents in 2003 (National Centre for Social Research, 2005).

The two studies from the UK and the US provided a comprehensive set of questions and a methodology that made for good comparison. The economic and political environments in America and Britain are also comparable to that in Singapore's. The welfare regimes of both countries were classified by Esping-Anderson (1990) as liberal, where residual welfare is given through means-testing. Singapore's welfare system in its treatment of the poor is probably most closely aligned with this liberal system rather than with the other regimes in Esping-Anderson's typology. In recent years, however, Britain has been viewed as more of a welfare state than the United States where personal responsibility has been heavily emphasised in its welfare reforms of 1997 (Rice, 2001).

While the American and British studies were national undertakings with funded resources, the present study was exploratory, a first stab at understanding poverty attitudes in Singapore. It might be viewed as a pilot for learning about social attitudes towards poverty in a way that allows for meaningful cross-country comparisons and contextualising to the current environment in Singapore. As will become evident later, a few questions were slightly modified after feedback from associates to make it more relevant and understandable to Singaporean respondents. This makes the questions not as closely matched with the questions in the other countries. Nevertheless, the conceptual meanings were still relevant, and the findings were felt to be credible.

Data collection for the study took almost four months, from 25 October 2009 to 10 February 2010. Before beginning, ethical approval was obtained from the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) in September. The data were collected via a self-administered survey that took approximately 10 minutes to complete. It was administered either face-to-face or through an online survey website. For the online survey, the link to the survey website was sent out to personal contacts. In this manner, a wide reach could be

achieved. However, such a convenience sampling method incurred biases. To balance the online survey, face-to-face interviews with 43 members of the public were also conducted. All respondents had to read the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) on the first page before proceeding to complete the survey.

Research participants were members of the Singaporean public aged between 21 and 64 years ($M=35.37$, $SD=14.35$). Efforts were made to have sufficient representation by income group and age group defined by those born before and after 1965, the year of Singapore's independence. These two demographic categories seemed to make a difference in attitudes in other countries, and were therefore defined in the sampling frame. However, as the results will show, there were no significant differences by these two factors. Further, since no criteria were set on the distribution of respondents by race and ethnicity, the number of respondents from non-Chinese respondents was too small (7 Malay, 4 Indian, 3 Others). This was considered unrepresentative of the minority ethnic groups in Singapore, and the decision was made to report only on the Chinese respondents. In total, the results from 191 research participants are reported on in this article. Table 1 provides a demographic profile of the respondents, and shows that Christians, middle/high income earners and university students were over-represented. While not representative of the general population, the sample size of 191 can be considered sufficiently large for statistical analysis.

Insert Table 1 here

For comparison of findings with the United States and Britain, Z-Test for two proportions was implemented to uncover the statistical differences in rates of responses in Singapore relative to the two countries. In addition, multivariate cluster analysis was conducted to classify respondents into salient groups based on multiple variables. In this study, as with most cluster analysis, an *a priori* approach was adopted where there is little prior information concerning which respondents should be grouped together. This latter

approach makes cluster analysis an exploratory tool of analysis. In this study, the selection of questions used as variables for the cluster analysis was based on the statistically significant differences observed in the cross tabulations.

The k-means clustering approach was used since the aim was to group respondents based on their different responses to a set of questions about poverty extracted from the whole survey. *K*-means clustering is a non-hierarchical approach that can be used to identify segments in a sample of observations. By identifying the clusters, one is then able to find out how these clusters differ. A total of 13 variables were chosen for the cluster analysis and the analysis was carried out on PASW. The cluster number was set at three after running the data through several *k*-means cluster analyses, and differences between cluster groups were noted. A hundred iterations were performed on the dataset to achieve three final stable clusters.

Comparative analysis

Table 2 shows the percentages of respondents agreeing with various poverty statements in the study. Where available, the percentages in the British and American studies have also been provided, with the *Z*-values and statistical significance of the differences in rates indicated. For brevity, this article reports only on selected items from the full survey, chosen to illustrate the interesting parallels and contrasts with England and America.

Insert Table 2 here

In terms of definition of poverty, more respondents in the Singaporean study held a narrower definition of poverty than respondents in the UK study. While the proportion who considered being poor in the narrowest sense of only getting by with external help was similar in Singapore (88%) and Britain (89%), significantly lower percentages of Singaporeans classified not being able to buy things one *wants* or takes for granted (broadest definition) as poor than in Britain (11% in Singapore and 22% in Britain). Instead, they were

more likely than respondents in the British study to see poverty as not being able to buy things one *needs* (60% in Singapore and 50% in Britain).

The Singaporean respondents saw poverty as a much smaller problem than American respondents did. Sixty-six per cent of the Singaporean respondents saw poverty as a little problem or no problem at all, compared with only 10 per cent of American respondents. The majority of American respondents (88%) answered that poverty was a big problem.

In contrast to their response to poverty, more than half of the Singaporean respondents (55%) answered that inequality was a big problem. This was a significantly higher rate than those who considered poverty to be a problem. Similarly, 58 per cent felt that ordinary working people were not getting their fair share of the country's wealth, a percentage that is comparable to Britain's 55 per cent.

In terms of attitudes towards poor people, respondents in Singapore were more likely to see poor people as working but not earning enough (76% compared with America's 61%) rather than as people who do not work (23% relative to America's 34%). More Singaporeans saw poor people as having the same moral standards as the rest of the population, with 79 per cent indicating so compared with 67 per cent in the US. A lower proportion of Singaporean respondents attributed poverty to bad luck or laziness (18 per cent compared with 37 per cent in Britain), and a higher proportion to circumstances. Sixty-one per cent in Singapore pinpointed circumstances beyond one's control as a cause of poverty compared with 34 per cent in the UK who answered that poverty was an inevitable part of modern life.

The Singaporean respondents were also more likely to find government assistance inadequate, while at the same time finding that government programmes do make things better. Eighty-one per cent of the respondents answered that government assistance does not go far enough to help poor people live decently, compared with only 43 per cent in America. Furthermore, 62 per cent, compared with 38 per cent in America, answered that the

government was spending too little on the poor. Conversely, while 46 per cent of the respondents in the US replied that poor people can get government aid without doing anything in return, only 18 per cent of the Singapore respondents replied so. Such a negative attitude toward government intervention in America was carried over to their view of the effectiveness of government programmes, where 13 per cent answered that government assistance to the poor make things worse, and only 34 per cent that it makes things better. In Singapore, the views were significantly more positive, with 58 per cent saying that government intervention makes things better and only 3 per cent saying that it makes things worse. However, while they indicated that more should be done for needy Singaporeans, Singapore respondents were not more willing to pay more taxes than their American counterparts (56 and 57%, respectively).

Cluster analysis

Thirteen questions were chosen from the survey to be used as variables in a cluster analysis to capture the dimensions of attitudes toward poverty (see Table 3). First, the questions, or variables, were chosen to reflect the general content of the survey, capturing the meaning, prevalence, causes, attitudes toward the poor, and government intervention. Second, the questions were chosen based on significant chi-square results between demographic groups. Several combinations of questions were tested to find the best final set of questions to use as variables in the cluster analysis.

Insert Table 3 here

The three clusters identified and their key differentiating characteristics are summarised in Table 4 (insignificant differences are not presented). The first cluster, named ‘optimistic and satisfied’, consisted of 102 respondents, the highest number of respondents. The majority in this cluster took the more optimistic view that there is little poverty (67.6%)

or inequality (52%) in Singapore. Cluster 1 also consisted of respondents who were most likely to see situational factors (i.e. circumstances beyond one's control) (72.5%) and the least likely to see social injustice (9.8%) as the cause for why people are poor. A majority (60.8%) in Cluster 1 answered that government programmes generally make things better

Insert Table 4 here

Also the second cluster (n=40) did not regard poverty and inequality as big problems in Singapore. However, in contrast to those in Cluster 1, a significantly higher proportion in Cluster 2 answered that ordinary people do not get a fair share of the nation's wealth (60% compared with 41.7% for Cluster 1). This is an indication of their view that inequality may be more manifest in Singapore. Cluster 2 respondents were satisfied with what the government is doing to help the poor through programmes, with 72.5 per cent answering that these programmes have made things better. Cluster 2 also had a high percentage of respondents (30%) who attributed poverty to 'laziness or lack of will power'. These two factors seem to be linked in that those who answered the government has done enough were more likely to blame the poor for not breaking out of their situation when sufficient help was being rendered. Cluster 2 was classified as 'concerned but satisfied'.

In contrast, Cluster 3 (n=49) was classified as 'concerned and dissatisfied'. Respondents in this group regarded inequality as a bigger problem than respondents in the first two clusters did. Linked to this is Cluster 3 having a significantly higher percentage of respondents attributing poverty to social injustice (40.8%) compared with the other two clusters (9.8% and 25.6%), and that the government's programmes are not effectively helping the poor (59.2%).

The differences in the three clusters can be summarised as follows. The largest group was those who were more optimistic about poverty in Singapore. They tended to attribute poverty to situational factors and answered that enough is being done for the poor. The other

two groups answered that ordinary workers do not get a fair share of the country's wealth. Among those with this view were found the 'concerned but satisfied'. The view among respondents in this cluster was that the government is doing enough to reduce inequality in society, the poor are getting enough help through effective government programmes; and the cause of poverty is most likely laziness or lack of motivation. The cluster that answered that ordinary workers are not getting their fair share were the 'concerned and dissatisfied'. They saw poverty or inequality as a result of social injustice and regarded present interventions as not being sufficiently effective.

A British study on a 2003 sample (Park, Philips & Robinson, 2007) also included a cluster analysis, but with only two clusters emerging: 'sceptics' and 'liberals'. Sceptics tended to attribute poverty to individual faults; that there was little poverty and enough was already being done to help the poor. The liberals explained poverty through social injustice, that there was considerable poverty and inequality in Britain and that handouts were insufficient for the poor. Comparing these with the clusters in our study, the 'optimistic and satisfied' correspond to the sceptics, and the 'concerned and dissatisfied' with the liberals. The moderate middle group in the Singapore study was absent in the British study.

However, while the respondents in the British study who were older, Asian and less educated tended to be sceptics, no significant correlations were found between the Singaporean clusters and the demographic factors of education, age, income group and occupation group. The clusters had an even distribution of the various demographic variables, and Chi-Square tests did not reveal any significant differences between the clusters and demographic variables. This suggests that the demographic groups differed only on specific aspects of attitudes to poverty, but did not cluster together in overall attitudes.

Discussion

Attitudes to poverty and inequality

The findings in this study, while exploratory and not representative of the general population in Singapore, show a close reflection of realities in the Singapore economy and policy environment. In a country where its rapid economic transformation has been premised on hard work, and where social policy has emphasised self-reliance with government financial assistance only to those who are unable to help themselves (Ngiam, 2004; Yap, 2010), it is not surprising that the Singaporean respondents adopted a narrow definition of poverty whereby poverty is seen as a lack in needs and not in wants. In this same vein, it is also not surprising that more respondents in Singapore than in the USA considered poor people as those who are working but not earning enough, and as having the same moral standards. Similarly, it is not surprising that more respondents in Singapore than in the UK attributed being poor to inevitable circumstances. The Singapore respondents were less likely to blame or despise the poor, as they perceived the poor as deserving in terms of need in accordance with their narrow definition of poverty. The latter response might also be a reflection of the current trends of rising inequality and stagnating wages, despite the tremendous economic growth that has enriched many (Ng, 2010). These trends explain the finding that poverty was viewed as a smaller problem in Singapore than in Britain, but that inequality was equally viewed as a big problem. Coupling these economic trends with a policy environment where those in financial hardship receive very little direct government assistance, it is no wonder that significantly fewer respondents in Singapore than in America indicated that government aid can be gotten without one having to do anything in return. This is consistent with the work-focused philosophy of the Singapore government to discourage reliance. Instead, substantially more respondents in Singapore than in the other two countries indicated that more should be done by the government.

Attitudes to fiscal policy

Given these responses desiring more help by the government, it seems puzzling that the Singaporean respondents were not more willing than their American counterparts to pay more taxes to aid the poor. The fiscal situations in the two countries might provide some explanations. First, it is noteworthy that more than half of the respondents in both countries indicated a willingness to pay more taxes. This in itself makes it clear that there are many who are willing to contribute to helping the poor. However, these high proportions are probably motivated by different reasons. In Singapore, the survey results indicated that current low levels of direct assistance and respondents' belief that people are poor despite working could have motivated their willingness to pay more taxes to help the poor. However, one might question why the percentages were not even higher in Singapore, especially since the tax rates are low. An important fact must be weighed in. Except in the last two years of recession, the Singapore government has accumulated huge budget surpluses through the years (Ministry of Finance, 2008, 2010). Hence, it might be that respondents feel that some of the budget surpluses can be channelled towards poverty alleviation. Indeed, several experts have made the point that the Singapore government, with its accumulation of reserves from budget surpluses, could do more for low-income individuals (Yeoh, 2007).

Attitudes by clusters

While the comparative results were consistent with the context in Singapore, two other findings are striking. First, it is striking that there were no demographic differences in the responses. In the American study, more low-income respondents attributed poverty to external factors, and in the British study, there was a higher percentage of more elderly, Asian and lower income respondents among the cluster classified as sceptics. In the present Singapore study, there were no significant differences between the clusters by demographic

factors. It might be that the biased and small sample in this study has made responses more homogeneous than would have been the case if the sample were more representative of the Singapore population. This is the main limitation of the study. Although this study set out to collect data from all ethnic groups in Singapore, the surveys collected from the Indian, Malay and other ethnic groups were too small in comparison with the Chinese respondents to be included in the study. Thus, this study is an attempt to ascertain, but cannot give a full and accurate picture of, the general population's attitudes towards poverty. This study also had an overrepresentation of the middle/high income group, university students and Christians.

Despite the above limitations, the results provide valuable insights for policy and practice. In the cluster analysis, we were able to differentiate respondents into three groups, and the sizes and typification of the groups resonate with current profiles of the Singapore population. The largest cluster of 'optimistic and satisfied' fits in with our initial hypothesis that in this wealthy city state, the majority of respondents are not concerned over the plight of poor people in Singapore, and regard the government is doing a good job. Combining this finding of a large complacent group with the non-differentiation in individual responses by demographic characteristics, it could be that the Singaporeans are generally uniform in their view of poverty and welfare policy. The entrenched mindset of self-reliance pervades across age, gender and class lines. However, this conclusion can only be suggested but not verified because of the non-representative sample used in the present study. Future studies should increase the scale and representation.

The first striking result of the uniformity of responses by demographic characteristics is an interesting parallel to the findings in the Hong Kong study on welfare attitudes (Wong, Wan & Law, 2009). In that study as well, no differences were found in attitudes by class, and similar reasons as those we have posited here were given. However, while the majority view in the Hong Kong study was towards greater welfare, the majority view in our study was

status quo with confidence in the government. At least among Chinese respondents in Singapore, the belief in self-reliance and government effectiveness might be a shared value. Yet, there is a substantial group who wanted and were willing to contribute to doing more for the poor. This is our second striking finding.

In the cluster analysis, besides the large cluster of ‘optimistic and satisfied’, the analysis also identified 40 respondents who were ‘concerned but satisfied’, and another 49 who were ‘concerned and dissatisfied’. The latter group wanted more to be done to help the poor. In the individual responses, a significant proportion responded that more could be done and were willing to pay more taxes to do so. The Chinese make up the majority of Singaporeans, and that a substantial number want more to be done gives much weight for initiating some policy changes.

Implications

The implication of the finding that significant numbers wanted more to be done for the poor is that policymakers will find much support for expanded programmes for the poor. Singapore is currently on the verge of expanding the programmes to help the poor, through such programmes as the Workfare Income Supplement, Healthy Start Programme and Job Credit Scheme (Goh, 2009). However, certain schemes, such as the Home Ownership Plus Education (HOPE) scheme implemented in early 2000s to help the low-income groups, have not changed their eligibility criteria despite inflation. Policies and schemes need to be continually evaluated and refined to truly meet the needs of the needy. The government is slowly introducing more initiatives to help the working poor. The findings in this study suggest that Singaporeans might be more open to these initiatives than is thought. Hence, policymakers can and should take bolder steps towards providing greater assistance for poor individuals.

Social workers play a vital role as a communication channel on behalf of those who are disadvantaged. On the one hand, social workers should tap the desire for more assistance found in this study. This desire could be translated into action by recruiting these sympathetic individuals as donors and volunteers, thereby harnessing community resources to best help the poor build social capital (Midgley, 1986). At the same time, ground knowledge, such as the data from this study, should be transmitted to the government as advocacy. Social workers should also continue to educate the general public about the hardships of the poor in Singapore. The media seems to have improved the general knowledge, even if it is skewed. There have been a number of media stories in which social workers were interviewed and which featured stories of poor clients referred by social workers (I don't know what you mean here) (Leong, 2010; Othman, 2010). Social workers play an important role in supplying the media with sound and correct information, and also educating the public through other platforms. Examples of such platforms include community events where individuals of different classes have the opportunity to interact, or even simple steps such as publishing summary statistics on poverty cases and outcomes handled by the agencies.

Indeed, information is key in moving toward improving policies and services for poor people in Singapore. This is a growing group that is finding it harder to make it in affluent Singapore. This study is but a start towards understanding people's attitudes. Unfortunately, no earlier studies exist as a basis for comparison. Perhaps 15 years ago, before the Asian financial crisis and before rising inequality became more of a social problem, attitudes were more negative towards the poor. More such studies are needed in the future that are representative of the population and are repeated so that trends can be analysed. For the current study, we took the liberty of changing a few of the wordings and choices that we regarded as being too abstract and difficult, especially for the less educated, non-English speaking respondents in Singapore. Future survey designs should continue to take these

factors into account, while maintaining comparability with surveys in other countries.

More resources are needed for conducting a multilingual, culturally sensitive and truly random sample that is representative of the ethnic, religious and socioeconomic makeup of Singapore. Such trend studies could be complemented with qualitative studies that could help us to better understand the nuances and reasons behind people's attitudes. Future studies should also focus on specific populations, such as social service practitioners who serve low-income clients. Their attitudes would affect the effectiveness of their work with the poor, and studying their attitudes would provide valuable lessons for improving assistance.

This exploratory study is but a starting point for more efforts to understand the social attitudes of Singaporeans. This comparative analysis has provided an appreciation of the broader macro-environment and how the attitudes of respondents in Singapore compare with respondents in other countries. Such international comparisons are becoming increasingly important in that globalisation has led to a similarity of experiences among distant countries and contrasting cultures. The lessons for Singapore are translatable to other economies. In many countries, even while many are in poverty, there might be little discourse on issues concerning poverty. The findings of this study reveal, for example, that there might be greater support for more assistance to poor people than expected. Larger, longer-term and more specific research, in accordance with the suggestions above, can help to open channels for more to be done for the poor. Of course, attitude surveys should ultimately only be a means to an end. They should translate into action, and social workers play a crucial advocacy role in relation to the public and the government.

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Table 1.
Sociodemographic profile of Survey Sample (n=191)

		Count	Percentage
Gender	Male	69	36.1%
	Female	122	63.9%
Education	Primary	6	3.1%
	Secondary	22	11.5%
	Polytechnic/Vocational Training	28	14.7%
	University	135	70.7%
Religion	Buddhist	27	14.1%
	Taoist	6	3.1%
	Christian	120	62.8%
	None	34	17.8%
	Others	4	2.1%
Income	\$2000 or less per month	61	31.9%
	Between \$2001 and \$5000 per month	60	31.4%
	Between \$2001 and \$5000 per month	51	26.7%
	More than \$10000 per month	19	9.9%
Age Group	Yes, after 1965	131	68.6%
	No, in/before 1965	60	31.4%
Occupation Group	Missing	10	5.2%
	Skilled/Professionals	77	40.3%
	Low Skilled/Clerical	27	14.1%
	Retired	8	4.2%

Table 2.

Poverty Attitudes in Singapore, Britain, and America

	Singapore (n=191)	UK^c (n=3748)	USA (n=1952)
Poverty Definition^a	%	%	%
Enough to buy things they really needed, but not enough to buy things they wanted (Broadest)	11.0	22*	NA
Enough to eat and live, but not enough to buy things they needed	60.2	50*	NA
Could only have enough to eat and live by looking for external help (narrowest)	88.0	89	NA
Prevalence of poverty and inequality			
Extent of problem of poverty			
Not a problem at all	3.1	NA	2
Small problem	62.8	NA	8*
Big problem	34.0	NA	88*
Extent of problem of inequality			
Not a problem at all	1.6	NA	NA
Small problem	44.0	NA	NA
Big problem	54.5*	NA	NA
Ordinary working people get fair share of nation's wealth	41.9	45	NA
Attitudes toward the poor			
Relation to employment (The poor are...)			
People who work but can't earn enough money	76.4	NA	61*
People who don't work	23.6	NA	34*
Don't know	0	NA	5
Moral standards of the poor			
Lower	15.2	NA	21
Same	78.5	NA	67*
Higher	6.3	NA	8
Don't know	0	NA	5
Cause of poverty			
Unlucky	1.0	10*	NA
Laziness or lack of will power	16.8	27*	NA
Social injustice	20.9	21	NA
Circumstances beyond one's control ^b	61.3	34*	NA

Table 2.

Poverty Attitudes in Singapore, Britain, and America (cont'd)

	Singapore (n=191)	UK^c (n=3748)	USA^d (n=1952)
The poor and government aid	%	%	%
The poor have it easy because they can get government financial aid without doing anything in return	18.3	NA	46*
The poor have hard lives because government financial aid does not go far enough	81.7	NA	43*
Don't know	0	NA	11
Perception of government intervention			
Effectiveness of government intervention			
Making things worse	2.6	NA	13*
Not having much impact either way	39.3	NA	48*
Generally making things better	58.1	NA	34*
Don't know	0	NA	4
Government expenditure on the poor			
Too little	62.3	NA	38*
About the right amount	36.6	NA	36
Too much	1.0	NA	18*
Don't know	0	NA	8
Respondents willing to pay more tax	55.5	NA	57

Note. *Z test of difference with proportions of Singapore study significant at 5%.^a Wording in the British survey slightly different: broadest definition was "...to buy things most people take for granted"; narrowest definition was "...not enough to eat and live without getting into debt".^b Choice in the British survey is "inevitable part of modern life".^cSource: Taylor-Gooby & Martin (2006).^dSource: National Public Radio, The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, & John F. Kennedy School of Government (2001).

Table 3.

Survey Questions used in Cluster Analysis

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1. Would you say that someone in Singapore was in poverty if they had enough to eat and live, but not enough to buy other things they needed?
 2. How big a problem is poverty in our society today? Is it a big problem, a small problem, or not a problem at all?
 3. In your view, in terms of numbers, do you think there are very few, few or many poor people in Singapore?
 4. How big a problem is inequality in our society today? Is it a big problem, a small problem, or not a problem at all?
 5. Do you think that Ordinary working people get their fair share of Singapore's wealth?
 6. Do you think that most poor people in Singapore are people who work but can't earn enough money, or people who don't work?
 7. In general, do you think poor people have higher, lower, or about the same moral values as other Singaporeans?
 8. In your opinion, which is the biggest cause of poverty today (chose one) : Unlucky, Laziness or lack of will power, Social injustice or Circumstances beyond their control.
 9. Which of the following statements comes closer to your own views? Poor people today: Have it easy because they can get government financial aid without doing anything in return, or Have hard lives because government financial aid does not go far enough to help them live decently.
 10. In your opinion, do you think that most people who receive money from the government today: Could get along without it if they tried, or They really need the help.
 11. Do you think government programs that try to improve the conditions of poor people are: Generally making things better, Making things worse, or Aren't having much impact either way
 12. In terms of the amount of money we as a country are spending on assistance to poor people, do you think we are spending: Too much, Too little or About the right amount?
 13. Of those you listed as major causes, which one would you say is the most important cause?
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Table 4.
Cluster differences (Percentage breakdown)

	Clusters (%)		
	Optimistic and Satisfied (n=102)	Concerned but satisfied (n= 40)	Concerned and dissatisfied (n=49)
Extent of problem of inequality			
Not a problem at all	0.0	7.5	0.0
Small problem	52.0	37.5	32.7
Big Problem	48.0	55.0	67.3
Ordinary working people get fair share of Singapore's wealth			
Yes	52.9	40.0	20.4
No	47.1	60.0	79.6
Cause of poverty			
Laziness or lack of will power	17.7	30.0	8.2
Social injustice	9.8	25.0	40.8
Circumstances beyond their control	72.5	45.0	51.0
Effectiveness of government's programs for the poor			
Making things worse	3.9	2.5	0.0
Aren't having much impact either way	35.3	25.0	59.2
Generally making things better	60.8	72.5	40.8