Governance, Welfare and the Familial in Singapore

Asian Family Matters

Changing Family in Asia Cluster
Research Brief Series No. 26, May 2015

This brief is intended to provide an overview of research produced by the Changing Family in Asia Cluster at the Asia Research Institute.

Teo Youyenn is a Cluster Associate of the Changing Family in Asia Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, and Associate Professor at the Division of Sociology, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University.

In this article Teo analyses the Singapore welfare regime and the ‘society’ that the current welfare principles have produced. She recommends an analysis of the logic of differentiated deservedness that underpins current social policies.

The welfare regime in Singapore

With population ageing, declining fertility rates, intermittent economic crises, and unpredictable employment conditions, the question of how people will meet their needs for healthcare, retirement, and unemployment has become urgent in many East Asian societies, including Singapore.

States have sought different strategies to address these—their efforts varying depending on cultural sensitivities, state-society relations, and politics. Scholars highlight the fact that many of these national regimes shun universal welfare and instead depend heavily on the family as a source of support.

By analysing states’ use of ‘the family’ in its approach toward welfare, we can better understand the logic and principles embedded in social policies around public housing, healthcare and childcare. In so doing, the welfare regime in Singapore can be thought of as one of ‘differentiated deservedness.’

What is differentiated deservedness?

Differentiated deservedness refers to a set of principles underlying the Singapore state’s welfare mechanism, which considers certain people and practices as more deserving of support than others.

On the surface, it appears exactly as scholars have observed—as a ‘pro-family’ stance. Look deeper, and we see that this requires narrow enactments of family and market practices: through eligibility criteria for things such as public housing, childcare centre subsidies, and paid maternity leave, citizens receive more direct and greater degrees of access to public goods when they maintain steady employment throughout their life course, when they maintain specific nuclear family forms, and when they take on specific gendered roles of wage earners and/or caregivers.

Support for children—childcare centre subsidies, reduced foreign domestic worker levies, paid parental leave, various tax reliefs—for example, are targeted primarily at women. The degree of support, moreover, varies depending on women’s marital status, employment patterns, and...
income. Married women are entitled to longer periods of paid maternity leave (16 weeks) than non-married ones (8 weeks, plus 4 weeks unpaid); their leave is publicly-funded where non-married women’s is employer-paid. Childcare centre subsidies are oriented not toward children, but toward mothers, and mothers who engage in wage work receive more support than those who do not.

Ultimately, all Singaporeans do not have equal access to public goods. The degree to which they can access them varies depending on how they perform gender and class.

**What kind of governance and politics does differentiated deservedness imply?**

Differentiated deservedness is a profound form of governance. It compels Singaporeans to discipline themselves, to think of their worth and choices in terms of what ‘normal’ Singaporeans *should* do—even as these ‘norms’ become increasingly challenging to perform, and even as these ‘choices’ extract personal costs.

People are framed primarily as individuals, and families as individual units. They are expected to avoid ‘dependence.’ Mutual obligations and shared responsibilities among citizens are not salient. This has resulted in an understanding about the state, family, and welfare, in which individuals’ efforts rather than mutual obligations are emphasised.

**What happens as differentiated deservedness is applied?**

The state has, over the past few years, acknowledged both overall expanded welfare needs as well as rising inequalities. Reforms that signal some movement in the direction of welfare expansion are ongoing. Yet, the principle of differentiated deservedness remains strong, and this is problematic.

First, if differentiated deservedness is embedded in social policies, it could further deepen inequalities. If access to public goods varies too much in terms of one’s capacity to pay, and this capacity in turn is too heavily dependent on one’s position in the capitalist economy, one’s advantage or disadvantage compounds.

Low-income Singaporeans, for example, face these challenges: housing insecurity and poor housing conditions; lack of money to seek medical treatment; children who are already behind by the time they begin formal schooling at primary one (age 7) because they did not go to preschool; lack of caregiver support and; lack of retirement income. In other words, the need for wellbeing and security amongst the Singaporean population is particularly acute at the lower ends of the income strata. Social policies need to address Singaporeans’ needs directly without first requiring them to behave in specific and narrow ways.

Second, social policies matter insofar as they produce certain categories, individualised orientations and sensibilities. That is, they produce certain relationships between the state and society, and certain political cultures. Differentiated deservedness contributes to a society split apart by varied and possibly competing interests—a society where people view some as more deserving than others.
Research Cluster Activities

Book Launch

*Perspectives on Marital Dissolution: Divorce Biographies in Singapore*
Sharon Ee Ling Quah
Springer, 2015

Using Singaporean divorcees’ narrative accounts, this book explores how divorcees design and construct what the author calls, a *divorce biography*, to dissolve an unsatisfying marriage, cope with the crisis, negotiate associated risks, organise post-divorce personal communities and make future plans. It uncovers how divorcees navigate their divorce biographies within the economic, policy and social context they are located and examines the condition that facilitates or obstructs the pursuit of productivity in different facets of their post-divorce lives. Far from a standard story of divorce, this book presents the diversity and complexity of Singaporean divorce biographies.


The book launch event will be held on 12 June 2015 at the University of Sydney, Australia, supported by its Department of Sociology and Social Policy. Details of the book launch are available here: [http://sydney.edu.au/arts/sociology_social_policy/about/events/index.shtml?id=3663](http://sydney.edu.au/arts/sociology_social_policy/about/events/index.shtml?id=3663)

Talks and Seminars

Sharon Quah will be giving a talk on housing woes of Singaporean divorcees at the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre, University of Sydney, on 17 June 2015. Details of the talk are available here: [http://sydney.edu.au/southeast-asia-centre/events/index.shtml](http://sydney.edu.au/southeast-asia-centre/events/index.shtml)

Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, San Diego, 30 April – 2 May 2015

- Dhiman Das, “Does Mother’s Autonomy within the Household Matter for Child Education in India?”

IN THE NEWS

Jean Yeung gave an interview to The Supper Club on the topic “*Men now expected to bring home the bacon - cook it*”. Read and watch it here: [http://www.singapolitics.sg/supperclub/men-now-expected-bring-home-bacon-and-cook-it](http://www.singapolitics.sg/supperclub/men-now-expected-bring-home-bacon-and-cook-it)