One Nation, Many People

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By Women Unbounded

Resource Booklet
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Stories from Singaporeans

Preeti Nair
Singapore’s TOP everything. Moderator

Mary Victor
Makeup Artist, Coach and Founder of The Body Within

Keyana
Singer-Songwriter, Professional Model, Advocate

Jane Tor
Digital Nomad, Political Sciences Graduate

Yulianna Frederika
Co-founder of Lepak Conversations
What is privilege and specifically, Chinese privilege?

There are various kinds of privileges that exist and it is impossible to list them all but some examples are:

1. The freedom to walk around without being on your guard, worrying about your safety. Most women in other countries walk with keys wedged between their fingers.
2. Not having to worry about being called out for or harassed because of your race, because you belong to a minority race.
3. Privilege is the absence of obstacles.
4. Privilege is unearned benefits from things you are born with and have no control over such as race, gender, class and being able-bodied. Because these are things we take for granted and many don’t even realise that it is a privilege. Privilege exists in the form of class, education and career regardless of your race.
5. Chinese privilege has no defined meaning in Singapore as it is (as many would describe) a “borrowed term”. However, majority privilege is where one dominant group experiences advantages that excludes minority groups’ access to similar social, political, and economic mobility.
Our Name as a Privilege

“Yulianna” does not sound remotely Malay and because of that, I find that I am taken more seriously by clients, whether consciously or otherwise. To illustrate this, my senior colleague who had a typically-malay name, had been chasing a client for a response for almost a year but never heard from them. When I sent an email to this client, I received an immediate response and even managed to close the project. This is just an example of how privilege exists in ways that totally elude us.

People who don’t know who I am or have never met me in person, tend to respond positively to me because of my name. My name being my brand allows me to put myself out there more easily. I want to use my brand to break any misconceptions people may have that coming from a specific race or culture would automatically mean my work would be sub-standard. For instance, some may assume that Indian make-up artists can only do make-up on other similar-toned individuals. I recognise the privilege that exists in my name and actively work to debunk such myths and raise awareness on issues such as fatphobia / body shaming.
Stories from Singaporeans

Privilege

The colour of your skin also affects the privilege you enjoy. Lighter-skinned individuals generally face less discrimination as compared to darker-skinned individuals. Growing up in Singapore, I have experienced my fair share of racist jokes about the colour of my skin, which in this day and age are simply unacceptable. But now, I also see the weird double standard and how people tend to treat me differently because I am “Preetipls” - which is also privilege I have to acknowledge.

As a half-Chinese, half-Ghanaian, I exist in a weird bubble. Because I live with the Chinese half of my family here, I enjoy the benefits that a Chinese person gets in Singapore. But when I’m on my own, because of the way I look, I don’t get those same benefits. People tend to speak about you right behind your back in Mandarin, and I often find myself saying to them “I’m perfectly fluent in Mandarin and I understood everything you’ve just said.”
**Why do racial stereotypes exist and where do they stem from?**

One reason it exists could be that we were taught growing up that there are only 4 main races - Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others. Each of these races (except “Others” of course) had their own unique cultures and practices which the others could not understand and so assumptions were possibly made, which turned into stereotypes, which have been passed down the generations.

Why do we first judge someone based on the colour of their skin? I denounce racial stereotypes of any kind because they tend to be hurtful and unnecessary. Even if the person perpetuating such a stereotype intends for it to be a joke, it is wrong.

WakeUpSingapore talked about how this boy of Indian descent did not see himself as Indian first but thought of himself as Singaporean first. However, because of what his friends in school used to say and do, he started speaking and acting that way towards other Indian students, not realising that he was one himself.

All the silly jokes that we used to hear as a child & the little things you pick up from your parents, it follows as you grow up and you don’t even realise that racism is so systemic. Slight changes in your parents’ behaviour will affect you or when you are speaking to a person that’s different from you. Even things like their body language. Because children are so sensitive and are constantly observing you, they pick up on that. These things cannot be brushed off as a joke.

We simply cannot accept this as the “norm”.
Why do racial stereotypes exist and where do they stem from?

I don’t belong to the major race categories in Singapore and there aren’t many black people in Singapore. It was a lot harder for me to feel like I belonged in school and even harder for me to find friends. I used to have a big afro which was my natural hair and people would want to touch my hair, but that’s just something you don’t do.

I used to be called names by people who adopt them from American TV. It is even more disappointing when people in power or with authority treat you in that same way, especially when society has progressed we know better than to not do stuff like that.

Stereotypes are definitely rooted in our society. Our parents may make racist comments or behave in a racist manner, but it is up to us to teach our parents and share with them that certain comments/actions are genuinely unacceptable.
How do racial biases affect dating preferences?

“There is always a racist undertone when people say that they have “preferences” in terms of race when it comes to dating.”

We have to talk about **being self-aware** when we talk about racial biases and stereotypes. We often see stereotypes being perpetuated in everyday life. But when we internalise this, use the information and treat people in a discriminatory way, we completely **disregard a whole race of people**. That’s just not being self-aware. That’s letting your racial biases completely affect how you live your life and how you treat people. There’s a fine line between believing in these racial biases and stereotypes and being racist.

When speaking to someone who has internalised such stereotypes and biases we need to **have empathy** and attempt to understand why they exist. We can start by asking questions to understand instead of making assumptions. We should also recognise intonations as people may say things with the best of intentions but end up causing hurt anyway. This does not excuse the person who has caused the hurt and they should equally acknowledge that they did. We have to be mindful and use the right language to **address the act** itself **rather than the person**.

Eg. Instead of saying, ‘I’m so angry at you because you are so rude and racist.’ (personal attack), we could say, ‘What you said made me feel hurt. Because I think you’ve generalised a negative stereotype and that’s unfair.’

These conversations are bound to be emotional and we have every right to protect ourselves and set a limit with which we are comfortable. Such conversations **require patience** and a willingness to listen. There’s no room for ignorance.
How do we have constructive conversations about race at home with the older generations of our family?

This really depends on how receptive older people are to having such conversations. Often, they get defensive when told that they have biases or that their biases are unfounded / racist. When having these conversations, we need to remain calm at all times, though difficult, as these stereotypes have been passed on for generations and have existed for longer than we have. We should let our parents know that it is a safe space without judgment.

Things used to be different in the past as families used to live in kampongs which were open and multi-racial. However once that was eradicated and HDB’s Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) was introduced, the whole language changed because we quite literally closed our doors.

Moving from an open door policy where both racial minorities and majority were able to move and interact, to living behind closed doors, we regressed socially.

Some questions to consider when wanting to have a sensitive conversation:

- How would you feel about listening to that?
- How do we even begin the conversation when we don't have the appropriate vocabulary for it?
- What does a non-judgmental conversation look, sound and feel like?
What did being Singaporean mean to you when you were younger? Has that changed?

To me, being Singaporean is bonding over the various cuisines in Singapore, regardless of race as food truly brings people closer together. When you sit together for a meal, enjoying foods from different cultures, you feel a sense of community & belonging and that’s what Singapore represented to me when I was younger and this remains the case for me.

When I was younger, I did not see a CMIO segregation in Singapore. Instead, I saw it as a country where people were able to get along well with one another regardless of race. Unfortunately, that is not everyone’s reality and the CMIO structure is very deeply embedded. Regardless, being able to meet and get along with people of different races remains the definition of being a Singaporean to me.

For many, being a Singaporean is about safety - it typically refers to the physical sense of security - however I wish it meant that there was also a safe space to have difficult but necessary conversations about topics like race.
What did being Singaporean mean to you when you were younger? Has that changed?

Having been a junior diplomat, I felt that being Singaporean was an artificial identity, manipulated by policies. Right now, being a Singaporean is having hope that things will become better as we have a safe environment to raise issues and talk about tough conversations. It doesn’t matter who we are or who we were yesterday, it matters more who we want to be tomorrow as a society or as a country.

I feel a strong sense of patriotism on National Day - We’re weirdly united yet not really, with somewhat of an odd balance. As we grow older, we learn more about Singapore, the good and bad through conversations and knowledge of specific issues and you embrace Singapore as it is, through its good and bad.
The Road Ahead

**Preeti Nair**
Singapore's TOP everything.
Moderator

**Farisha Ishak**
Winner of Mediacorp's The Final 1 (2013), Advocate

**Sharvesh Leatchmanan**
Co-founder of Minority Voices

**Noorlinah Mohamed**
Award-winning actress, Arts Educator
How do we navigate conversations about race when there is a fine line between personal attacks and constructive debate?

Conversations on race are clearly sensitive. So in regards to the line between it being a personal attack and constructive conversation, you have to be firm in knowing where to draw the line. If you feel like you can’t take on a conversation, then it’s probably best that you stop and direct them to other resources from which they can learn.

With social media being fast-paced and instantaneous, there’s so much real-time information out there. Even so, I get questions from people asking me to help them understand why something is wrong. As much as I want to help, when it gets all too much, I tell them I can’t handle the conversation anymore and need a break from my phone.

There is so much information and infographics out there on race. It does not fall on minorities to constantly educate others. I have had my experiences invalidated and been gaslit by others when I attempted to educate / explain. To go through a particular unpleasant experience and then get told I’m being sensitive is unnecessary and eventually takes its toll. So if you feel yourself teetering between sanity and anger, stop the conversation and redirect them to resources.
How does having difficult/sensitive conversations affect our mental health and how do we take care of our mental health?

*Minority Voices* started with a couple of friends sharing their stories and experiences without much expectations. However, many resonated with these various experiences such as the racist polytechnic teacher/the gong lady & these prompted others to share their encounters & how these incidents affected them by way of direct message. However, reading all of these does put a lot of pressure on us, in turn affecting our mental health - we used to work until the wee hours of the morning to reply all emails we received without setting boundaries. Someone reported us to the police once and as a result of the stress I was under, I suffered an anxiety attack. I learned then the importance of taking a break and seeing a therapist if needed. It was comforting to see many followers being so willing to help recommend a therapist and reach out. Now, after a certain time of the day, I stop checking my emails/ viewing such content to maintain a peace of mind and go about focusing on everyday work.

While it is important to be there for others, it is vital to take care of yourself and know that there is only so much of yourself that you can give & drawing those boundaries when talking about race, the conversation never ends. As much as you want to provide people with a safe space and don’t want to let them down, you need to remember that you need a safe space too. Creating boundaries is essential.
Does systemic racism exist in Singapore and if so, how can we combat it?

First, we need people to understand why a policy may not necessarily work. Often, people don’t bother with policies that do not affect them and this is one reason systemic racism is enabled. By educating others, we hope that they will then also speak out in whatever echo chamber they have, to raise awareness and effect change.

Undoubtedly, government agencies are aware of the conversations that currently occur on social media. Hopefully this leads to something constructive in terms of formatting of policies and shaping our narrative going forward.

We live in a racially managed and politicised society.

One example is the setting up of self-help groups along racial lines. Mendaki was established in 1982, SINDA in 1991 and CDAC in 1992. There was an “every community for its own” sort of attitude. When these self-help groups were told to raise money to fund their programmes, because of population size and demography, MENDAKI and SINDA face greater challenge in raising the amount as compared to CDAC. This is one example of structural discrimination. We need to have honest conversations on how existing structures can cement racial inequities and impedes the development of a more cohesive society.
Have we really progressed as a society?

Our name is an indicator by which we are profiled and may be discriminated against. People often comment on how I don’t look or sound Malay and tell me that I am “lucky” to have been born “on the fairer side of the coin”. How did we get here? We need to have critical conversations about race as organised conversations such as RC / interfaith / interreligious conversations which are marshalled by politically influenced parties and thus discourage candidness.

My parents’ generation is largely thankful that they were ushered into a world with great safety from the turbulences of violence. My generation was the start of pragmatism. You rise above this thankfulness and make a living for yourself - we’re the silent generation. We’re often fearful of questioning authority because our rice bowl will be affected. Then there comes the younger generation with its exposure to the Internet. The Internet lets us reach out to a larger audience.

There is a sense on the ground that our leaders do not possess moral courage to look out for minority interests. The agency, then, rests on us to effect change. We must have the courage to become the beacon for ourselves by using the privileged platforms that we have, to continue discussions in a safe way.
With the advent of social media and the need to create attention-grabbing headlines, content creators are required to simplify otherwise complex matters, put them in an infographic or a one-liner and in doing so miss the nuances in those points. When these content creators accidentally get things wrong, or when their messages are misunderstood, they tend to be “cancelled”. What are your thoughts on cancel culture?

One thing that people need to remember is to draw a distinction between the issue and the person. “Cancel culture” has more to do with the individual that the issue. Often, people conflate the two and we should not be so quick to judge these figures simply because of the fast-paced and immortal nature of social media. Once someone has said something mildly controversial, it tends to spread like wildfire and it is near-impossible to take it back, even if the figure did not intend for their message to be construed in that manner.

Empathy and forgiveness are therefore essential, because no one has everything figured out and social issues tend to be extremely complex.

That said, people in positions of power should be held accountable for their words and actions and messages because these might trickle down to their impressionable followers. Cancel culture therefore has its benefits as well. It can be used as a tool to teach someone a lesson, so that others will learn from it too.
As much as empathy and forgiveness are important, cancel culture doesn’t affect everyone proportionately, and some people are never cancelled because of certain privileges they have. There are some influencers and celebrities who are still very much relevant despite their unpopular and rather controversial take on pertinent issues.

Cancel culture also only really applies to public figures and influencers. Starting a debate with someone in the comments section of a post isn’t considered “cancelling” because it doesn’t affect their livelihood, whereas for a public figure, if they are “cancelled”, it very much does.

In some instances, cancelling someone does not work because the offending person disappears for a little while, and resurfaces later with a new brand or version of themselves. They seem to have an echo chamber of blind supporters who are unable to discern between right and wrong. Because of their ability to restart after a certain amount of time, these people never actually have to change their views on matters that got them temporarily “cancelled” in the first place.

We need to speak up and call people out. But is that ‘cancel culture’? Identifying, calling out and speaking up against racism is important. It serves an educational purpose by getting the conversation and discussion going.
The Road Ahead

How can we incorporate conversations about race in schools?

- Before we look at the education system, we need to ensure that teachers who will ultimately be conducting lessons on the various cultures understand and have the right attitude to multiculturalism. With teachers as the gatekeepers of education for our children, having teachers who are properly trained to deliver material and facilitate discussions on race relations is essential.

- The existing Social Studies curriculum briefly touches on the various cultures and their respective practices. This can be beefed up to include critical understanding and discussions of the diversity of cultures and practices that exist in Singapore. The narrowly defined cultural practices according to the CMIO model needs to be reviewed.

- Racial Harmony Day needs to be more than just about wearing a different traditional outfit. It should be about the different lived experiences for instance.
About Women Unbounded

Women Unbounded (WU) is a volunteer-based community headquartered in Singapore, working for women's empowerment through connections, mutual aid, ideas, and events. WU is proudly feminist; our approach to intersectional feminist activism is grounded in our beliefs in fairness, respect, and empiricism. One step at a time, we work to break down psychological, intellectual, socio-cultural, and economic barriers to gender equality.

WU’s Teams

Connections
Provide a safe space for mentorship and guidance

Mutual Aid
Empower women with knowledge and skills to excel

Ideas
Start conversations on what it means to be a woman and the norms that constrain us

Events
Host meaningful events to empower the individual and bond the community

Join Our Community!

Our Website
@women.unbounded
Women Unbounded
Women Unbounded

You may reach us at hello@womenunbounded.com

Resource Booklet: Special Mentions

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