

## **USE2209: Globalising Asian-Pacific Identities**

**A/P Barbara Ryan**

### **‘You choose’ Assignment**

In this paper, I will respond to a possible interview question for NUS Overseas College (NOC), Israel: “Besides your technical courses, can you share with us what you have learned from a course that makes you a suitable candidate for NOC Israel?”

In Year 1 Semester 2, I took an inquiry module, called Globalising Asian-Pacific Identities, or GAPI for short, under the University Scholars Programme. In this module, we explored the complex nature of human identities in a globalising world. At the same time, we sought to analyse related issues from varied perspectives, particularly in the Asian-Pacific context. We combined extensive thought-provoking readings with critical class discussions, essay writing and peer teaching stints to aid our learning. I believe that this module has equipped me with entrepreneurial skills that NOC prides itself on. Please allow me to elaborate on the various ways in which I believe these skills will augment my learning and contribution as an entrepreneur-to-be in an Israeli start-up.

One of my greatest takeaways from GAPI is learning to be never easily satisfied and always eager to delve deeper, which I believe is a must-have quality of an entrepreneur at the forefront of innovation. During our analysis of textual and visual sources in order to uncover more insights on Asian-Pacific realities, we did not just accept claims at face value, but critically examined their soundness, intentions, audience, possible inferences to be drawn and so on. Take for example one of our assigned readings, called *Autism from the inside*, by

Katherine May (2018). Written from the perspective of a journalist on the autism spectrum, this article poignantly voices out the prejudice faced by people in her community, in a world where social rules are defined by neurotypical, or so-called “normal”, people. While her arguments against the imposition of stereotypes by “outsiders” on autistic individuals are largely well-developed, through class discussion, we questioned the persuasiveness of some arguments. May describes neurotypical people as being “endlessly obsessed with their status and their identification with their tribe ... To me, their company seems superficial, blunt, emotionless”. This statement contradicts her position, as she is perpetuating the same “crime” of imposing fixed labels on people from the other group. We then discussed how this claim could be framed better so as to accentuate the pernicious effects of misguided stereotypes instead of undermining her own position. Through many other similar instances over the course of GAPI, I have learned to put on a critical lens when analysing problems. By questioning how things can be done better, I am more likely to discover potential pitfalls and generate innovative insights. I believe that being unafraid to challenge existing ideas is a crucial quality for an entrepreneur who desires to be a change-maker.

You may be wondering, how is learning a Western writer’s opinion about people on the autism spectrum related to Asian-Pacific identities? Indeed, the link does not seem immediately clear. People conventionally associate the term “identity” with an individual’s culture, race, nationality and religion, rather than a mental condition such as autism. Yet, on closer inspection, the presence of a neurological “Other” in this discussion indicates that mental conditions can be identity markers, too. This ability to connect ideas across disciplinary and geographical contexts is exactly one of the key learning points of this module, that is to apply a concept to a different but analogous situation. The identity of autistic people

is just like that of a minority race, existing in a society whose rules are written by the majority. What does the majority overlook when it assumes the role of an observer? What may systemically disadvantage the lives of the minority? These questions are given clear analytical consideration in the article, shedding light on similar issues faced by minorities in other contexts. Throughout this module, I analysed many papers that deal with the nebulous notion of identity through direct or indirect lenses including history, gender, militarism, religion, body image and so on. I processed ideas in these readings in my assignments and class discussions by making connections across seemingly disparate domains. This practice helped me acquire a more holistic understanding of the issues that I was investigating. I believe that the ability to connect ideas is crucial to the success of an entrepreneur, who endeavours to explore uncharted waters using existing knowledge.

In addition, I have honed my ability to make use of tools through this module. Tools empower humans with greater capability, efficiency and access to knowledge. For an entrepreneur venturing in the IT industry, he or she uses technical tools such as web development frameworks. But tools need not be technical. More often than not, tools in the form of ideas can do us great service in solving problems. GAPI placed a great deal of emphasis on the skill of using ideas as tools. In May's attempt to contextualise neurotypicals' skewed representation of autism, she utilises Edward Said's (1978) description of the Orientalist gaze, in which the observed subjects are not allowed to speak for themselves, but are "rendered without depth, in swollen detail". This analogy points out that, just like how the West studied the "Orient" with preconceived biases, the neurotypical community imposes its norms onto the autism community and perceives the latter to be "in deficit". In this case, another scholar's work is used as a tool to examine an unfamiliar concept. Similarly, in entrepreneurial

endeavours, one needs to use intangible tools to untangle complex issues, and to draw inspirations for innovation. GAPI has made me more alert and skilful in utilising tools to solve problems.

Last but not least, GAPI has taught me to be critical of my own pre-conceived categorisations and stereotypes. I have learned how the concept of race as a rigid, immutable categorisation has trapped African-Americans in a vicious cycle. I have also learned how ethnic stereotypes were exploited to serve Japan's imperialistic agenda against the Marshall Islanders before and during World War Two. This point is also evident in May's argument that stereotypes about autism are not only inaccurate but also alienating. When interacting with people from different backgrounds, we ought to be sensitive, understanding and free from sweeping judgements. As with the problem of the "Orientalist gaze" that I have mentioned previously, we should also avoid assuming the position of an observer, but rather listen to the people themselves. As an aspiring entrepreneur, it is vital for me to acquire a global outlook and appreciate the identities of communities that I may make an impact on. Also, with the understanding that Israel is situated on a land full of complicated histories, contentions and strife, it is extremely relevant to learn to interact tactfully with different groups of people. While remaining culturally aware, I should put aside pre-ascribed assumptions about the cultures and historical backgrounds of communities living in Israel. I believe that these considerations will assist me in coping with potential challenges in cross-culture interactions in Israel and integrating more smoothly into the Israeli start-up scene, facilitating my learning journey there.

To conclude, through GAPI, I have learned not to be easily satisfied with existing ideas, to draw connections between concepts, to use tools from wide-ranging sources, and to challenge my own pre-existing assumptions. I believe that my learnings from GAPI have developed my entrepreneurial skills, making me a great fit to study in and contribute to the Israeli start-up community.

(1186 words)

#### References:

- May, K. (2018, August 22). Autism from the inside. Retrieved from <https://aeon.co/essays/the-autistic-view-of-the-world-is-not-the-neurotypical-cliche>
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

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