

Are memories of poverty keeping us stuck in a material world?

Tan Poh Lin

A study by the National University of Singapore found that a balanced world view, which establishes equal priorities between family and tradition, broader societal well-being, and social status and wealth, is associated with greater life satisfaction. In contrast, materialistic values, which disproportionately fixate on acquiring possessions and status, were associated with the lowest levels of happiness.

One potential response to the study's findings is to view them with hope. While our financial situation is often subject to external conditions beyond our control, each of us always has the option to establish our outlook and life priorities. From a broader social perspective, this also raises the possibility that a single generation could break away from unhealthy materialistic mindsets, paving the way to intergenerational mobility of happiness.

But with the demands of work and life in Singapore, do families realistically have the resources to do what it takes to produce a change?

ANTECEDENTS OF MATERIALISM

Many of our belief systems and priorities are shaped by our life experiences, particularly at a young age. Studies show that impoverished children aged eight to 10 express similar levels of materialism as children from well-to-do families. However, by adolescence, at ages 16 to 17, the disadvantaged group exhibits greater preferences for materialistic gains, which could be linked to their lower levels of self-esteem.

This also applies at the national level. Countries that experience rapid and dynamic growth from an impoverished base also tend to espouse more materialistic values than those that have been wealthy for longer.

Thus, the negative impact of poverty on happiness delivers a double whammy: first, directly by causing stress and scarcity; and second, indirectly by fostering world views that are less conducive to life satisfaction.

In the case of Singapore, our historical context places us squarely in this danger zone. Widespread poverty and scarcity in the earlier half of the last century, coupled with recent explosive economic growth, has likely left a scar in our nation's

collective memory. While the sudden inflow of wealth can be intoxicating, it has made us more reliant on material possessions for feelings of security and happiness.

MATERIALISM STARTS AT HOME

Ironically, the ingredients that went into our newfound financial success may also have made it more difficult for us to extricate ourselves from the hold of materialism, and it all starts at home.

One key driving force of Singapore's economic miracle was the widespread entry of women into the labour force, which has improved gender equality. One unintended consequence, however, is that parents on the whole have less time to spend with their children, with only half of families feeling that they spend enough quality time together, according to a 2014 survey conducted by the Families for Life Council.

Shaping a child's character takes intimate communication, consistent training and conscientious role modelling. All these require dedicated time and effort, including researching and sketching out lesson plans, choosing pedagogical strategies and implementing them. But long hours of work and a fast-paced environment mean that workers are typically low on both time and energy by the time they reach home.

Tellingly, while our competitive education system consistently churns out some of the best educational performances in the world, our children report relatively low parental support and interest in their studies.

Between the demands of mundane, day-to-day household tasks and the occasional family or workplace exigency, some parents may decide to leave it to professional educators to teach values of social responsibility and environmentalism and even traditions and beliefs to their children. This is especially the case when parents are divorced and live in different households, with coordination becoming a serious consideration when it comes to consistent messaging, or when one parent works extended or irregular hours, leaving interactions with children more sporadic and unpredictable.

BITING THE BULLET

Hence, helping the next generation to achieve a balanced world view is an ideal that is simply not within every family's

reach. For some, the resources to adjust mindsets may depend on the season of life, with changes being more transient than permanent.

Yet there is also reason to think that change is on the horizon. In his speech at the Economic Society of Singapore in 2015, current President Tharman Shanmugaratnam outlined how Singapore began the process of moving from merely ensuring economic survival to building an inclusive society. Similarly, Singaporeans at the individual level can also gradually shift towards a less materialistic, more balanced outlook.

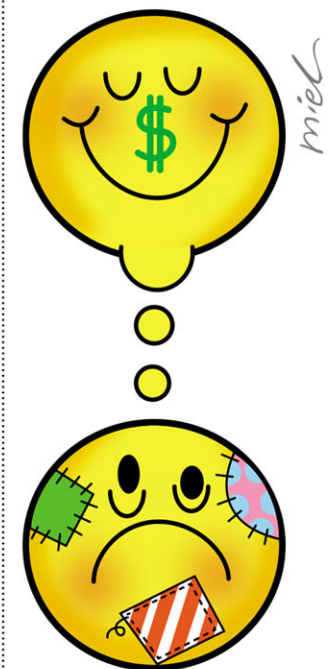
The climate is favourable for change as our society seeks to build a fairer meritocratic system, by gradually reducing the impact of early single-metric outcomes such as primary school scores on individuals' long-term future trajectories. Allowing our youth to bounce back from early academic setbacks helps families to look beyond the demands of high-stakes examinations, to refocus on other important life values. This will enable young people to learn to be self-responsible, care about the well-being of others in society, foster healthy attitudes towards failure and risk-taking, and develop an appreciation of culture and philosophy.

It is time for parents to bite the bullet and realise that when it comes to laying out the optimal pathway to well-being for us and our children, there is no substitute for time spent together. It may be costly or nerve-racking to request flexible work arrangements or take more time from work, but as first century BC writer Publilius Syrus quipped, "Everything is worth what its purchaser will pay for it."

In contrast, by sticking to a rigid focus on materialistic goals with its status-driven competitive mindset, we make parenthood unnecessarily stressful and miserable. This is partly why so many have shied away from it, and that is unfortunate, because bringing up the next generation with shared beliefs should be a joyful journey of discovery.

The wisdom of past generations tells us that money makes a good servant, but a terrible master. Whether or not our children can learn this lesson depends on whether or not we do so.

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