

Singapore's Family Values: Do They Explain Low Fertility?

Most Singaporeans identified positively with the nuclear family structure and "standard" family roles. Also, Singaporeans are generally pro-children. In this context, it is difficult to support those views that argue that Singaporeans have become highly individualistic and hedonistic.

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To the Government of Singapore, the country's declining marriage and fertility rates are serious national problems. It believes that those trends will have negative consequences for economic growth and Singapore's overall quality of life in the future as Singapore faces a "greying population". In 2003, there were 21,962 marriages registered, lower than 2002 (23,189), the 1990s (average 24,000) and the 1980s (average 23,000) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2004: 14). Between 1970 and 1975, Singapore's total fertility rate averaged 2.6; in 1980, it was 1.80; in 1986, 1.43; in 1990, 1.83; in 2000, 1.60; and in 2003, it had fallen to 1.24.¹ During the same period, the population census also found that there was a

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higher proportion of Singaporeans remaining unmarried. In the Singapore Census of Population 2000, for the age group 30-34, one in three Singaporean males and one in five Singaporean females were unmarried (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2001: 2). The State is particularly concerned that Singapore's future economy will be unable to sustain an ageing population, where 20 per cent of the population would be aged 65 and older by 2030 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2002: 6).

The State has implemented a wide variety of measures over the past 20 years in an attempt to reverse the declining marriage and fertility rates. Those measures have included fiscal incentives as well as ideological persuasion (mainly through campaigns such as the "Romancing Singapore" festival). However, by 2004, official statistics showed that the fertility rate had fallen even further, and that there were even more "singles" in Singapore than ever. This had led one prominent Singaporean statistician (Paul Cheung, Chief Statistician, Singapore Department of Statistics, 1983-2004) to opine:

In the 1980s, many singles were single by circumstance. If they did get married, they would probably have two or three kids. So the Social Development Unit came in and stabilised things, and the birth rate actually rose for a few years... But now [2004], more people choose to stay single. And couples choose to have one or no kids. Their lifestyle choices have changed. So influencing the birth rate now will require different methods. (Singapore Straits Times, 23 May 2004)

In other words, while it might have been true that Singaporeans in the recent past agonized over their inability to get married and have children, the new view argues that most contemporary Singaporeans intentionally do not want to get married or to have children. Many policymakers believe that this new view on the family is owing to changes in Singapore's family values. The Government's view is clearly laid out in the executive summary of *Family Matters*, a State-commissioned report of the Public Education Committee on Family:²

1. Values guide the decisions that we make: our relationships, our work and life as a whole; as well as the responsibilities that come with them. Just as families are the basic building blocks of the society, values are the foundations that underpin the family. Family values are the set of tenets necessary for holding a family together. The emphasis given to teaching values in schools and the promotion of Singapore Family Values underscore their importance.

2. Singapore society has seen tremendous changes in the past few decades. Globalisation (*sic*), technological change and the Internet have expanded our spheres of influence beyond our immediate environment. Work and family have become highly interdependent with the rise of dual-income families. Parents face the “time-bind”, which often results in inadequate value transmission to their children. These challenges have the potential to erode the values that ensure the well-being of families.
3. In recent years we have seen a gradual shift in long-held attitudes towards relationships, marriage and family. More Singaporeans are remaining single, delaying marriage and having fewer children. Many place priorities on careers and other life goals, while holding high but often unrealistic expectations about their life partners. Youth are adopting increasingly liberal views towards sexual intimacy, marriage commitment, childbearing, etc. Efforts must be expended now to foster positive attitudes and strengthen our social institutions. (PECF, 2002: 11)

In response to this, the Government of Singapore implemented a broad range of measures to reinforce the family institution as a key strategy to reverse the declining marriage and fertility rates. In his first National Day Rally Speech, the country's third Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong promised to make “Singapore: A Great Place for Families”, which has become the tagline for the new “pro-family” policies (see <http://www.family.gov.sg/>). In addition to even more fiscal incentives for procreation, the State has taken the lead in completely restructuring the civil service to create a “pro-family” environment, beginning with the implementation of a “five-day working week”, with weekends set aside for “family time” (see <http://aboutfamilylife.org.sg/>). The state also feels very strongly that family values must be “strengthened”, introducing a variety of programmes to promote marriage and childbearing.

Research question

It is fairly clear that several influential individuals and senior policymakers in Singapore believe that the society's family values have been eroded, and this erosion has been a key factor in causing the decline in marriage and fertility rates. The cause of the erosion, according to the State, is “economic development”, and the more recent process of globalization. This study will therefore focus on examining Singapore's family values at the turn of the millennium. More specifically, it intends to analyse and explain whether Singaporeans actually value the family (as an institution), marriage, parenthood, motherhood, childbearing, and

other issues regarding the family. It posits that if Singaporeans hold pro-family views, it can be concluded that Singapore's family values are strong, and vice versa. Towards this end, this study therefore intends to identify and account for Singapore's family values at the beginning of the new millennium. Since the Government of Singapore assumes that "younger" Singaporeans appear to be facing a greater risk of value erosion (as a consequence of modernization, industrialization or globalization), it is also worth examining whether there is a difference in value system between "younger" and "older" Singaporeans.

Theory of intergenerational value change

It is worth noting that the position adopted by the contemporary Government is one where it feels that "value change" seems to be the primary reason behind fertility decline. As sociologists have long noted, there could possibly be many different reasons behind fertility decline (see Van Krieken, 1997 for a summary). Indeed, most sociologists would argue that fertility decline arises from a combination of factors, some sociological, others economic, political and even historical (Alter, 1992; Gillis, 1996). Hence, it is worthwhile to examine the Government of Singapore's logic of "value change", which seems to be drawn from existing theories of "intergenerational value change". The central argument of those theories, which originated from various strands of modernization theory, is that the processes of industrialization and economic growth will lead to greater "individualization" in society. According to Beck:

Traditional bonds (kin, clan, community) tear apart as industrial and postindustrial society emerges. The feasibility of living a more or less detached life is aided by the modern state (1992: 32).

Similarly, Beck-Gernsheim (2002) holds that family life today is characterized by the "post-familial family", where the "traditional" family a lifelong officially legitimated community of father-mother-child, held together through emotion and intimacy is being replaced by a diverse array of lifestyles. She explains that "individualization", also brought about by changes in modern social institutions such as the State, is the key driver behind this mindset change; the result is that people now think and act as individuals rather than based on strong kinship ties and family obligations (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 41).

Inglehart (and associates) holds a similar view on value change. With industrialization and economic growth, people place "less emphasis on traditional cultural norms ... especially those norms that limit self-expression" (Inglehart 1997:33-35). In this sense, Beck and Inglehart indirectly agree that the family is less socially crucial than it once was, as it is no longer the key economic or

socialization unit in modern (and post-modern) societies. As Zimmerman (2001) argues, changes in the economy, which in turn lead to changes in the demographic structure of society and changing roles of women, lead to people valuing the family differently. The rise of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution brought challenges to the social norms that "...buttress traditional family values and patriarchal norms of male dominance" (Inglehart and Norris, 2003:16). As more women enter the labour force, with increasing education and qualifications and the emergence of feminist movements, gender roles will have to change and adapt to the new economic structure. Thus, modernization theorists suggest that social trends like late marriage, late parenthood, smaller family units, the "double-income-no-kids" (DINKs) syndrome and increase in divorce rates are becoming more common nowadays and can be attributed to the process of "individualization". In particular, the authors believe the "affluence effect" is the most pronounced factor behind individualization, as affluence allows individuals and family "... to experiment with different forms of self-expression and individuality ... sweeping aside traditional values rooted in generations of want and scarcity" (Zimmerman, 2001:74). As such, with individualization taking hold, modernization theorists would argue that the notion of having "obligations" would eventually erode. Previously, "obligations" were central to social life in traditional societies, as individuals were necessarily held by their obligations towards family, religion or political authorities. With greater individualism, people now have the power of "choice" over what they do. The final link between value change and declining fertility is therefore the belief that marriage, starting a family and childbearing are now personal choices rather than social obligations.

The theory of intergenerational value thus posits that individualization would be more pronounced in the generational group that experienced industrialization and economic growth directly. With greater propensity towards individualization, the generation in question would be more likely to feel that the family (marriage, family structure and roles) and childbearing are less important in their lives. Although those views have been criticized as being "too monochrome and too one-dimensional" (Smart and Shipman, 2004: 506), there is no doubting that modernization theories do have "ideological appeal", especially to the so-called "conservative segments of society" (Gillis, 1996; Zimmerman, 2001). This is because values are used as guides for behaviours, as they tell people what they ought or ought not to do; they "incorporate ideas, symbols, and beliefs that help people make sense of their lives and the world" (Zimmerman, 2001:65-6). Thus, family values are supported by norms, rules and laws that act as moral compasses to "help" people realize the "ideal family" type. Family values are thus conceptions of what is desirable and looking after the family well-being represents the goal of

family policy. Clearly, in such a discourse, the fingerprints of certain interest groups which might be the State, or segments of the State captured by interest coalitions are evident. In such a scenario, the notion of “value change” often tends to imply a “change for the worse”. Hence, some sort of intervention (or policy) is necessary, as seen in the case of the Government’s pro-family policies.

This paper will examine Singapore’s family values, which are defined as how individuals value the institution of the family, rather than “what family life ought to be”. More specifically, it hopes to analyse whether the Singapore’s family values are “strong” or whether the opposite situation of “individualization” has taken place. If “individualization” has taken place, it could therefore be proposed as a primary explanation for Singapore’s declining marriage and fertility rates.

Methodology

The study is based on an analysis of the Singapore-leg of the World Values Survey, conducted in 2002. According to the International Network of Social Scientists, the organization in charge of the survey:

The World Values Survey is a worldwide investigation of sociocultural and political change. It is conducted by a network of social scientist at leading universities all around world. The survey is performed on nationally representative samples in almost 80 societies on all six inhabited continents. A total of four waves have been carried since 1981 (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>).

An abridged version of the survey was conducted in Singapore by a team from the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore.³ The WVS-Singapore 2002 was constructed to emulate the proportions of major social categories of the Singapore population, including by gender and ethnicity (see table 1). This dataset consisted of views by Singaporeans on various aspects of the family.

Table 1. WVS-Singapore 2002 Sample, by gender and ethnic group

	Male	Female	Total	Ethnicity (Percentage)
Indian	39	53	92	6.1
Chinese	603	602	1,205	79.9
Malay	98	104	202	13.4
Others	6	7	13	0.9
Total	746	766	1,512	100
Gender (percentage)	49.3	50.7	100	

This study was interested in examining whether Singapore actually “suffered” from weak family values. As mentioned earlier, “weak family values” would refer to individuals placing less importance on various aspects of the family, such as getting married or bearing children. Weak family values can also be understood as implying the presence of “individualization” among the population. Therefore, the first area of inquiry would be to identify how Singaporeans value the family “as an institution”. Do Singaporeans think the family is important? How important is it when compared against other institutions and social groups (such as friends and work colleagues)? The second area of inquiry would involve identifying how Singaporeans value marriage as an institution. Do Singaporeans think the family is an outdated institution? How do Singaporeans feel about women who want to be unmarried single parents by choice? The third area of inquiry would involve identifying how Singaporeans value the nuclear family, as a structure, as well as parenthood. What do Singaporeans think is the “ideal” structure for the family? Must it involve both a husband and a wife? What is the “ideal” number of children a family ought to have, if any? Can career women be as effective in bringing up children? Is being a housewife considered fulfilling?

In addition, since the basic line of inquiry seeks to test the theory of intergenerational value change, in lieu of applicable comparative data, this study artificially segments the sample into two generational cohorts (younger generation and older generation). If there are differences in views between the two cohorts, it might indicate that there are generational differences and therefore possibly a change in values across generations. This however cannot be taken as definite proof of generational change, as only a time-series comparison would qualify. In addition, there are further limitations to this study, which seeks aggregate indicators through the homogenization of the sample. This is because Singapore (and therefore the WVS sample) is highly heterogeneous, in terms of ethnicity, religious affiliation, as well as in terms of class and educational differences. Yet, since this is a preliminary study, it is more important to tease out wider aggregate trends first, in order to get a sense of what Singaporeans feel before more detailed disaggregated analysis follows. Thus, the only social variable examined is that of gender, as the study is interested in finding out whether there were any significant differences between the views of men and women. Gender differences are possible because the issue of the family is intrinsically linked to gender and gender roles within the family.

Data

The family

At the aggregated societal level, data generated from the WVS-Singapore 2002 gave very clear indicators about the family values held by Singaporeans.⁴ Firstly, over 91 per cent of the respondents indicated that they felt that the family was “very important” (see table 2). However, it is significant to note that this figure is slightly lower than the mean of 31 countries (93.2 per cent indicated that family was “very important”) in the WVS⁵ (Fourth Wave) conducted between 2000 and 2001. Interestingly, the Singaporean aggregate response was lower than the response from the United States of America (95.3 per cent), South Africa (95.7 per cent) and Nigeria (98.9 per cent), but higher than China (60.2 per cent), and the Republic of Korea (89.6 per cent) (WVS, 2000).

Table 2. Views on “the family” as an institution (percentage)

	Male	Female	Combined
Very important	90.8	92.7	91.8
Rather important	8.7	6.7	7.7
Not very important	0.5	0.5	0.5
Not at all important	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0*	100.0

Note: Figure due to rounding.

When compared to other social institutions, the “family” was ranked as being the most important (see table 3).

Table 3. Percentage of respondents indicating that these social aspects are “very important” (percentage)

	Male	Female	Combined
Family	90.8	92.7	91.8
Work	59.4	45.5	52.3
Friends	41.7	37.4	39.5
Religion	33.5	38.3	35.9
Leisure time	27.4	27.9	26.3
Politics	10.9	9.0	10.0

Singaporeans also generally felt that “there ought to be more emphasis placed on family life”, especially when compared to other aspects of social life (see table 4).

Table 4. Priorities in social life (percentage)

	Combined (male/female)		
	Good	Don't mind	Bad
More emphasis on family life	92.8 (91.7/93.8)	4.6 (5.1/4.0)	2.3 (3.0/1.6)
More emphasis on the development of technology	66.8 (70.5/63.3)	28.6 (26.3/30.8)	4.1 (2.7/5.4)
Greater respect for authority	52.1 (53.2/51.1)	40.3 (39.0/41.7)	7.1 (7.6/6.7)
Less emphasis on money and material possessions	37.9 (35.8/39.9)	45.9 (47.6/44.3)	16.1 (16.6/15.7)
Less importance placed on work	28.6 (27.6/29.7)	37.4 (37.3/37.4)	33.7 (34.8/32.6)

Singaporeans also appeared to prioritize social contact with family members. Nearly three quarters of the sample indicated that they “frequently” spent time with family members, whereas only half indicated that they frequently spent time with friends (see table 5).

Table 5. Social contact – at least weekly (percentage)

	Male	Female	Combined
Spend time with parents or other relatives	72.7	76.3	74.5
Spend time with friends	59.9	43.8	51.8
Spend time socially with colleagues from work or profession	30.0	23.0	26.4
Spend time with people at place of worship or religious organization	19.0	18.2	18.6
Spend time socially with people at sports clubs, voluntary or service organization	13.3	6.3	9.7

Based on those responses, it can be concluded that Singaporeans appear to value the family, as an institution, very highly. They also view various aspects of family life, such as contact with family members, as being important in their lives.

Marriage

More than three quarters of the respondents think that marriage is not an outdated institution (see table 6). However, over 70 per cent of respondents who were single (at the time of the survey) disagreed that “marriage was an outdated institution”.

Table 6. Views on “marriage is an outdated institution” by marital status (percentage)

Marital status	Combined (male/female)	
	Percentage of sample	Disagree
Married	45.1 (40.7/49.5)	83.2 (84.2/82.3)
Divorced	1.5 (1.2/1.7)	67.9 (77.8/61.5)
Separated	0.5 (0.7/0.3)	65.8 (60.0/100.0)
Widowed	1.6 (0.4/2.7)	98.9 (100.0/100.0)
Single	51.2 (56.8/45.8)	72.6 (71.9/73.4)
	Total: 100 (49.3/50.7)	Mean: 77.8 (77.1/78.4)

In addition, when the respondents were asked: “If someone says a child needs a home with both a father and a mother to grow up happily, would you tend to agree or disagree?”, over 93 per cent (standard deviation of 0.512) indicated that they agreed. This implies that Singaporeans valued the “nuclear” family structure, which consists of a husband and a wife, along with their children, living in a household. Further, most Singaporeans disapproved of women as single parents by choice (defined as a woman choosing to have children without having a stable relationship with a man) (see table 7).

Table 7. Views on “family structure” – agree (percentage)

	Male	Female	Combined
Nuclear family structure important	95.3	91.6	93.4
Single-parenthood for women by choice is wrong	74.1	68.1	71.1

The WVS-Singapore 2002 also found that Singaporeans tended to hold rather “modern” views towards family roles (see table 8). Over 70 per cent of the respondents felt that a working mother could establish just as warm a relationship with their children, than a mother that does not work (outside the home). In addition, over 80 per cent of respondents felt that both the husband and the wife should contribute to the household income. Finally, nearly two thirds of the respondents indicated that being a “housewife” was just as fulfilling as working for pay.

Table 8. Views on “family roles” – agree (percentage)

View	Male	Female	Combined
Working mother alright	67.5	73.4	70.5
Housewife fulfilling	68.6	68.6	68.6
Both spouses should contribute to household income	77.8	82.5	80.2

Interestingly, those views on “family roles” saw some variation between the male and female responses. For instance, a slightly larger proportion of women than men felt that “a working mother could establish just as warm a relationship with their children”, and also the view that “both spouses should contribute to the household income”. Overall, the views on family roles can generally be understood as being fairly “modern” views, as opposed to “traditionally conservative” views, which would disapprove of working women. By contrast, the views indicated that most Singaporeans felt that women could adopt both roles (career woman or housewife), and that it was entirely the woman’s own choice, as opposed to only being allowed to perform traditional female roles (mother, wife and homemaker). This therefore indicates that employment, by itself, is not viewed as being an obstacle to getting married as well as having or raising children.

Childbearing

On the issue of having children, very few Singaporeans indicated that they did not wish to have children (1.3 per cent of the sample), whereas over 80 per cent of the sample felt that the “ideal size of the family” included having either two or three children (see table 9).

Table 9. Views on “ideal size of family” (percentage) by marital status

Number of children (male/female)	Combined (male/female)		
	Married (n = 683)	Single (n = 829)	Total (n = 1,512)
None	0.9 (0.6/1.1)	1.6 (1.7/1.4)	1.3 (1.3/1.2)
One	2.5 (3.5/1.7)	3.6 (4.3/2.7)	3.1 (4.0/2.2)
Two	45.0 (42.3/47.2)	53.9 (56.4/51.0)	49.9 (50.7/49.1)
Three	33.9 (34.9/33.0)	28.0 (27.7/28.4)	30.7 (30.6/30.7)
Four	14.1 (14.1/14.1)	9.1 (6.2/12.4)	11.3 (9.4/13.2)
Five or more	2.4 (3.1/1.7)	3.9 (3.7/4.1)	2.2 (2.1/2.3)
Mean	2.74	2.55	2.65
Median	3.00	2.00	2.00
Mode	2	2	2
Standard Deviation	1.103	1.146	1.162
Variance	1.217	1.314	1.349

It was also interesting to note that there were only minor differences in views between those who were married at the time of the survey and those who were single. In aggregate terms, it could be argued that those that were single generally preferred having slightly fewer children than those that were married. However,

most singles did not indicate that they did not want children at all. When comparing the responses of the “ideal” number of children with the actual number of children the respondents had, there were some variances (see table 10).

Table 10. Ideal number of children, for married respondents (n = 683)

Number of children	Combined (male/female)	
	Actual	Ideal
None	12.3 (15.6/9.6)	0.9 (0.6/1.1)
One	19.9 (20.1/19.6)	2.5 (3.5/1.7)
Two	36.2 (37.1/35.6)	45.0 (42.3/47.2)
Three	22.5 (16.9/27.0)	33.9 (34.9/33.0)
Four	4.8 (7.1/3.1)	14.1 (14.1/14.1)
Five or more	4.3 (3.2/5.1)	3.6 (4.5/3.0)
Total	100	100

There could be some possible explanations for this outcome. First, the desired number of children can be explained as being higher than the actual number because some families may continue to have children (i.e., in the future). The second possible reason is that Singaporeans would like to have more children than they currently have, but choose not to do so, for various reasons. In this sense, the second reason could be a policy concern.

On a related issue, only slightly more than half the respondents felt that childbearing, by itself, is not necessary for a woman to feel “fulfilled” (54.5 per cent agreed to the statement “Childbearing is necessary for a woman to feel fulfilled”) (see table 11). This would suggest that nearly half of the sample were of the view that having children was more a personal choice than a social obligation. While it might follow that respondents having indicated that women needed to have children to feel fulfilled will perceive that it is important to have children, it is more significant that most of those that indicated that having children is a personal

choice still stated that they valued having children. Thus, it could be concluded that most Singaporeans valued having children.

Table 11. Views on childbearing (percentage)

	Combined (male/female)		
	Necessary	Not necessary	Don't know
Childbearing is necessary for women to feel fulfilled	54.5 (52.3/56.6)	42.7 (43.1/42.2)	2.9 (4.6/1.2)
Standard deviation	1.354		

Up to this point, the emergent data suggest that there was not too much variation between the views of men and women in the survey. As mentioned earlier, the most significant difference of opinion was found with issues concerning gender roles within the family.⁶

Generational change?

While the aggregate data from the Singapore-leg of the World Values Survey suggest that Singaporeans generally value the family, childbearing and marriage, it is important to examine whether there is any difference in opinions between age groups. Age groups are important to this analysis because the Government of Singapore and various other state agencies seem to think that so-called “younger” Singaporeans appear to face a higher risk of value erosion or “individualization”, as suggested in the PECF’s recommendations (article 3, as mentioned earlier). For this preliminary study, “younger” Singaporeans are defined as being born after Singapore’s independence in 1965 (i.e. those who are aged 37 years old and under), while those born before independence (i.e. those who are aged 38 years old and over) would be considered “older” Singaporeans.⁷ The year of independence as the dividing point was chosen as it was assumed that each group would have been growing up and socialized under different circumstances. Those born before independence would probably have faced Singapore’s earlier economic hardships, whereas those born after independence were probably growing up during Singapore’s economic boom. If there was no difference of opinion between the two age groups, then it could be suggested that there was no value change across time. Although there is a statistical problem in categorizing the age groups as the Singapore-leg of the WVS included 978 respondents aged 37 years old and under during the year 2002, while there were 532 respondents who were aged 40 years old and over the resultant data are still useful in shedding some light on that issue.

The oldest respondent was born in 1922, making him around 80 years old at the time of the survey, there were 83 respondents who were 15 years old (the minimum age to participate in the survey). The mean age of all the respondents was between 32 and 33 years old.

For this analysis, the responses by each age group to several key issues were compared, and then ranked on the basis of the degree of difference of opinion. Just by comparing means, it was interesting that there was almost no difference in the two age groups' opinion that "a working mother can establish a warm relationship with her children", but by contrast, there was a very significant difference of opinion as regards "childbearing is necessary for women to feel fulfilled" (see table 12).

Table 12. Views on family life, by age cohorts and gender (percentage)

	Younger			Older		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
n	516	462	978	229	303	532
Agree that childbearing is necessary for women to feel fulfilled	43.4	46.9	45.0	72.5	71.6	72.0
Agree that marriage is an outdated institution	25.0	21.6	23.4	12.2	17.2	15.0
Approve of single parent mother by choice	18.2	24.1	21.0	11.8	13.8	12.9
Nuclear family important	94.0	90.5	92.3	98.3	93.4	95.5
Agree that being a housewife can be fulfilling	69.2	65.2	67.4	67.2	73.7	70.9
Family is very important	90.3	92.0	91.1	92.1	93.7	93.0
Agree that a working mother can establish a warm relationship with children	70.5	72.0	71.2	60.5	75.5	69.1

Note: "Younger" category: Respondents aged 37 years old and below as of the year 2002; "older" category: respondents aged 38 years old and above as of the year 2002.

There also appears to be some difference of opinion between the two age groups over the issue of marriage as an outdated institution. Younger respondents were willing to agree that marriage was an outdated institution compared to older respondents, with almost a 10 per cent difference in opinion. Although the overall number of respondents for both groups is still relatively low, it again suggests that there is some value change. The implication here is that younger Singaporeans

seem to now accept alternative institutions to marriage, such as cohabitation (without marriage) and singlehood. The other issue which generated a significant difference in opinion is that it is acceptable for women to be single parent by choice (nearly 8 per cent difference). More specifically, younger Singaporeans appear more open to that possibility, whereas older Singaporeans generally expressed disapproval at such a personal choice.

It was also interesting to examine the difference in opinion on the issue of the “ideal number of children in a family” between the age groups (see table 13). In general, younger Singaporeans indicated that they viewed having two children per family as being ideal, whereas older Singaporeans were split between two and three children per family.

Table 13. Ideal number of children in the family, by age cohort and gender (percentage)

	Younger			Older		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
n	516	462	978	229	303	532
None	1.9	0.9	1.4	0.0	2.0	1.1
One child	3.3	2.4	2.9	5.7	1.7	3.4
Two children	57.2	57.1	57.2	36.2	37.0	36.7
Three children	28.7	27.5	28.1	35.4	35.6	35.5
Four children	5.8	10.2	7.9	17.5	17.8	17.7
Five or more children	1.9	1.1	1.5	3.9	3.7	4.3
Don't Know\ no answer	1.2	0.9	1.0	1.3	1.3	1.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	2.48	2.53	2.51	2.91	2.94	2.92
SD	1.096	0.990	1.047	1.276	1.329	1.305

There are several possible explanations for this difference of opinion. On the one hand, it could be argued that older Singaporeans hold traditional values, which in the Asian case would refer to valuing large families and having large numbers of children per family, whereas younger Singaporeans are more modern in that they prefer smaller close-knit nuclear families, usually consisting of parents and two children. Alternatively, there is the possibility that an economic reason is behind the difference, as younger Singaporeans feel

that contemporary Singapore's cost of living is very high, and therefore it is uneconomical to have more than two children per family. Conversely, older Singaporeans would view the fact that having more children was economically functional, as the children would jointly contribute to supporting the parents in their old age. At this stage, it is impossible to pinpoint the actual reason for this difference in opinion without engaging in deeper qualitative research on the issue. However, what is clear is that there are some differences of opinion concerning certain issues, which could be an indicator of value change across generations. Given that the main differences in views were on the issues of women's childbearing being a choice, that marriage is an outdated institution, and acceptance of single parenthood by choice, this suggests that indeed some degree of individualization has taken place for the "younger" generation.

Conclusion and policy implications

At an aggregate level, the data from the WVS-Singapore 2002 suggest that most Singaporeans strongly value the family and marriage as an institution, as well as family life as being "very important". Most Singaporeans identified positively with the nuclear family structure and "standard" family roles. Also, Singaporeans are generally pro-children. In this context, it is difficult to support those views that argue that Singaporeans have (already) become highly individualistic and hedonistic. For example, Singaporeans have not given any indication that they favour a lifestyle of single-parenthood or unmarried cohabitation. There is also no indication that Singaporeans solely think of themselves, their work or friends, ahead of family members.

Thus, at the aggregate level, those views mirror earlier findings from studies done after the 1990 Singapore Census of Population, which found that marriage and parenthood were important "personal goals" for the large majority of Singaporeans (see Quah, 1998 and 1999). This suggests that Singapore faces a "social problem", which can be defined as a sizable gap between the ideals and the reality in society (Coleman, 1998). It is clear that most Singaporeans value marriage, parenthood and childbearing, but somehow do not seem able to achieve those personal goals. It could be further argued that the problem is increasing because the social outcomes today are even further away from the ideals than in the corresponding period a decade earlier. In this sense, low marriage and fertility rates are both a national as well as a personal issue. As a personal issue, it is probably highly likely that most Singaporeans do feel some degree of anxiety and stress over not being able to get married or to have children (or as many children as they would like to).

Viewed from a different angle, this research proposes that Singapore's low fertility is therefore not because of a high degree of individualism among the people. This finding probably gives greater impetus to the State's current pro-family strategy, which is trying to assist Singaporeans in balancing their work and personal lives, and coping with the perceived high economic costs of having and raising children. However, from a policy perspective, it is recommended that the strategy needs to have greater direct impact. This is because at the moment, the various policies within this strategy are mostly guidelines and recommendations rather than enforceable laws. Since the introduction of those policies, the organizations that have been putting in place the improved "work-life" arrangements are the State's own agencies, ministries and statutory boards. Outside of the mandatory extension of maternity leave (which is upheld by the law), all the other "pro-family" recommendations remain generally optional for firms in the private sector. Still, the State's strategy remains important, as it demonstrates that the Government is trying to create a pro-family sociocultural environment. The potential social problem here would be that since economic issues are deemed to be more important than family life, which might be perceived as being impossible to achieve, the next generation could completely give up even trying to form a family. In this sense, the State's current policy will be useful to those who would like to form a family but they might view their career aspirations and other economic issues as potential obstacles.

Viewed from the State's perspective, there probably is some urgent need to further promote Singapore as a "pro-family" society. This is because this research also found that there are already some mindset differences between younger and older Singaporeans, especially on issues such as childbearing, whether marriage is outdated as an institution, and being a single parent by choice. The widest difference of opinion was on the issue of childbearing for women as a personal choice, where the difference between the cohorts was about 26 per cent. The difference on all other issues was less than 10 per cent, with four issues returning less than 5 per cent difference. So while family values appear to be generally "strong" if the entire sample is viewed as a single cohort, it suggests that the mindset of individualism has already taken hold among some "younger" Singaporeans. While the degree of individualism does not appear to be very strong at the moment, there is the "danger" that this might become the "norm" among younger Singaporeans in the future. How does the State stem or even reverse this trend? Given that younger Singaporeans generally demonstrate that they have "fairly strong" family values, while older Singaporeans have "very strong" family values, the policy implication is that the State should focus on making Singapore a pro-family society rather than embark upon an ideological campaign to "improve

family values". This is mainly because the latter could have the opposite effect on what is generally a highly educated and affluent society, which might not view "orders" from above too favourably. Hence, the State must make hay while the sun shines; Singapore currently has strong family values, Singaporeans would like to get married and to have children, and appear to be asking for "help" to do so. If the State can help those people resolve their personal problems, it is more likely that they will retain and transmit strong family values to the next generation.

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Endnotes

1. Compiled from various reports published by the Singapore Department of Statistics (<http://www.singstat.gov.sg>)
2. This is how the PECF report describes itself: Released on 15 April 2002, this report represents the work of more than 150 individuals (comprising members of the various PEC Committees) from over 100 different organizations. It serves as a public education blueprint that complements the Government's initiatives in creating a total social environment conducive to marriage, families and the raising of children. The Public Education Committee on Family was formed in September 2000 to support the Ministerial Committee and Working Committee on Marriage and Procreation (<http://aboutfamilylife.org.sg>)
3. The author is a team member of the Singapore-leg of the World Values Survey 2002.
4. Unless otherwise specified, all data presented are drawn from the WVS-Singapore 2002.
5. The so-called Fourth Wave of the WVS was conducted between 1999 and 2001 and covers 16 countries, some for the first time and others for the fourth time. Singapore's data will be added to the fourth wave. See <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/> for more details on the WVS itself.
6. Statistically, the largest gender difference found in this survey was concerning the view: "Marriage is an outdated institution", for the subgroup of "divorced" respondents. However, this might be an anomaly as there were very few respondents (9 male, 13 female), thus probably skewing the response rate.
7. The age of the respondents for all the data reflects their age in the year 2002, when the World Values Survey was conducted in Singapore.

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