5 Population problems, family policies and the naturalization of differentiated deservedness

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Introduction: the problem of population and family

In February 2013, the PAP government released a Population White Paper, in which it projected an increase in Singapore's population from 5.3 million in 2013 to 6.9 million by 2030 (National Population and Talent Division, 2013). The reactions were immediate and negative. Singaporeans, in blogs and various online media, expressed anger and indignation – criticizing the government for ignoring the negative effects of immigration; for favouring certain migrants over 'true blue Singaporeans'; and for generally ignoring people's unhappiness about the pressures that have arisen in recent years over high costs of living, crowded and inadequate infrastructure, and certain angst over the erosion of Singaporean identity. Within the Parliament itself, there were rare displays of dissent. Many began to argue that the government should focus energies on trying to address the low fertility problem that has ostensibly led to the need for high rates of immigration.[1]

The reactions are significant. They signal increasing challenges against the PAP government's dominance and hegemony. Nonetheless, the challenges themselves were not always in the direction of democratic progression. Indeed, in the numerous critiques of the Population White Paper, one dominant theme that emerged was about protection of 'core' and 'born and bred' Singaporeans – their jobs, culture and heritage. The main opposition political party, the Workers' Party, proposed focusing more on increasing fertility rates (Heng, 2013). Letters to various newspaper fora called on the government to improve lives for Singaporean families so as to increase fertility among so-called core Singaporeans.[2]

Significantly, while important challenges were posed vis-à-vis the long-sacred ideals about GDP growth – with voices articulating the possibility of a future with lower growth rates – the thrust of criticisms of the White Paper did not challenge the ways in which Singaporean women's fertility has historically been construed as a problem, nor were there significant criticisms of the differential valuation of different (ethnic/class) groups historically embedded in Singapore's population and family policies. Indeed, in reaffirming the importance of having 'core' Singaporeans, some of the claims wanted *greater*

focus on existing pronatalist policies targeted at 'real' citizens (versus new citizens).

How are we to understand these reactions to the state that replicate important elements of the state's approach to population and family? I argue in this chapter for taking seriously how population and family have been construed in contemporary Singapore and the ways in which policies shaping both have been key to governance. I show that underlying these policies is a strong differentiating orientation – what I call differentiated deservedness, in which citizens' access to key public goods vary depending on a confluence of social categories and practices. I then reflect on how notions of citizenship, rights and entitlements are deeply limited by this principle of differentiated deservedness.

In what follows, I briefly present an overview of how population has been conceived as a problem in contemporary Singapore and how a particular familial form has been idealized and institutionalized as solution. Then, drawing on Foucauldian and feminist lenses, I show how policy orientations toward population create and uphold the principle of differentiated deservedness; in other words, population policies are key to the forming and articulating of social divisions and hierarchies in Singapore society. Finally, I return to consider what this implies for understanding the contemporary resistances I point to at the beginning of the chapter as well as the definitions of citizenship more broadly.

Population and family as national problems: entrenching state interventions and producing differentiated deservedness

The master frame of the population problem in Singapore has focused on the inadequacy of population growth and an ageing population as challenges for economic development. In this frame, Singapore must maintain an adequate workforce such that it can continue to prosper as a nation. The assumptions embedded within this claim – deeply held by both policy makers and ordinary citizens – are that Singapore society is ageing too rapidly and that too many elderly within the population will mean a lower level of economic productivity and therefore slower economic growth.[3] Further, the population problem is located in delayed marriage and below-replacement fertility. More recently, the state emphasizes the further problem of balance between a 'core' and a 'foreign' population.

In the state's solutions to address issues of low fertility and high dependency ratios, an idealized familial form has emerged. In it, gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality are key 'principles of vision and division' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). People have specific roles to play in Singapore society depending on the confluence of where they are located along these lines. Significantly, the solutions have been articulated not only at the level of discourse but also through the shaping of everyday practices. Over the course of three decades, despite continual downward trends in fertility rates and therefore the ostensible failure of the policies to reverse trends, we see an entrenchment of the

state in matters relating to marriage and childbearing. There has also been a production of clear definitions around ideal families.

Whether intended or unintended, the policies have thereby produced what I call differentiated deservedness, in which a Singaporean's access to various public goods – public housing, health care, education, childcare support, retirement funds – is dependent on her/his familial form and practices. The capacity and will to 'do family' appropriately has important consequences.

The history and evolution of population policies in Singapore has been described in some detail by Kamaludeen and Turner in Chapter 2. Here, I elaborate on the following points: the pronatalist turn that happened in the mid-1980s put in place some key principles that continue to underpin social policies today. A specific familial form – premised around heterosexual marriage, stable employment and minimal reliance on non-familial members and institutions – has been idealized and institutionalized as a norm. The policies have also deepened the separation of roles, ideal practices and options along gender and class lines.

The meanings of fertility: gender and class inflections

The antinatalist 1960s and 1970s are remarkable not for the policies' success in reducing fertility per se. Instead, the antinatalist policies mark crucial beginnings of *state interventions and institutionalization*: public housing, education, workplace and even health care policies became implicated in upholding certain familial ideals.

Beginning from this time, privileges and disadvantages were largely attached to *women* – it was primarily their bodies that were to be sterilized, and their order of children that were recorded and rewarded/punished. In these ways, the state began on its path of demarcating its orientations to citizens differentially by gender. Population problems are not inherently feminine; by focusing all its programmes towards women's bodies and saying little about men's, the Singapore state embarked on what would turn out to be a path that spans to this day.[4]

The pronatalist turn further framed decreasing fertility rates as women's fault. We see, moreover, distinctions *among* women along class–ethnoracial lines (Heng and Devan, 1995). The very earliest pronatalist policies reflected then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's view that it was highly educated women who had to be targeted; for him, they would give birth to more intelligent children who could in turn contribute more to the nation's economic growth (Lee, 1983). He lamented this group of women's tendencies to marry later, not at all, and to have no or too few children. During this time period, he also expressed regret at having given women too many educational opportunities (Lazar, 2001).

Policies soon followed Lee's infamous 1983 speech, 'Talent for the future'. Women – married, divorced or widowed – with certain minimal educational qualifications were given access to tax reliefs when they had children; those with university degrees received priority when they enrolled their children in

primary school; and cash rewards were given to women with less educational qualifications when they underwent sterilization after their first or second child. Particularly in the early days of pronatalism, it was clear that it was the ethnic Chinese population (TFR of 1.65 in 1990) rather than the Malay population (TFR 2.69 in 1990) who were targeted to step up in production (Heng and Devan, 1995).

The explicit eugenics tone in the 1980s was not well received; some of the initial policies – such as privileges in primary school enrolment – were pulled back quickly. By the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, with TFR below replacement, the government promoted the idea of 'Have three or more, if you can afford it'. They put in place a series of tax incentives to encourage married couples to have their third child. Even though the eugenics language had become more subtle by then due to the outcry that had followed the initial policies, eugenics assumptions remained in schemes such as the Enhanced Child Relief – where married, divorced or widowed women with certain *minimal educational credentials* were entitled to additional income tax reliefs for their *legitimate* and *biological* children (Ministry of Community Development and Sports, 2003).

The use of tax measures as incentives was itself aimed at higher-income women, since roughly half of the working population pays no income taxes at all. The Special Tax Rebate (discontinued in 2004) gave tax rebates to married couples when they had their second, third or fourth child. When a second child is born, the mother's age determined how much rebate she received: $20,000 for a mother below 28 years old; $15,000 for those below 29 years old; $10,000 for those below 30 years old; and $5,000 for those below 31 years old (Ministry of Community Development and Sports, 2003). In the context of graduate women being singled out as the source of both problems and solutions, this policy was clearly aimed at encouraging well-educated, higher-income women to marry and have more children (the presumption being that women who have children early were more likely to have more children).

Marriage, employment and public housing: institutionalizing pathways to ideal families

Aside from infusing population problems with specific gender and class meanings, the Singapore state has also produced marriage as a central component of the familial ideal. This is most clearly illustrated when we look at one key public good in Singapore: housing. It is through public housing that the state signifies and institutionalizes most strongly its vision of the ideal family: a heterosexual married couple at its centre – employed and economically self-sufficient – taking care of young children and ageing parents.

Under the Land Acquisition Act of 1966, the Singapore state has the right to acquire any land it deems necessary for national development. In the 1960s and 1970s, this was done on a large scale (Chua, 1997; Loh, 2013). Much of the land was used for the building of public housing – what are popularly known

as HDB (Housing & Development Board) flats. Since the 1980s, HDB flats have been the main mode of housing for people living in Singapore. Today, more than 80 per cent of the resident (citizen and permanent resident) population lives in these flats while less than 20 per cent live in 'private' housing in the form of 'landed property' and private flats or condominiums (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2012a). Home ownership rate among the resident population is high – 90.1 per cent in 2012 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2012b).[5] Public housing is purchased on a 99-year lease and they may also be sold between individuals who fulfil citizenship, (maximum) income, and 'family nucleus' criteria.[6]

Indeed, the family nucleus criterion is an important means through which the state regulates household formation and thereby shapes the definition of family in Singapore. Rules and regulations around the application and financing of, and residence in, flats lead to most people forming a 'family nucleus' with a spouse when they buy a flat.[7] The HDB Fiancé/Fiancée Scheme, for example, allows two unmarried Singaporeans to begin their application for new flats. When their applications are successful (that is, when there is a flat available for them), they are given three months to file their marriage with the Registry of Marriages (ROM) before completing the housing transaction.

Signalling the state's desire that young Singaporeans marry early and have more children, the Staggered Downpayment Scheme allows first-time applicants who are married and *where one of the applicants is younger than 30 years old* to pay their downpayment in two stages (Housing & Development Board, 2013c).

Marriage and housing continue to be tethered after a couple purchases a flat: in the event of divorce, ex-spouses may no longer co-own a flat; one party may keep the flat if she/he has custody of a child and in so far as she/he fulfils citizenship requirements. A series of complex regulations ensure that it is difficult for divorcees to either retain their flats *or* purchase new ones, particularly if they have been married and living in their flats for fewer than five years (Housing & Development Board, 2013b). HDB regulations thereby provide an institutional context in which marriage is favoured *and* the dissolution of marriage costly.

This is not to say that the unmarried have no access at all to housing, but singlehood is cast as an exception rather than a norm. In response to greater needs and demands for housing among the never-married, the state has since the 1990s made adjustments to its rules so that unmarried citizens *above the age of 35* are allowed to buy 'resale' (that is pre-owned) flats of a limited size. In August 2004, the cap on flat size was lifted, but unmarried Singaporeans were still limited to resale flats. In July 2013, unmarried Singaporeans above 35 years old became eligible for new two-room (i.e. one bedroom) flats. Despite these adjustments, public housing is still mostly accessible to people who marry and one-person households are a small minority.[8] Married couples receive larger housing grants than singles, and the Top-up grant (Housing & Development Board, 2013a) that singles receive when they 'subsequently marry a first-timer citizen spouse'[9] indicate that marriage has its rewards. In

general, then, public housing and marriage are closely linked and their links are very much institutionalized – embedded in the deep minutiae of criteria and regulations that regulate not just the fact of marriage but also the pathway to it.

The heterosexual married couple is, moreover, ideally flanked by parents and children. Aside from keeping more unmarried Singaporeans in or at least near their natal households, public housing policies incentivize young married couples to live close to or with their parents. There is greater demand than supply in HDB flats; most people who need a flat have to get in a queue for them; the wait often spans several years. Within this queue, the HDB gives priority – through the Multi-Generation Priority Scheme and Married Child Priority Scheme – to married adult children and parents who apply to live either in the same flat or in two adjacent flats (Housing & Development Board, 2013c). The CPF Housing Grant for Families is a S$30,000[10] grant given to first-time married flat buyers who purchase flats on the resale market or from developers (see note 6); an additional S$10,000 is given to couples who purchase flats in the same estate or within two kilometres of one of their parents' homes. The Parenthood Priority Scheme sets aside flats for married couples with children and the Parenthood Provisional Housing Scheme provides temporary housing for families made up of married couples with children who are waiting for their HDB flats to be built. The Third-Child Priority Scheme also enhances the chances of those with more than two children. Through these various schemes and grants, married couples with either elderly parents or children receive greater public support in the acquisition of housing. The schemes signal, indeed, that they *deserve* greater support.

The institution of public housing in Singapore is further systematized through the Central Provident Fund (CPF) system. Here, we see that the mode of 'doing family' appropriately – wherein one can access important public goods – also involves specific practices around employment and savings.

The CPF began in 1955 as a form of retirement savings plan. A percentage of every citizen or permanent resident's wages are placed into their CPF accounts, with matching contributions by employers. Rates of contributions vary depending on citizenship, age and salaries of workers. These savings are mandatory and most of the funds become available to the individual after they turn 55 years old. Unlike the pension systems in the US and other European countries, individuals have their own accounts that they maintain throughout their working lives and that only they can draw from; like personal property, the funds can be transferred to family members when they die. Over the years, various elements have been added to the CPF. CPF monies may now be invested in certain types of bonds or shares, and there are special funds set aside for medical expenses. Significantly, since 1968, people have been able to use CPF monies for purchasing residential properties.

Indeed, most Singaporeans pay for public housing through savings in their CPF accounts. Homebuyers withdraw these savings to pay for down payments and whatever cost of the flat their funds can cover. The remaining amount is

then paid through bank loans that most service with the CPF that regenerates in their account as long as they are employed. In addition, the various grants homebuyers receive, a few of which I mention earlier, are paid through the CPF and credited into individuals' accounts. The CPF is thus central to putting Singaporeans on the track to purchase housing. Most potential homebuyers calculate their ability to pay for housing by gauging their CPF savings. Long-term and continual employment is key to both getting to the point where one can afford housing using CPF, and necessary for paying for the flat for up to the next 30 years. In an increasingly expensive housing market, it is difficult to purchase housing on only one income so the combined CPF (and therefore employment) of couples becomes important.

Through the HDB–CPF system, particular ways of 'doing family' are thus promoted. Heterosexuality as performed in marriage is an important precondition to the acquisition of public housing. Regular and steady employment of at least one if not two members of a household is a long-term prerequisite to housing security. Familial dependence in the form of intergenerational co-residence or proximity living is promoted as an ideal. On this final point, specific gendered divisions of labor are also promoted and reproduced through other 'pro-family' policies. Through these, we see the ways in which gender and class are given specific meaning. I turn now to discussing how gender and class are rendered meaningful and consequential.

Support for narrow familial forms: solidifying the significance of gender and class

As the 1990s rolled into the 2000s, and as the fertility rate fell to 'alarming' low rates – 1.48 in 1999 – the state devoted its attention to encouraging women who work to also be childbearers. Childcare support facilities, maternity and childcare leave have been slow in coming, but they have been greatly expanded in the past decade or so. Throughout the 2000s, policies were tweaked to give women more time off work when they have children. In 2004, paid maternity leave was increased from eight to 12 weeks; four years later, this was upped further to 16 weeks. During this same period, the state pledged to increase the number of childcare centres, and also started to provide state subsidies to *working mothers* when they put their kids into childcare centres. Taken at face value, these adjustments to policy are favourable for certain women. This, however, is precisely the problem: the vast expansion of support for children is not universally directed at all children but narrowly aimed at women in higher socio-economic positions. This necessarily means that men as well as women in lower socio-economic positions receive less attention and public support as parents.

To understand this fully, we must first pay attention to the ways in which substantial state support is directed at getting people to carve out private solutions in which care is maintained within the home. To this end, tax reliefs for married working women who either hire foreign domestic workers and/or

rely on 'grandparent caregivers' have been implemented. Correspondingly, until the recent five years or so, scant attention has been paid to the childcare/preschool sector. Instead, over the past three decades, more and more foreign domestic workers have been given permits to work in Singapore; the private in-home mode of childcare has thereby become normalized for those who can afford it.[11] The presence of full-time live-in domestic workers, mostly from the Philippines and Indonesia and increasingly from Myanmar, has been crucial to allowing a specific class of women to work full-time and have children. This privatized way of dealing with childcare – highly dependent on the unequal income levels between Singapore and neighbouring countries, and sustainable for certain Singaporean families only in so far as domestic workers have relatively low wages – has been the state's preferred route for such a long time that it indirectly stymies recent efforts to enhance childcare centre services and professionalize childcare teachers.[12] For one thing, many people share the belief that care is more appropriately carried out within the home, particular when children are very young (Teo, 2009, 2011). For another, the low wages received by domestic workers indirectly depresses the wages of childcare teachers insofar as the latter are replacement caregivers; they are, moreover, replacements who do not cook meals, mop floors, wash cars or any of the other numerous chores that domestic workers do. Unsurprisingly, it is difficult to recruit and retain Singaporeans to do the work of preschool teachers at low salary (Davie, 2013).

The orientation towards support for a particular class of women to carve out private solutions – particularly in the form of relying on domestic workers and grandmothers – has solidified their symbolic value as mothers while also perpetuating and *institutionalizing* the marginal role of men as fathers. Although increasing state discourse is devoted to emphasizing the role of fathers, structural conditions largely support roles played by women – as mothers, grandmothers and paid caregivers – and rarely those of men. Fathers operate within a context where caregiving is largely accepted (by both women and men) as women's work.

The marginalization of fathers is symbolic as well as material. To qualify for various 'motherhood' tax reliefs, the Baby Bonus and state-paid maternity leave, fathers' *existence* matters but they are designated no roles as caregivers. They merely provide the precondition of marriage that comes attached with several of the policies – allowing women worker-mother-wives, for example, to take 16 weeks of paid maternity leave[13] and, in the case of civil servants, extended unpaid leave for childcare purposes. Their existence as husbands also mean their wives can claim tax reliefs on foreign domestic worker 'levies'.[14] For years there was no mandated paternity leave at all; when in January 2013 government-paid paternity leave was introduced, it was for one week. State support for childcare thus affirms and reproduces the roles and identities of fathers as breadwinners and (middle-class) mothers as caregivers-wage earners.[15]

Whereas women with socioeconomic advantages bear symbolic and material double burdens as mothers and workers, women of lower socioeconomic

status face a context in which their symbolic value as mothers and workers are undervalued.

As mentioned, the early years of pronatalism in the mid-1980s had clear eugenic overtones: highly educated women were explicitly encouraged to have more children and lower educated ones fewer. In the contemporary context, much support for childcare remains in the form of tax incentives, leaving out mothers of lower socio-economic status. Certain measures targeted at women of low socio-economic status in fact require them to limit their family size. The Home Ownership Plus Education Scheme (HOPE), for example, requires applicants to have a maximum of two children; disburses maximum aid when applicants undergo non-reversible sterilization; and requires applicants to return their aid if they have a third child (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2012).

The narrow definitions of ideal familial practices extend to childcare support. In recent years, more aid in the form of childcare and kindergarten subsidies have become available to low-income households. To qualify for aid for childcare centres or after-school student care, formal employment of *both* parents (work of at least 56 hours per week) is a key criterion (Early Childhood Development Agency, 2013). Indeed, the ostensible aim is to get women from low-income households into the formal workforce. In principle, this could be positive for women in low-income households in so far as they are freed up for paid employment outside the home, and assuming that paid employment improves their positions vis-à-vis their family members. Yet, as I am finding in ongoing ethnographic work on low-income families in Singapore, this idealized combination of paid employment and institutionalized childcare is difficult to arrange and can be a source of new forms of gaps in care and/or tensions in the home; 'self-reliance' for women in low-income households carries with it specific challenges.

To begin with, most women in low-income households have limited formal education. Consequently, the jobs they have access to are low-wage work such as cleaners (that is, janitors), workers in food service (often in school canteens), 'school-bus aunties' (assisting in taking care of children as they board and alight from school buses) and supermarket cashiers. Some of this work is full-time and some part-time, but none of them allow for much control over hours, far less telecommuting. Moreover, based on ongoing interviews with low-income women and social workers, I have gathered that locating positions in childcare centres close to their homes may be difficult. For low-income women, the difference between walking distance and bussing distance is a significant one, both in terms of money and in terms of the time taken to get multiple children to where they need to be in addition to getting to work on time.[16]

Moreover, very young children need round-the-clock care, and this is not easily balanced with employment. Because of the lack of flexibility in hours, and the fixed hours of operation of childcare centres, many low-income women also need to secure babysitting while children are not in school/childcare and they are still at work. Unlike higher-income women, they cannot afford substitute

caregivers within the home. Similar to high-income women in Singapore, the fathers of their children do limited caregiving work. Given these difficulties in ensuring adequate caregiving throughout a given day, particularly when there are multiple young children, and given that their incomes are low, maintaining full-time and stable employment over time is extremely challenging. Both economically and as mothers who take their responsibilities as caregivers seriously, it also does not make sense to be working long hours at menial jobs to earn marginally more than what childcare costs – all while having much less time to be with their children.[17]

To date, public policy has not adequately addressed these particular difficulties. The insistence on mothers' employment as precondition to childcare subsidies is premised on the idea that this is crucial to 'self-reliance'; in this schema, the work that these mothers do as caregivers and housekeepers – and therefore the unpaid reproductive labor they do on an everyday basis – goes largely unacknowledged. Indeed, their labour is arguably devalued in so far as *employment* is a criterion of access to public support. This is particularly striking when we consider the recent attention that has been paid to low-income families and workers.

In the past few years, the state has committed significant resources to encourage companies to retain and train older and lower-wage workers; they have also spent resources on subsidizing the income of low-wage workers ('workfare') and in financing training ('upgrading') for less-educated workers. Low-income households have received aid in the form of subsidies for utilities and conservancy fees and rebates on the goods and service tax. Yet, little attention has been paid to the divides that exist between men and women through their differential familial responsibilities. 'Worker' and 'self-reliance' are conceptualized primarily with the male person in mind.[18] No particular effort has been directed to ensuring these women are given sufficient opportunities for finding good work that would make it sensible for them to leave their children and seek paid work. Indeed, women of lower socio-economic backgrounds are caught in a situation where they are encouraged to work, but somewhat half-heartedly – via conditional childcare subsidies that largely neglect their positions in the job market and their roles in the home. Most existing training programmes aimed at improving workers' skills and incomes are funded through employers, which means that one has to have a stable job before being able to access opportunities to 'upgrade'; women are therefore less likely to be able to access this training. The combination of factors – the lack of support for fathers; the privatization of care solutions among the higher-income and the corresponding inadequacy of institutionalized care both financially and physically accessible; the low wages of work available to the less-educated – mean that women in low-income households face particular challenges in being both mothers and workers.

There are long-term negative implications for the underemployment of women, particularly those from low-income households. Since important public goods – public housing and health care in particular – are linked to

employment and the CPF system, the lack of regular employment leads to endemic insecurity (Lee, 1999, 2001; Mehta, 2006). Married women become perpetually reliant on their spouses; low-income women with low-income spouses may find that even if marriages remain good that insecurity increases with age. Unmarried, divorced or widowed mothers face even greater risks and vulnerabilities.

The orientation of public policy towards *privatized* care in the form of live-in domestic workers combined with subsidies for institutionalized care *contingent upon employment* thus has both gender and class implications. They solidify the ideal and reality of everyday caregiving of children as women's work. They render particularly difficult for women of low socio-economic status to combine work and caregiving. Instead of the increasing orientation we see in the EU toward focusing support for childcare on the needs of children (Daly, 2010), the Singapore case is characterized by a strong focus on the behaviours of parents and provides differential support or options for solutions depending on parents' social roles and standing.

In sum, we see that the various 'pro-family' policies that arose out of the desire to increase fertility rate (among some) have had important effects in solidifying particular ideals around the familial and in perpetuating key gender and class inequalities.

Producing norms

In 2003 and 2004, I conducted more than 60 in-depth interviews with Singaporeans to better understand how they negotiated various family policies (Teo 2011). I focused in particular on capturing people's interactions with public housing policies and how they thought and talked about the state. One of my key findings was that certain norms around Singaporean-ness are generated through their shared negotiations of state policies. These norms often transcend the parameters of the policies themselves and encompass beliefs and values around things that go beyond the explicit goals and criteria of policies. Importantly, I found too that Singaporeans think often about the state, and that despite important critiques of it, they saw demographic challenges and global economic forces as beyond the state's control; they therefore empathized with the state's challenges. This section draws on findings from these interviews. Although some important shifts have happened since 2003/4 – most notably in so far as inequality has intensified and there has been correspondingly greater dissent and more salient articulations of displeasure regarding equality and justice – it remains the case that Singaporeans are deeply shaped by the structural conditions held up by various policies. The many policies that structure access to public housing and childcare support have made and continue to make deep imprints on how Singaporeans see their life paths, problems and solutions.[19] In what follows, I focus on how Singaporeans articulate and perceive the importance and worth of marriage, the naturalness

of continuous employment and accumulation of CPF savings, and the moral worth of resolving problems within individual households.

Marriage, housing, employment and the production of differentiated deservedness

The tethering of marriage and housing embedded in HDB–CPF regulations finds its mirror image in how Singaporeans imagine housing, marriage and employment. To begin with, the minutiae of regulations are astonishingly well understood, both by people who have gone through the process of flat application and, albeit to a lesser degree, people who have not.

Beyond knowing about rules and regulations, certain complex scripts about romance, marriage, flat-buying and continual, stable employment have been generated. On one hand, the people I interviewed described 'natural' pathways of planning for marriage that include working for a few years to accumulate CPF savings, putting in applications as fiancé–fiancées, and waiting for a few years before getting their flats, and then going through the ROM (legal marriage registration) before holding weddings. As part of this process, they also described matter of factly the accumulation of savings and the servicing of loans via the CPF; they rarely dwelled on the centrality of continued employment in this plan. In other words, to many of the people I spoke with, the tight links between marriage, housing and employment seem very natural and, to quote one respondent, 'very Singaporean stuff'.

This naturalness is, moreover, bolstered by the developing of meanings about marriage in reaction to the narrow pathway set up by HDB–CPF regulations. Here, the notion of 'romance' is invoked and people insisted that it matters, for example, to not propose marriage by saying 'let's go apply for a HDB flat'. Indeed, the issue of marriage proposals came up in conversation often even though I never asked about the practice directly. Rather than undermining the housing–marriage link, these reactions add to the significance of marriage in Singapore insofar as the accompanying discourse around romance is not in resistance to but going along with the tethering of marriage and housing. The shared negotiation of public housing policies – including the building and sharing of knowledge about specific criteria and the generation of meanings around typical, 'normal' ways of doing things or the extent to which romance should figure – give concrete and positive symbolic worth to the social arrangement that is 'housing–marriage'.

Given the high status given to marriage, particularly of the sort that results in stable economic units and reproduction, it is unsurprising that I also saw a corresponding acceptance of the differentiated deservedness embedded in housing policies. That married couples need housing more than unmarried people, partly because they must 'start a family', and that unmarried people's desire for housing are wants rather than needs was articulated *both* by people who were married or on the marital track *and* those who were not. The naturalized link between housing and marriage also leads, then, to an acceptance

that differential access to housing is to be expected, sensible, and perhaps even implicitly fair.

Public problems with private solutions: individualist orientations in a 'communitarian' society

Public policy orientations also shape Singaporean sensibilities around what is private and public. Despite perceiving issues around the care of dependants as public problems implicating the state and their fellow citizens, my respondents experienced their own dilemmas as private ones and do not typically look to solutions outside the boundaries of their own families. Indeed, I found that there was a high degree of turning towards *individual* families. This is somewhat paradoxical given the state's claims that Singaporeans being 'Asian' are (or should be) less individualistic and more communitarian; it turns out that public policy compels people to experience and perceive families as essentially individual units that should largely be independent of public support.

Four themes regularly emerged that signify the resonance of the state's framing of the population problem for ordinary people: first, the self-evident nature of demographic problems; second, the links made between demographic trends and economic survival; third, the reference to other countries as object lessons; and finally, the insistence on autonomy and responsibility for the family. These themes ultimately translate to a view of population problems as public problems but caregiving requiring ultimately private solutions.

First, for many of my respondents, the fall in fertility rates and the ageing population structure are trends they are highly aware of and perceive as important social problems. When I asked them what they think the state wants in terms of babies, most quickly replied that the government wants 'more babies'. Though most expressed the sentiment that *they* would not make decisions about having children based on policies like tax rebates, and though many felt that policies aimed at increasing fertility are too intrusive, most simultaneously expressed empathy for the state. They said that even though the policies are unlikely to affect behaviour, it is understandable that the state would pursue them. Why? The 'ageing population', came the self-evident response. Although most respondents could not or did not elaborate on the specific problems an ageing population structure would bring, they saw it as a solid, 'factual' reason for state intervention into what for them is a rather private matter.

Though my respondents generally did not elaborate on the specific economic or social burdens arising from an ageing population, many did make the link between the falling birth rate and the struggle for economic survival. That is, many respondents told me that the fall in fertility rates is a problem because this could deplete the labour force; this, in turn, would be the downfall of Singapore because human resources are all we have. One respondent laid it out in this succinct way: 'The way it works is like this: no workforce, no economy; no economy, no Singapore'.

Given these seemingly self-evident trends, what do they think about how Singaporeans compare to other countries in terms of how dependents are cared for? Two visions were proposed: the first seems to come about from exposure to the popular culture of the United States or more vaguely 'the West'. Here, respondents told me that their impression is that old people in the US or 'the West' are far more independent relative to their counterparts in Singapore. And old people live on their own or, without stigma, in institutions and generally do not require care from their children. While the respondents who painted this picture displayed a certain admiration for the supposed independence of the elderly in the West, they implied that there are deep cultural differences between them and us such that this could not be the way the elderly live in Singapore.[20]

A second comparison respondents drew on when I asked them how people in other countries take care of aged dependants and what is the role of government was some vague notion of 'welfare states'. Here, respondents pointed to more public spending on dependants and praised what they perceive as universal health care provisions. Nonetheless, they also pointed out that welfare states are costly, that Singapore is *not* a welfare state and that they would certainly not want to pay the high taxes that inevitably come with such states. Most of my respondents also saw themselves as contributing members of society and implied a certain unwillingness to work hard in order to support those who did not work for themselves. Though able to imagine some potential benefits of certain universal provisions, they were largely unable to conceive that such systems require different values and beliefs about collective need, shared responsibility and mutual obligations.

Indeed, consistent with the state's ideal, their sense of responsibility towards their *individual* families was very strong. Both in childcare and aged care, respondents asserted their desire to take care of their own. When I asked respondents what their ideal arrangement for childcare is, both men and women pointed out their desired arrangements in this order of hierarchy: the mother of the child; either paternal or maternal grandmother; and then 'maids', preferably supervised by a grandmother or some other family member. Childcare centres did not figure in as desirable options because they did not think newborns should be cared for outside the home. Hence, even though live-in domestic workers are seen as undesirable because 'we've heard too many horror stories', it is perceived as the 'no other choice' option ahead of sending children to institutionalized care. Middle-income couples often opted for piecing together various arrangements involving family members, like having the mother take some time off without pay for the first few months, and then hiring a maid and having a grandparent supervise, or sending their kids to live with grandparents during the weekdays and then bringing them home during weekends. Similarly for elderly care, many respondents talked about making contingent plans for their parents or parents-in-law to live with them when they become unable to take adequate care of themselves. Those who had not thought concretely about this also expressed that they assumed that

someone in the family – either themselves or their siblings – would take care of their parents when it came time to do so. It is certainly possible that some expressed such sentiments because it would be embarrassing to say anything else to me, but even that in itself is a finding: the assumption of care within the family is strong enough that the expression of alternatives would bring about shame. Moreover, there is no reason to think that people were simply paying lip-service since many had made specific plans to live with their parents, such as buying flats with extra bedrooms.

When I asked people whether they wanted or expected the government to step in and do more in terms of providing for childcare or elderly care, a surprisingly large proportion responded in the negative. More often than not, they told me that these were things that people have to handle on their own, and that there is a limit to what governments can and should do. While some certainly expressed the desire that the state step in to alleviate the burden of individual families – whether by providing more financial help for working parents, or by making health care more affordable – there was in fact a limited sense in which they saw the state as needing to vastly expand social support. Often absent in their responses was the notion that *society* as a whole has to take more responsibility for caring for the young and old, or that there may be people ill-equipped to deal with these tasks within their own families.

In sum, then, even as people saw childbirth and the ageing population as major public issues, they did not think of their own situations as needing social solutions. Instead, they turned toward pooling individual family resources and piecing together private resolutions. Significantly, the recognition of the social dimension of care giving and the intensifying struggles they and others face did not translate into louder calls for an expansion of universal provisions. Instead, there was great suspicion of welfare states and vague but seemingly deep scepticism about high taxes and dependency.

Looking at citizenship through Foucauldian and feminist lenses

The voices of dissent directed at the state, which I point to at the beginning of the chapter, are undoubtedly noteworthy. They represent the beginnings of more democratic participation in Singapore's recent history. It also reveals the beginnings of dissent against an 'economic growth before all else' approach. Nonetheless, we must pay attention to the terms and frames of dissent, and the persistence of certain principles and logic embedded within critiques directed at the state. In particular, deploying key Foucauldian concepts around governmentality, and by viewing the case through a feminist lens, we can be sensitized to the complex ways in which reactions against the state do not unitarily represent democratic tendencies toward expansion of equality and rights. Instead, the dominant theme of protecting 'real' Singaporeans obfuscates the numerous differences and inequalities that exist among so-called real Singaporeans; the corresponding calls for intensifying pronatalist policies suppress recognition of the unequal effects of the Singapore state's approach toward fertility.

Foucauldian analyses suggest the importance of governance from 'inside out' (Cruikshank, 1999; Dean, 1999; Burchell, Gordon and Miller, 1991; Li, 2007; Rose, 1999). Subjects are not merely controlled via repression and control, but *produced* in form and content. The concept of governmentality points to two dimensions of rule: political rationalities and technologies of rule. The former refers to logic and principles embedded within governance that render certain things thinkable and others unthinkable, while the latter to the various techniques and tools for articulating the former in practice. The production of *self-regulating subjects* is key.

Taking a Foucauldian perspective, one sees that Singaporeans are governed not primarily by means of repression – though certain repressive measures are no doubt significant – but more importantly through the production of (idealized) subjectivities, identities, habits and practices. The Singapore state's conceptualization of 'population policies' – aimed first at reducing and then at expanding certain segments of the population and articulated via measures that narrowly define families – shapes individuals in deep and profound ways. What it means to be Singaporean – the habits and practices around 'normal' family formation; the dangers of welfare and the superiority of a system built on 'self-reliance'; the salience of individual responsibilities and importantly the corresponding lack of salience of social responsibilities – are articulated through everyday practices compelled by policy parameters. Everyday governance is therefore exercised via a whole host of discursive and institutionalized policy practices, a series of acts we can think of as 'technologies of rule' which 'political rationalities' can be deconstructed.

Indeed, what is normal and ideal versus deviant and less desirable are clearly articulated through policies that emphasize differentiated deservedness. When it comes to citizenship rights and entitlements, there is no singular 'citizen'. In Singapore, one's access to health care, education, housing, childcare support, retirement and elderly support is tightly tethered to her/his employment history, gender, marital status and more generally how she/he is situated in constellation with others who qualify as 'family'.

Here, feminist scholarship, particular work that analyses welfare regimes, is instructive. Scholars have documented the ways in which the conception of welfare draws on gendered and racialized assumptions and stereotypes of citizens; when translated into policy and practice, these differentiations and inequalities are solidified (Abramovitz, 1996; Gordon, 2001; Quadagno, 1996; Roberts, 1995). Rules and criteria that mark out the 'deserving' also demarcate the 'undeserving' (Haney, 2002). Familialist orientations often suppress the gendered differentiations and inequalities that characterize welfare regimes (Daly, 2011; Haney and Pollard, 2003). These differentiations have sustained consequences not just for individuals and particular social groups, but also in so far as they set the tone for and shape larger national conversations on conceptions of citizenship rights and entitlements (Fraser, 1989; Orloff, 1993).

The 'normal' subject has a narrow range of behaviours within the life course and in multiple realms of life. The attainment of normal is not universally easy,

but normalcy comes with benefits both material and symbolic while failure to attain it results in significant disadvantages also at once material and symbolic. Returning to Foucault, and framing differentiated deservedness as governance/governmentality, we see a number of notable features: this is a very intimate form of governance that acts deeply on subjects. It compels acquisition of sensibilities and values and habits about the self – how many children one – given one's 'qualities' and 'assets' – *should* have; how one should perform parenthood, work, and family life, again given one's social standing. Self-regulation is deeply embedded. Despite the population policies' limited effects on marriage trends and fertility rates, then, we see that they have deep and profound effects on how Singaporeans conceptualize themselves, their relationship to society and the polity. As I shall argue in the next and final section, this mode of governance also limits the conception of rights.

Individualism without (individual) rights: on thinkable and unthinkable alternatives

Taking a Foucauldian perspective also compels us to examine political rationalities more broadly. That is, it forces us to consider, as many feminist theorists do, what welfare regimes have done in terms of setting the terms of public discourse and debate. Given particular mechanisms and principles of instituting access and lack thereof to public goods, what are the effects for how people think about themselves, others and citizenship more generally? What kinds of persons become marked as good citizens who deserve more, and what kinds as not so good and therefore less? In a system that emphasizes self-reliance and family as first line of support, what is or becomes thinkable and what unthinkable?

Looking at the various policies aimed at shaping population, we see that being an individual – with specific behaviours, plans, *desires* – is central to deservedness. Embedded in this logic is a particular sort of agent with an *individualized* subjectivity: people are individuals or families are individual units – they should act for themselves; in the face of problems, they must try to help themselves; they must be self-reliant, and their dependence on others must be minimized. Although there are increasing calls by civil society to ensure that inequality does not intensify, the mantra of self-reliance continues to ring loud, even among people calling on the expansion of social safety nets.

The calls for the expansion of pronatalist measures to build a 'strong Singaporean core', for example, generally fail to point out that women and men face distinct challenges and that the challenges are reinforced by state policies that insist on women as primarily responsible for the care of children. These calls also stop well short of calling for reform that untethers access to housing, health and childcare subsidies from employment. There is, then, a tacit acceptance of inequalities along gender and class lines.

Instead of citizenship wherein there are mutual obligations, shared responsibilities and collective rights (Somers, 2008), then, we arrive at a definition of

citizenship where to be deserving is an individual challenge, task and responsibility. 'The traditional Asian family', which the state from time to time claims implies Singapore's communitarian orientation, is in fact an entirely individualized unit; any qualities implying shared values and collective good are incidental rather than integral to its deservedness.

Notes

1 See, for example, Goh (2013).
2 See, for example, Ang (2013) and Teo (2013).
3 See, for example, Goh (2000) and Lee (2008).
4 The Singapore state is by no means unique in its focus on women's bodies in managing population and nation building. See, for example, Ginsburg and Rapp (1995) and Kligman (1998).
5 Home ownership rate went from 29.4% in 1970 to 58.8% in 1980, 87.5% in 1990, 92% in 2000, 87.2% in 2010 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2012a).
6 HDB flats are transacted through three channels: BTO (build-to-order) flats are built and sold directly by the HDB; DBSS (Design, Build and Sell Scheme) flats and ECs (Executive Condominiums) are built and sold by private developers; and 'resale' flats are flats that have been pre-owned and are transacted between individuals. While specifics may vary, HDB criteria around family nucleus, citizenship and age generally apply across the flat types. The HDB also has an Ethnic Integration Policy in which each block as well as each residential neighbourhood cannot exceed a certain percentage of Chinese, Malays, Indians and (Non-Malaysian) Permanent Residents. The percentage is slightly higher than the percentage of the particular ethnoracial group within the population.
7 In some situations, the family nucleus is formed by a parent and an adult offspring, and less often by a divorced or widowed single parent with their minor child(ren).
8 In 2005, there were 103,300 one-person households out of 1,024,500 resident households (rougly 10%). Of these, about 58% were never married, 12% were married, and 30% divorced, separated or widowed (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2006a). In contrast, roughly one in four US households are one-person households (US Census Bureau, 2010).
9 'First-timer' here refers to first application for a HDB flat.
10 S$1 = US$0.79 (February 2014).
11 In 2012, there were about 206,000 foreign domestic workers working in Singapore, close to one in five households (Associated Press, 2012).
12 Elsewhere, Nicola Piper and I have argued that the state's reticent approach towards the regulation of these low-wage, limited-rights workers is directly related to their desire for families to deal with their problems within the confines of the household (Teo and Piper, 2009).
13 The state pays for either half (for the first two children) or all (for the third and subsequent children) of married women's maternity leave and employers are required by law to pay for all remaining non-state-funded portions of leave. In contrast, unmarried women's maternity leave is entirely funded by employers and they are required to provide *paid* leave only for eight of the 12 weeks mandated maternity leave, and only for up to two children (Ministry of Manpower, 2013a, 2013b).
14 On the website of the Internal Revenue Service, this statement accompanies the listing of maid levy relief: 'Foreign maid levy relief' is a relief to encourage **married women** to remain in the workforce and also encourage procreation. **Single** or **male** taxpayers are not eligible for this relief' (Internal Revenue Authority of Singapore 2012) (emphasis in original).

15 A 2009 survey finds, unsurprisingly, that Singaporeans think of fathers as having breadwinner rather than caregiver roles. Among a list of roles and responsibilities for fathers, from which respondents could select three, the largest number (46%) of respondents selected 'breadwinners.' 'Look after child's day to day needs' was checked by only 11% of the respondents. The same survey finds that on an average day on a weekend, fathers spend far fewer hours than mothers with their children. The difference exists both when there are others present (8.4 hours for fathers to 10.5 hours for mothers) as well as alone with a child/children (2.8 hours for fathers to 4.6 hours for mothers). Finally, the survey also found that mothers were more engaged in everyday activities of direct care, reading and school-related activities. See Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (2009).
16 When things are within walking distance, older children – seven or above – often manage on their own and may even be able to help with picking up younger siblings.
17 For some low-income women I have spoken with and/or observed, this 'balance' is sometimes struck by essentially leaving young children unsupervised for some hours in a day. They do not find this arrangement ideal, as they fear 'bad influences' in the neighbourhood, but, given their circumstances, this is often the only option they have.
18 When speaking of workers (and often other categories of persons such as students), government officials refer almost exclusively to 'he', 'his' and 'him'. See, for example, Shanmugaratnam (2013) and Lee (2013).
19 For elaborations of who I interviewed and what I found about how Singaporeans think and talk about the family and the state, see Teo (2011) and Teo (2010).
20 Interestingly, however, there is some hint that they think it could be achieved in the next generation. Many respondents told me that though they would live with and take care of their parents, they do not expect nor really desire *their* children to care for them in the same way. Instead, they aspire to be both financially and physically independent so that they do not have to 'burden' their children.