GLOBALIZATION INTENTIONS IN TENSION: THE CASE OF SINGAPORE

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Abstract

This study uses Singapore as a case study to discuss the intricate interplay between globalization, social policy, and two important social trends: inequality and intergenerational immobility. The paper explains what intergenerational mobility is and the need for social workers and policy makers to better understand the phenomenon.

Keywords:

Globalization; Singapore; inequality; intergenerational mobility

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Introduction: A Global Economy

Singapore is one of the most globalized economies in the world. Table 1 (based on information from sources as indicated) shows that Singapore has been rated the second free-est economy, the least restrictive in terms of immigration laws and employment of foreign labor, fifth most network ready, and with the best quality of port and air transport infrastructure. That is, whether in terms of commerce, air and sea travel, migration, or knowledge, Singapore is among the free-est in the world.

Table 1

Globalisation of Singapore

Category	Rankings
Index of Economic Freedom 2008	2nd free-est economy
IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook 2008	Least restrictive immigration laws for employing foreign labour
Global Information Technology Report 2007/2008	5th most network ready country
Global Competitiveness Report 2007-2008	Best quality of port infrastructure
Global Competitiveness Report 2007-2008	Best quality of air transport infrastructure

What does being such a globalized economy mean to social trends and policies in Singapore? This paper outlines the historical development of Singapore's globalization and uses Singapore as a case study to discuss the intricate interplay between globalization, social policy, and two important social trends: static inequality and dynamic inequality (or intergenerational immobility). The latter, in particular, is lesser known. The paper explains what intergenerational mobility is and argues for the need to better understand this phenomenon. In research terms, we need more data to establish how current global trends and policies influence dynamic inequality. In practice terms, social workers should be educated on these trends and their influences in order to effectively work with and on behalf of those who are poor. The Singapore case provides some interesting pointers for other countries.

Globalized Intentions

Globalization in Singapore was intentional and to a large extent inevitable. When Singapore became an independent country in 1965, it was felt that there was no way this small country of two million people (http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/themes/people/hist/popn.html, retrieved on 18 December 2008) could survive unless it opened to free trade and investments. The new government encouraged foreign direct investments, and became a key centre for trans-shipment and re-exports. Bold social policies were implemented to provide an educated workforce that the rapidly industrializing Singapore required. Educational policies accelerated the building of schools in the 1970s, making primary and secondary education in effect free and universal. Besides physical infrastructure such as roads and industrial parks, another massive project was the building of affordable and good quality public housing. With home ownership a key social policy, the government itself built, sold, and maintained housing at highly subsidized prices. Housing policy then became a tool not just for social welfare, but also economic development. Home ownership gave citizens a stake in the country and provided national stability needed for investments and economic progress. A housing market tightly controlled by the government also lent itself as a macroeconomic tool (Vasoo 2001). Today, 91% of Singaporeans own their own homes and 81% live in public housing (Department of Statistics, 2008).

Indeed, the intentional policy towards globalization has served this young nation well. As Table 2 shows, the economic and social development in Singapore has been dramatic. In merely four decades, the gross national income increased 27 times, life expectancy increased by 27%, and the literacy rate increased by 58%.

Table 2

Development since Independence

Year	GNI per capita ($)	Life Expectancy (yrs)	Literacy (%)
1965	1,618	64.5	60.2
1975	5,997	66.8	76.2
1985	14,717	73.9	85.7
1995	34,755	76.3	90.8
2005	42,983	79.6	95.0

Source. Singapore 2007 Statistical Highlights.

Singapore is now considered a mature economy, and the type of globalization that it is encountering is quite different from the past. Today, more and more developing economies have opened up. Now, investments and trade can go directly between investor and recipient countries without going through Singapore. Compared to less developed, neighbouring countries, Singapore has become a high cost destination.

Increasingly, Singapore has moved into high-tech and skills-intensive industries. This means attracting the best talent into the country in order to compete in the high-tech sectors, bidding up wages of skilled labor. On the other hand, low-skilled jobs are either leaving for low cost destinations or being filled by foreign workers who find the wages in Singapore higher than in their homeland. Hence, while Singapore's first phase of globalization upgraded wages in general, the second stage of globalization is widening the gap in skilled-unskilled wages. Therefore, one tension that the current phase of globalization poses is inequality.

Inequality: Globalization in Tension

As Chart 1 shows, inequality in Singapore, as measured by the Gini Index, declined in Singapore from 1965, when it gained independence, to the 1980s. Since the 1980s, however, inequality has been fluctuating upwards.

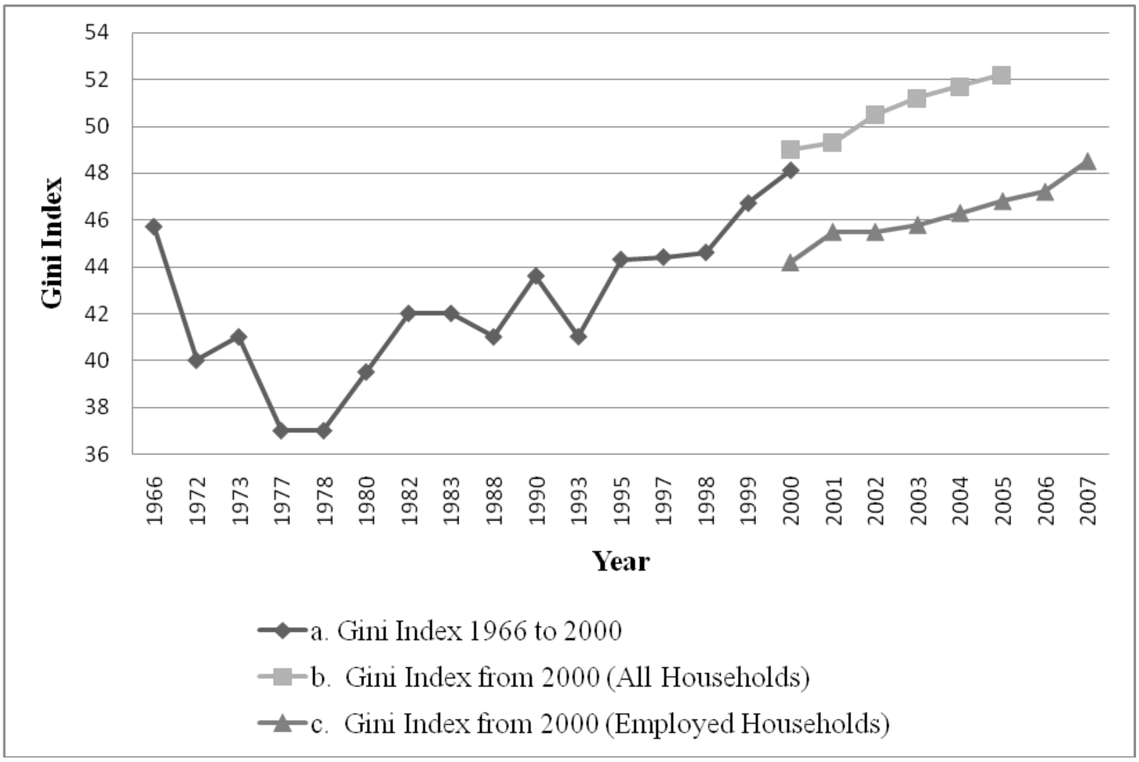

Chart 1. Singapore's Gini Index (Year 2000 to 2007)
Sources.

a. Gini Index from 1966-2000: World Institute for Development Economics Research, based on household income, consumption or earnings data from Singapore published statistics.
b. Gini Index from 2000 (All households): Singapore Department of Statistics (2005).
c. Gini Index from 2000 (Employed households only): Singapore Department of Statistics (2005) and Singapore Department of Statistics 2008)

Widening inequality is a trend that is happening not only in Singapore, but also in many industrialized countries (such as the United States) as well as less advanced countries (such as China). The UNDP's 1999 Human Development Report on Globalization and Human Development outlined that liberalizing globalization resulted in the following undesirable social consequences: increased inequality and impoverishment; increased vulnerability of people to social risks; and increased chances of exclusion of individuals and communities from the benefits of globalization. In a collection of eleven country papers – including Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, India, Mexico, Russia, South Korea, Turkey, and Zimbabwe - Taylor (2000) found that while economic liberalization had mixed impacts on economic growth, it had the dire consequences of widening the skilled-unskilled wage gap and resulting in either stable or higher unemployment rates. The collection also shows that the Asian economic crisis of 1997 had a more adverse affect on low income populations. It will take time before we can verify the effects of the current "financial tsunami", but already there are reports of massive layoffs in factories from the U.S. to China. Globalization has produced a worldwide tidal wave from a recalcitrant act by the financial sector of one country.

All in all, the effect of globalization on static inequality is well recognized among scholars (e.g. Easterly, 2004; Solimano, 2001; Caminada and Goudswaard, 2000;

Smeeding, 2005). Another type of inequality is lesser known but may be more worrying. We can call this type of inequality dynamic inequality, that is, the extent to which economic status is passed down through generations. A more descriptive name for dynamic inequality, as used by Labor Economists, is intergenerational earnings mobility. At a particular point in time, static inequality causes those in poverty to realize their condition of lack relative to the exorbitantly rich. Nevertheless, if intergenerational mobility is high, poor parents can hope that their children will have opportunities for higher earnings while rich parents understand that their wealth is not a given. However, if intergenerational mobility is low, those who are poor remain poor while those who are rich remain rich. Where an economy has both static and dynamic inequality, rich people get richer and poor people get poorer; low intergenerational mobility will perpetuate widening inequality through generations. We should therefore be concerned about both types of inequality, although from a social justice perspective, the intergenerational nature of mobility may make it the greater evil of the two.

The intergenerational nature of dynamic inequality also makes it harder to measure than static inequality. Economists have applied statistical methods to compare intergenerational mobility across countries. The baseline model regresses offsprings' earnings (dependent variable) on their parents' earnings (explanatory variable), controlling for possible confounding factors such as age and race/ethnicity. The coefficient estimate of parents' earnings (symbolized by β) then gives the extent to which offsprings' earnings depend on parents' earnings. It measures the elasticity of an individual's earnings relative to one's parents'. A larger β would mean larger dependence of children's earnings on parents' earnings, and therefore lower intergenerational mobility. A lower β would denote lower intergenerational persistence and therefore higher mobility.

Estimates of β reported by different studies and on different economies are not comparable because of different types of data available in different countries. These methodological issues can be summarized as follows. To truly reflect intergenerational transmission of earnings, one needs permanent earnings, which reflects true earning potential. Hence, if data is available only for young offspring, when they have not reached their full earning potential, β will be underestimated. Similarly, if data is available only for older parents, β will be underestimated because earnings taper off towards the end of working life. And if only one year's data is available, the earnings in that year may be higher or lower than usual for transitory reasons. Again, β will be underestimated. To overcome the problem of only one year's data, one may average earnings over several years or adjust for earnings with indicators of economic status such as occupation and education. Adjusting, however, may overestimate β as the adjustment may have direct effects on off-springs' earnings besides representing parents' earnings. A final difficulty with comparing across data sets is that some studies have income while some studies have earnings data. In general, income elasticity estimates tend to be higher than earnings estimate (see Ng 2007 and Ng et al. 2008 for detailed statistical measurement of intergenerational mobility in Singapore and explanation of the above measurement issues).

With these data considerations in mind, Table 3 summarizes Gini indices and intergenerational elasticity coefficients (β) for various countries. It also lists the methodologies so that the reader can assess whether that β value is likely to be over- or under-estimated. Some studies replicated the limitations of the country under investigation on U.S. data, and I have included the U.S.-equivalent estimate for these studies.

A few observations from the table include the following. First, equality and mobility tend to move together: in countries where the Gini Index is higher, the β value also tends to be high. Second, among developed countries, Canada and the Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Denmark are more mobile than the United Kingdom and the United States. However, and thirdly, the countries with the worst mobility and equality are Brazil and South Africa. The other developing countries do not look worse or better than developed countries.

Table 3

Inequality and Intergenerational Earnings Transmission around the World

Country	Gini index*	β	Son's mean age	Father's mean age	No. of years of father's earnings	Estimation method	Author	U.S. equivalent
Developed countries								
Canada	32.6 (2000)	0.21	32-35	45.5	5	LS	Corak (2006)	
		0.15	32-35	45.5	5	LS	Grawe (2004)	0.38
Denmark	24.7 (1997)	0.071	40	35-64	1	LS	Jäntti et al. (2006)	
France	32.7 (1995)	0.41	30-40	55-70	-	IV	LeFranc and Trannoy (2005)	
Germany	28.3 (2000)	0.11	22.8	51^	6	LS	Couch & Dunn (1997)	0.13
		0.095	≥25	31-56	5	LS	Grawe	0.14

							(2004)	
Sweden	25.0 (2000)	0.28	34.44	43.3	-	IV	Björklund and Jäntti (1997)	0.52
United King-dom	36.0 (1999)	0.58	33	47.5	-	IV	Dearden et al. (1997)	
		0.58	33	≤57	1	Simu-lated LS	Grawe (2001, 2004)	0.55
United States	40.8 (2000)	0.47	28-41	40.2	3-5	LS	Grawe (2001, 2004)	
		0.22	24-39	52^	-	IV	Altonji & Dunn (1991)	
Less-developed countries								
Brazil	57.0 (2004)	0.69	25-34	30-50	-	TSIV	Dunn (2007)	
Ecuador	53.6 (1998)	1.13	24-40	45-60	-	TSIV	Grawe (2001, 2004)	
Malay-sia	49.2 (1997)	0.27	25	43/44	3	LS	Lillard & Kilburn (1995)	
		0.54	≥23	24-59	-	IV	Grawe (2004)	0.35
Nepal	47.2 (2003-04)	0.32	24-40	45-60	-	TSIV	Grawe (2001, 2004)	
Pakistan	30.6 (2002)	0.24	25-35	45-60	-	TSIV	Grawe (2001, 2004)	
Peru	52.0 (2003)	0.67	24-40	45-60	-	TSIV	Grawe (2001, 2004)	
South Africa	57.8 (2000)	0.609	25.1	53.7	1	LS	Hertz (2001)	
Singa-pore	42.5 (1998)	0.26	23-29	N.A.	1	IV	Ng et al. (2008)	0.28

*Source for Gini Index: 2007 World Development Indicators

Intergenerational mobility information adapted from Ng (2007) and Ng et al. (2009)
^ contemporaneous

At the end of the table, I have included Ng et al. (2009), which replicated its data limitations on a U.S. data set and found a β value that is very close to the U.S. This means then that Singapore is less mobile than countries such as Scandinavia.

Intentions in Tension

That intergenerational mobility is similar in Singapore and the U.S. is not surprising. In terms of their economies, they have similar structure and challenges. Both countries are experiencing the globalized and skill-biased development as described in the beginning of the paper. In terms of welfare policy, Singapore and the U.S. emphasize individual responsibility or self reliance whereas the Scandinavian countries emphasize universal support. While the Scandinavian model typically gives generous unemployment insurance (and even guarantees paid employment by the government) residual aid in Singapore and the U.S. relies on stringent means-testing. The emphasis on individual hard work is also evident in their highly meritocratic education systems. While privately funded schools are significant in the U.S., education in Singapore is increasingly liberalized. In the past, the curricula in primary and secondary schools were more or less standardized. Now, the education ministry encourages autonomous and independent schools which can set their own curriculum at higher fees.

In this global era, the above types of welfare, education, and labor systems are felt to promote competitiveness and are less burdensome on the government. In the case of Singapore, a small urban economy with no natural resources, it relies heavily on its human capital as probably its only resource. However, such a meritocratic policy regime emphasizing self reliance is also intrinsically regressive. Those who are able to help themselves and prove their worth can reap abundant rewards, but those who are unable to help themselves may be left further and further behind. Take the education system, for example. There is huge pressure to groom the best brains so that they can compete in the global market place. Such single-minded emphasis on meritocracy, however, comes with trade-offs. In terms of mobility, theoretical models by Solon (2004) and Davies et al. (2005) suggest that more privatized education systems lower intergenerational mobility. Besides primary and secondary education becoming more regressive, global competition and a maturing economy has also necessitated the expansion of tertiary education in Singapore. Again, while necessary for competitiveness, empirical findings in Britain by Blanden et al (2005), suggest that the expansion of tertiary education is most likely to "benefit children from affluent families more and thus reinforce immobility across generations".

The above comparison of the policy regimes in Singapore and the United States, therefore, throws some light on the interplay between globalization, policy, and intergenerational mobility. However, the correlations between the three and with static inequality are actually not straightforward. More research is needed to understand how inequality and immobility relate to one another, and how globalization and policies influence them. The previous section showed that cross-nationally, countries with greater inequality are also less intergenerationally mobile. Theoretical models such as Solon (2004) and Ho (2008, ***forthcoming***) also suggest that inequality and immobility are endogeneously and jointly determined. However, while Solon (2004) shows that inequality and immobility tend to move together, Ho (2008, ***forthcoming***) presents one globalization scenario – the case of skilled-biased immigration - where globalization increases inequality but has ambiguous effects on mobility.

Piecing together all these separate research studies relating globalization to inequality, social policies to mobility, and inequality to mobility, it is probably true that in most situations, inequality and immobility move in tandem in response to globalization and pro-globalization policies. However, the scenario given in Ho (2008) suggests that there are exceptions. We need more research to connect the dots.

Implications for Social Policy and Social Work

In several reports (e.g. Mkandawire 2001, Deacon 2000, and Pillinger 2008), the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) articulated that countries and international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are leaving behind the policy model where economic policy leads and social policy follows. In response to concerns over social risks and inequality from globalization, they now favor an expanded role for social policy. The reports even suggest social policy development beyond national boundaries. Through what is termed socially responsible globalization, the UNRISD reports have proposed the need for international organizations to provide social regulation of the global economy, world trade and transnational organizations.

Social policy in Singapore is an interesting mixture between being residual and being a partner to economic policy. On one hand, Singapore is one of the countries exemplified in Mkandawire (2001) as having married economic and social policies well by prioritizing social investments in education and healthcare to provide quality human capital to the economy. On the other hand, Singapore's strong anti-welfare philosophy means that public policies promoting economic growth and productive engagement in the workforce have trumped social protection policies. While steps have been taken to improve the social safety net through measures such as increasing public assistance and introducing workfare, incentivizing work is too important for the government to introduce unemployment insurance or minimum wages. In the education system, the government has initiated creative schools (e.g. Northlight School, http://www.nls.edu.sg/, retrieved 21 January 2009; and Assumption Pathway School, Ho 19 March 2008) and alternative programmes (e.g Youth Link http://www.nygr.org.sg/youthlink/, retrieved 21 January 2009) for drop-outs. Believing in the importance of starting young, the government has also provided funds to help low-income families afford early-intervention programmes (e.g. Healthy Start and Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme, http://app.mcys.gov.sg/web/serv_grant_english.asp, retrieved 21 January 2009). However, such additional aid continues to be stringently means-tested with work requirements. And as shown earlier, the mainstream education system is investing heavily in grooming the brightest. Additional educational aid for the economically disadvantaged, although providing a stronger safety net than in the past and than many other countries, continue to be residual.

Instead, priority is given to policies that continually stimulate growth and jobs and ensure flexibility in labour markets. A bold decision was made in 2005 (Lim, 19 April 2005) to build two huge integrated resorts with casinos, despite much public outcry. These investments would stimulate tourist dollars and also create many service jobs for low-skilled workers. The severity of the current recession means that market-oriented measures are taking an even higher priority than social policy. The Government Budget for 2009 was released a month early to respond urgently to the current economic crisis. The Budget of $20.5 billion would create a budget deficit of 6% of GDP, the largest deficit ever faced by a government that has historically operated on budget surpluses. With the key objective being “to help Singaporeans keep their jobs”, the Budget focused on helping businesses stay afloat and to retain their workers. Among many other initiatives, the government would share up to 80% of the risk of business loans, give ‘per employee job’ credits to employers, lower the corporate tax rate and even commit to expanding government hiring. These were bold new moves for an unusual time. All-in-all 66% of the budget addresses jobs, bank lending, and competitiveness. The much smaller remainder (34%) would be spent on social policy measures such as increasing public assistance, consumption tax credits, and infrastructure development for suburbs, schools, and healthcare (Budget Speech 2009).

Although what comprises social policy is more nuanced than the above simplistic 66-34 percent demarcation, it is clear that the Singapore Budget 2009 was geared towards stimulating the economy, with social assistance taking a back seat. Commentators such as Tan (23 January 2009) have cautioned that to be forward-looking, the plight of low-skilled workers would be a continuing challenge requiring government intervention. Indeed, with greater pressure from within and without for socially responsible globalization implies that social policy in Singapore will have to expand in the longer term. Unlike in other countries which have depleted public resources due to globalization, Singapore has a healthy budget surplus and thus has more than sufficient resources to expand social services and fund social programmes.

Social workers should be at the forefront of such policy changes, both as service providers as well as shapers of social policy. Mkandawire (2001) critiqued another trend in globalization that impedes the role of government in social intervention. Due to more international non-governmental aid organizations that provide their own micro-level poverty alleviation and social development programmes, macroeconomic trends and poverty alleviation programmes are disjointed. However, as shown in this paper, poverty and macroeconomic trends are intricately related. Such micro-focus is also true of Social Workers in Singapore, who have tended to be involved in individual case work. To be able to work on the source of the problems, Social Workers need to blend macro-practice into their individual case work. This means that they need to understand how economic trends are affecting their client groups. The explanation of inequality and immobility trends in this paper could be a starting point for information.

More Social Workers should also take on jobs at the policy and advocacy levels. Millar and Austin (2006) opined that welfare reforms have been implemented by senior policy officials with backgrounds in economics and political science, while social work inputs would continue to be confined to practice and delivery domains. I believe that Social Workers should be involved in roles beyond practice and implementation, that they should and can participate in the policy making process. Social Workers can complement the economics-dominated literature on intergenerational mobility with their on-the-ground information. Social Workers have expert knowledge on firstly, the persistence of poverty and other kinds of disadvantage related to poverty, and secondly, on the implementation of poverty-alleviation policies. By coming out of the shell of individual case work, and acquiring knowledge on macro trends and interventions, Social Workers can become important partners in government policy making and better advocates for their clients.

Social workers claiming policy and advocacy roles on poverty and inequality issues will have a bearing on social work education and professional associations. Both should play key roles in educating students and members on economic tools, trends, and structures, as well as being leaders in advocacy.

Conclusion

To conclude, despite its ill consequences, globalization is an unstoppable train. This article has used Singapore as a case study of the interaction between globalization, policy and inequality. In Singapore, the intentional efforts towards globalization have been key to economic progress, but are now also in tension with the resulting social ills of two types of inequality: static and dynamic. The latter, in particular, is lesser known. By explaining comparatively what dynamic inequality (intergenerational mobility) is, this paper has proposed a trend that both Social Workers and policy makers need to become familiar with. The Singapore government has responded to the problem of inequality with expanded welfare policies, although the focus continues to be economic development. The three implications of this study include the need for (a) a greater emphasis on social policy; (b) more rigorous research to understand the interaction between globalization, social policy, and inequality; and (c) increased role of Social Workers in alleviating poverty and inequality. An expanded role for Social Workers will require them to become better informed about economic policies, trends, and structures, as well as increasingly involved in policy formation and advocacy work. Social work educational institutions and professional associations can lead the way.

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