

Exploring economic inequality and societal well-being in Singapore

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Singapore (SG)

- Tropical island city-state, one degree north of the equator
- Majority Chinese population, with significant Malay, Indian, “Other” populations
- Previously colonized by the British, who capitalized on it as a port city, before its eventual independence in August 1965
- Center of global trade and commerce

Focus of & reasons for study

I decided to do a broadly-focused independent study to develop a **deeper understanding of the issues relating to economic* inequality, and how that impacted on societal well-being in SG**. As someone who grew up, studied and worked in SG, I had some familiarity of the context, and wanted to learn more by applying social work/public policy lenses through a period of intensive study.

Having observed that discussions of inequality I’d experienced often turned quickly to a focus on the state of and rules relating to poverty, I was interested in learning more about other aspects of inequality, including **understanding more about diverse populations on the inequality spectrum**, and the **relationship between the rich, middle-class and the poor**. I also wanted to understand **how aspects of inequality might impact upon societal well-being**. Gaining a greater understanding of aspects of inequality and impacts of societal well-being had great potential to be relevant to any policy area / outcome one might want to work on.

* “economic” broadly covered issues impacting on money and opportunity

Methodology

Tasks:

- Surveyed sources relating to research questions, including both SG and non-SG literature and administrative information.
- Reflected on positionalities w.r.t. this issue in light of daily interactions and ongoing current events
- Heard from local sources of knowledge
- The above processes, carried out in an interwoven and iterative way, allowed me to periodically adjust research directions and shortlist further questions / directions to explore

Outcomes

Developed a better understanding of:

- Dimensions of inequality in SG
- How the SG economy is set up and approaches to economic growth
- How wages are determined
- SG tax, education, property, public budgeting laws and policies
- How philosophy (stories and values) relate to inequality
- Measures of inequality and well-being
- Philanthropy in SG
- Links between inequality and well-being
- Challenges of approaching inequality in SG

Next steps:

- Continue learning and integrating points into my graduate school career
- Consider how to best represent and integrate this into my post-graduation career direction (SW748)

Skills Utilized/Developed

I engaged and critically assessed answers to my questions through my research and immersion in the SG context, which allowed me to gain a better current understanding of and historical context of this issue, including its relationship to various policies and populations. I gained a greater breadth and depth of knowledge relating to this issue and will continue to be directed by questions raised in the course of the study.

I gained familiarity with SG resources and sources of knowledge.

I applied knowledge gained in graduate school to the country I had grown up in. I will continue to be challenged to incorporate my experience and findings into my future courses, professional work and lifelong learning goals.

Classroom Connections

The following classes allowed me to research different aspects of the SG context and links between inequality and well-being, and taught me theories and tools of analysis that could be applied: PUBPOL717; SW530; SW647; SW697, SW504.

Lessons Learned

- “Not all who wander are lost”
- Need to be patient with the process
- “You never know what you don’t know”
- The process of learning does not need to be linear
- Comfort with change – Adjust as you learn – iterative process

Gaining critical consciousness:

One can live in the world for many years, yet suddenly realize elements of the world that you have been subconsciously navigating around or ignoring, and “should” know, as you spend time to reflect on and learn from others who have approached this issue before you.

Career Connections

The better understanding of SG’s positionality, policies, systems, macro ecosystem and resources that I have gained with respect to this issue will be a useful backdrop to future career decisions and help me to make macro change to advance societal well-being in a more informed way.

Advice

1. What do you want to learn more about that is not covered in classes?
2. Reach out and keep moving forward: Seek OGA advice, write that application, seek that connection
3. Find a supervisor who respects your vision, goals and humanity

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