New Naratif

Poor People Don’t Like Oats Either

By YOU YENN TEO | 9 SEPTEMBER 2017

How we imagine people—their capacities, values, and moral worth—shapes how we treat them. The myths, imaginations, and assumptions about poverty, wealth, welfare, and wellbeing in contemporary Singapore are important to confront because they affect how people are oriented to each other in society, how problems are defined and consequently how they are dealt with or overlooked.

Photo by Teo You Yenn

A year ago, on one of my field visits to a low-income community, [1] I talked to a community

worker about food rations that corporate sponsors donate. I asked her what is typically included in the boxes. She told me there is usually dry stuff, like biscuits and Milo. Very often, she added, there are oats. This community worker is one of the most generous people I know, and someone who speaks positively about everyone and everything. As she mentioned oats, however, I saw her in a rare moment of frustration. She lamented that oats taste bad, particularly when paired with water. In an exasperated tone, she asked, "why must poor people always eat oats?!"

"Poor people don't like oats either" is the title I have chosen for this article, not because I want to discuss the nutritional or gastronomical value of oats. I know that some people may genuinely enjoy oats even as this particular community worker and I both think oats are like sawdust.

I mention oats because they are often included in donated rations. For, while many people will agree with me that oats taste unpleasant, and although oats are not a particularly common part of most Singaporeans' diets, some corporate donors have apparently deemed that they are "good for the poor." Embedded in this "oats are good for you" orientation is an imagining of aid recipients as inherently different from donors, and as *needing* to be steered in certain directions. Conversely, aid givers are cast as superior in making choices, including for others. The assumption that aid recipients will not make "good" choices is embedded in donor preferences for giving food rations over vouchers, or for giving vouchers over cash.[2]

How we imagine people—their capacities, values, and moral worth—shapes how we treat them. In this article, I explore some of the myths, imaginations, and assumptions about poverty, wealth, welfare, and wellbeing in contemporary Singapore. These issues are important to confront because they affect how people are oriented to each other in society, how problems are defined and consequently how they are dealt with or overlooked.

What are myths, and why do they matter?

When we say something is a myth, we imply that it is not true to empirical realities, that they are falsehoods. It is worth refining this understanding of myths to include three further components: first, myths tend to be sweeping, to assume a veneer of universality; second, myths tend to represent dominant versions of realities as neutral and objective facts; and three, their influence compounds when they are institutionalized.

Myths are powerful precisely to the extent that people believe them. And people believe them because they obviously *do* capture something about empirical realities. Myths, then,

are not empirical falsehoods in a straightforward sense. Instead, myths have a tenuous relationship to empirical realities insofar as they have universalizing tendencies. They are sweeping. They obscure differences, flatten variations, and represent one set of assumptions as capturing the whole of the matter. Hence, as in the oats example, the myth that underlies the practices of some donors is the sweeping presumption that poor people do not understand what food is best for them.

Myths also cast the truths of a limited group, usually a structurally dominant group, as the standard bearers of reality. It is important to point this out because it forces us to see that the articulation of myths is an act of power. The invocation of myths is an act where the point of view of a group is recast as a neutral fact—absent of actors, interests, and uneven consequences. Who gets to decide what is nutritious? Experts (such as nutritionists or academics),[3] donors. Who is to be acted upon when it comes to what they should and should not put into their bodies? Recipients, "the poor." These presumptions are cast in terms of nutritional "facts." Unpacking myths means asking questions such as: who has decided oats are good, on what basis, and for whom?

Myths reside in individual heads. They are the basis of individual beliefs and prejudices. One can study myths in this way, by analyzing people's belief systems—how they think about something. As a sociologist, however, I am more interested in how myths manifest in shared practices. In particular, I want to know how and what kinds of myths are embedded in institutional practices, and with what consequences for the way those institutions behave. These are where myths have the most insidious effects. They are not necessarily clearly articulated; instead, they live under the safety of rules, regulations, policies, and laws. Their effects are regularly applied in the everyday. And they are therefore mistakenly taken-for-granted as part of our realities. It is through institutions that myths are transformed into facts.

Myths in Singapore's welfare regime

What are some myths embedded in Singapore's welfare regime? In this article, I highlight two: the self-reliant Singaporean; there is no real poverty and inequality is a negative externality.

(a) The self-reliant Singaporean

The myth of the self-reliant Singaporean is an important one. Self-reliance is highly valorized as a trait Singaporeans should strive to maintain. It is defined around continuous

employment and lifelong savings; self-reliance is about accumulating money from employment to pay for housing, healthcare, and education. Self-reliance is about not relying on the state or on society for these needs.

Self-reliance is not only an image, nor mere discourse—it is deeply embedded within the practices of institutions such as the Central Provident Fund, the Housing and Development Board, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Social and Family Development.[4] It is not simply an encouragement or a call to action—employment throughout one's life course is *crucial* to funding housing, healthcare, and other ostensible public goods.[5] In this way, self-reliance via employment is a precondition to social membership in contemporary Singapore. Put another way, falling short on performing self-reliance via full employment throughout one's life course puts one at risk of being left out of these important goods and therefore social membership.

What are the universalizing tendencies of this myth of self-reliance? Whose position does it represent and whose does it obscure? Attention to two things helps us think through these questions: gender and class.

When we think gender, one thing becomes clear: employment is not the only activity human beings need to partake in. While people who are employed are working outside the home, there are people who are doing housework, running errands, caring for children and the elderly. People doing wage work are highly *dependent* on people doing unpaid labor.[6] In other words, the doctrine of self-reliance depends on women's unpaid or underpaid labor within the domestic sphere.[7] The long-term consequences of public goods being channeled through those who are employed is to create a situation in which one kind of dependence—that of wage earners on caregivers—is completely obscured, while another—that of non-wage earners on wage earners—*does* ultimately render some women severely dependent because their access to public goods is mediated through another citizen, either their husbands or adult children.[8]

A second issue is that of social class. Leaving aside that it is basically impossible for any human being to be completely independent of others, the myth of self-reliance makes the universalizing claim that employment will automatically bring self-reliance, that employment will lead to security and wellbeing.

Many of the people I meet who live in low-income rental flats work hard and for long hours.[9] They are often in employment that requires significant physical exertion, and jobs where they have to put up with disrespectful bosses and/or customers. Among them, when women work, many care gaps emerge because they cannot outsource any of their domestic responsibilities.[10] Yet, despite partaking in wage work, and working hard, they have a lot of trouble meeting both daily subsistence needs and long-term ones for future security. The

employment they participate in does not bring them the wages that could lead to so-called self-reliance. The myth of self-reliance is, in this instance, an act of power insofar as it obscures capitalist exploitation.[11] Put another way, the strong doctrine of self-reliance in effect serves the interests of corporations that pay some of their workers very low wages, as well as wealthier segments of the population who enjoy certain goods and services at relatively low prices.[12]

The myth of self-reliance through employment is one that is weaved into many different institutions. In particular, it is deeply embedded in those specialist institutions tasked with helping people with low income. I refer here to the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF); the National Council of Social Services (NCSS); 5 Community Development Councils (CDC) (which comes under the People's Association); 20 Social Service Offices (SSO); about 40 Family Service Centres (FSC); and numerous other Voluntary Welfare Organizations (VWO) and ethnically-based Self-Help Groups (SHG). Each of these institutions has specific roles in regulation (setting policy both for recipients of public aid and social service providers); funding (budgeting and distribution); and type of service (e.g. counseling, dispersing financial aid, programmes). In particular, the MSF and NCSS—as policy-makers, regulators, and funders—shape the everyday work and goals of the service-providers: the CDCs, SSOs, FSCs, VWOs and SHGs. An important principle upheld through these institutions is that social service must not create over-dependence on the state by reducing incentives for employment.

Hence, to qualify for childcare centre subsidies or temporary aid (cash or vouchers for three to twenty-four months), one has to prove deservedness by showing willingness to be employed. For example, childcare centre subsidies require mothers to be employed at least 56 hours per month. When social workers review cases of people who receive temporary aid, which they are obliged to do every three months or so, they look for signs that people are deserving; this tends to mean looking at whether they are employed or trying to find employment. To qualify for permanent Public Assistance (PA)—aid meant to cover all living expenses, and which is dispersed over the long-term—one has to prove that employment is utterly and permanently impossible and that there is no family one can rely on. Such criteria of deservedness qualify a relatively small number of households—roughly 3,000,[13] most of them elderly persons who do not have children.

What are the consequences of this? Essentially, a strong signal is sent that one should not seek public/state assistance if one can avoid it, that self-reliance via employment (and family) is the right way to be.[14] Applying for aid therefore involves a strong assumption of individual failure. One has to admit that they or their family members have failed in this basic requirement of them as members of society. It was striking, when I spoke with people who are living in endemic crisis situations, how often people said things like "I can still manage," "not so bad yet," or "got hand got leg, what for ask for help." The myth of self-reliance, in

this instance, renders getting social support something undignified.

The numerous documents and personal information applicants of aid are required to submit adds to the sense of dignity violated. As one single parent put it to me, one "must say A to Z, they need to know everything." She added that she does not like to have to tell strangers everything about herself and would rather not go through with the process. The advice she receives from social workers—to put her children in after-school care centres so that she can work full-time—is, moreover, unacceptable for her because her own experience growing up without parental attention was so negative that she is unwilling to pass the care of her children to others.

To recap, the myth of the self-reliant Singaporean, first, obscures a fact that feminist scholars have long pointed out—that dependence is part and parcel of being human. Outside of wage work, a great deal of labor occurs that goes into sustaining meaningful lives and regenerating human societies. By making self-reliance via employment so central to social membership, we lose sight of the importance of other roles in the everyday lives of human beings and do injustice to the people, disproportionately women, who play these roles. Second, the myth of the self-reliant Singaporean obscures the fact that employment does not in fact lead to equal outcomes for all groups. Central to this is about the uneven exploitation of workers. The perpetuation of this myth throughout the capillaries of state institutions renders poverty a problem of failing individuals rather than adverse social conditions.

Let me turn to discussing a second myth, which is composed of two parts.

(b) There is no "real" poverty in Singapore; inequality is an inevitable part of development, a negative externality

In the two years since I started working on my current project, people's response when I say I am studying poverty in Singapore is often the question "there are poor people in Singapore?"

This response is sensible. It draws from what we see in our everyday worlds: reports of global rankings of wealth in which Singapore ranks high;[15] dominant narratives about Singapore's progressivist historical trajectory in textbooks,[16] in TV shows, in newspaper articles; they are to some extent embodied in our built environment, in our homeless-less streets, and even in our individual family stories comparing how comfortable things are now compared to how things were for our parents.[17]

In this narrative, not only is poverty rarely mentioned, inequality is also cast as an inevitable feature of economic development. In recent years, state officials have begun talking more regularly about the importance of dealing with inequality. This is typically framed in terms of inequality resulting from global forces beyond the nation-state's control. For example, in his Budget Speech of 2012, Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam put it this way:

The economic pressures that have led to widening income gaps *nearly everywhere in the world* will not go away soon. Furthermore, because Singapore is a global city, our income inequality will *inevitably* be wider than in larger countries, *like in many other global cities*.[18]

In this narrative, there is no doubt that continued economic growth is a *precondition* rather than a barrier to greater equality; he continues: "We have to maintain a dynamic economy and *grow the pie*, in order to generate the resources to help all Singaporeans get a fair share of the pie."

Hence, while the state takes credit for wealth generation, inequality is cast as a negative externality, an inevitable outcome of economic growth, thus marking it as a phenomenon without an accountable agent. The relational link between wealth and poverty is never seriously scrutinized.

It is helpful to return to those aspects of myths I pointed out in the beginning: its universalizing tendencies, and its tendency to favour the interests/perspectives of powerful groups. The dominant narrative of the Singapore story is one in which everyone is middle-class,[19] in which the differences that have emerged and intensified over the decades are not integral to the story. It is also a narrative told from the point of view of holders of power who have interests in claiming credit for the successes but not the pitfalls of a particular model of development. It is a story from everywhere yet nowhere.

Importantly, this myth is not only repeated through various channels; it is embodied by the institutional ghettoization of the "poverty problem."

What does this mean? Basically, this: that specialist institutions, programmes, schemes have been set up to address those who "fall through the cracks." As mentioned earlier, a number of state institutions have been specially tasked with dealing with the problems of people with low income.

A feature of the agencies worth highlighting here is a significant degree of division of labor: each of the institutions have specific and narrow roles carved out for them, to which they are held accountable through funding regulations and "Key Performance Indicators" (KPIs). Each is in charge of a limited range of schemes and programmes. This in turn generates

problem-solving orientations in which the "problems" are conceived both narrowly and in the short-term. Rather than systematically examining how poverty comes about, or providing the conditions and platforms for these debates, the institutions are designed primarily to be trouble-shooters: their mandate is to target those who fall into specific categories; their everyday responsibilities lie in resolving individual cases. Insofar as their mandate is to use what funds they have to "help," they do not and perhaps cannot address the issue of poverty as a larger systemic issue rather than the limited problems of a small group. For example, while social service providers try to supplement inadequate cash flow by giving vouchers for utilities or food, we do not see them addressing the issue of endemic low wages[20] made possible by the exploitation of foreign and local workers. While social workers assist families in applying for school financial aid, their work does not put them in positions to advocate more systematically against inequalities in the education system —inequalities that arise, for example, by the continual raising of the bar; private tuition has become practically a requirement for attaining good grades in school.[21] Importantly, the very existence of these institutions separates the problem of "the poor" from the broader issues of inequality in access to and delivery of essential public goods.[22]

The problems of middle- and high-income groups are conceptualized and dealt with separately, through institutional and policy instruments quite apart from those aimed at "the poor." The state's orientation toward pronatalism epitomizes this: while highly-educated, higher-income women are encouraged—via tax reliefs, baby bonuses, foreign domestic workers and paid maternity leave—to have more babies, the low-income are offered incentives to keep family size small (via what is known as the HOPE scheme[23]); support for their children, in the form of childcare centre subsidies, are conditional on their performance of deservedness through employment.

Whether intended or not, the existence of specialized institutions and personnel to deal with a small group of people leads to the separation of poverty from the issue of *public* goods and universal rights. To the extent that the various institutions exist, the problems of poverty and the low-income are directed toward them, and their modus operandi is understandably to "help." That is, the effect of them taking on this work is to separate poverty as a problem that falls primarily if not solely under their purview. Some other institutions of the state—the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Manpower—which arguably all have a stake in addressing poverty and its reproduction, are inoculated to some extent from directly dealing with how their policies may compound and reproduce poverty. Increasingly, the institutions that "specialize" in social services monopolize the landscape for discussions of poverty. Although oriented to "help"—or perhaps precisely because of this—the logic of their interventions deepens the notion of *poverty as exception*.

This lets all of us off the hook. This myth—in separating the problems of a small group from

those of most of us; in severing the links between development and wealth on the one hand and poverty and inequality on the other—enables us to approach the problem of poverty through ad-hoc individual compassionate acts, to endure the state's continual reticence toward more comprehensive approaches to providing social wellbeing. It promotes acts that stem from individual kindness that ultimately perpetuate the sense that "their" problems are separate from "our" problems. It paves the way for some of us to give oats—to people who do not like, nor need, oats.

What alternatives do we have?

For those of us who think that inequalities of all kinds are getting in the way of building a better Singapore, unpacking and deconstructing myths is a crucial first step to the work of imagining alternatives.

The reason for this is quite simple: when things like policy or legal changes occur, we want to know if they will lead to real changes, and one way to figure this out is to see if fundamental assumptions and principles have shifted. If they have not, we should remain very skeptical and alert to the ways in which old patterns will persist.[24]

Beyond analysis, in the Voluntary Welfare Organizations, schools, universities, corporations, activist groups, and whatever other organizations we spend our days in, to the extent that we are part of programmes targeted at "the needy," "the less fortunate," we must continually ask ourselves: are our actions shaped by appreciations of people's life-worlds, or do they reflect our own class/gendered/racialized prejudices and presumptions? Are our practices genuinely creating alternative pathways in the long-term, or are they deepening existing patterns? This questioning may lead some to see the need for not just resolving the needs of individuals, but for advocating to change social conditions and structural impediments.

Finally, as members of society, with what limited influence we have as citizens vis-à-vis our state, it is important that we push *not* for more done on behalf of "the needy," but more done so that *all* citizens have some basic and universal social goods. This is one way to destigmatize poverty and one way to begin creating a society in which we have mutual obligations, where we recognize our mutual dependence on one another.

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[1] This article draws from ongoing research on the experiences of being low-income in Singapore. Between 2013 and 2015, I conducted fieldwork in two neighborhoods where residents live in public rental flats. The Housing and Development Board (HDB) rent out the flats to residents whose household monthly incomes are below S$1500. Based on the average household size in such flats—2.4 persons (Singapore Department of Statistics 2014b)—this implies per capita monthly income of roughly S$625. This is about a quarter of the median monthly household income from work per capita (S$2,380 in 2014) (Singapore Department of Statistics 2014a). To date, I have visited the neighborhoods seventy times and spoken with about a hundred people.

[2] To ensure that money is spent "wisely," vouchers are usually from supermarkets such as NTUC. These vouchers may be stamped with the message, "No purchase of cigarettes or liquor allowed."

[3] As scholars have shown (Amin 2013; Mitchell 2002; Li 2007), "experts" of various stripes have had great influence in shaping how poverty and development are defined, understood, and thus resolved.

[4] Teo Youyenn, "Interrogating the Limits of Welfare Reforms in Singapore." *Development and Change*, 46 (1) 2015b:95-120.

[5] Teo Youyenn, "Differentiated Deservedness: Governance through Familialist Social Policies in Singapore." *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 3 (1) 2015a:73-93.

[6] Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,1989); Ruth Lister, "'She Has Other Duties' – Women, Citizenship and Social Security." In *Social Security and Social Change: New Challenges to the Beveridge Model*, ed. Sally Baldwin and Jane Falkingham (UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 31-44; Paula England, and Nancy Folbre, "Who should pay for the kids?" *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 563 (1) 1999:194-207.

[7] Teo Youyenn, "Support for Deserving Families: Inventing the Anti-welfare Familialist State in Singapore." *Social Politics*, 20 (3) 2013:387-406.

[8] Scholars have noted the inadequacies of the CPF system for retirement security and the particular vulnerabilities of women who have been caregivers rather than wage earners (Lee 1998; Ng 2013c).

[9] Other studies have similarly found that low-income households in Singapore typically *do* have wage earners and that people *want* to do wage work (Ng 2013b; Smith et al. 2015).

[10] A study conducted by the SMU Change Lab on single-parent families documents the particular difficulties single parents face in trying to earn wages while caring for their children (Glendinning, Smith, and Kadir 2015).

[11] Recent policy efforts to address low wages through supplementing the income of employed citizens who earn less than S$1900 per month (Ministry of Manpower, Central Provident Fund Board, and Singapore Workforce Development Agency 2014), while laudable in improving some people's lives, in fact subsidize companies and leave intact the problem that employers are not paying adequate wages (Teo 2015b; Hui 2011).

[12] For recent discussions of increasing income inequality and wage stagnation at the lower ends of the income spectrum, see Low and Yeoh (2014); Hui (2011); Ishita (2008); Ho (2007); Lim (2013); Ng (2013a); Hui (2013).

[13] Ministry of Social and Family Development, Statistics of Families and Individuals on the Public Assistance Scheme, Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2012, accessed 30 September 2015, http://app.msf.gov.sg/Press-Room/Statistics-of-families-individuals-on-PA-scheme

[14] Teo Youyenn, "Differentiated Deservedness: Governance through Familialist Social Policies in Singapore." *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 3(1) 2015a: 73-93.

[15] Singapore Economic Development Board. "Facts and Rankings." *Singapore Economic Development Board*, 2015, https://www.edb.gov.sg/content/edb/en/why-singapore/about-singapore/facts-and- rankings/rankings.html

[16] Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang, *The scripting of a national history: Singapore and its pasts* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008)

[17] Teo Youyenn, *Neoliberal Morality in Singapore: How family policies make state and society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011)

[18] Tharman Shanmugaratnam, "An Inclusive Society, A Stronger Singapore.", in *Budget Speech 2012*, (Singapore: Ministry of Finance, 2012)

[19] Chua Beng Huat, and Tan Joo Ean , "Singapore: Where the new middle class set the standards." In *Culture and Privilege in Capitalist Asia*, ed. Michael Pinches (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 137-158.

[20] Yeoh Lam Keong estimates that the bottom 10 to 20 per cent of working households struggle to meet basic needs, while the bottom 20 to 30 per cent of working households "are probably barely able to meet basic consumption and human capital investment needs but have little in the way of retirement savings, leaving them vulnerable to falling into poverty in their lifetime" (Smith et al. 2015).

[21] As Annette Lareau (2003) shows, schools perpetuate inequality insofar as they reward/punish various qualities that they do not teach and which are essentially qualities that differ along class lines. These include subtle things such as ways of speaking to adults in positions of authority, and the level and quality of exchanges between teachers and parents.

[22]

[23] The Home Ownership Plus Education (HOPE) Scheme was introduced in 2004, and entails a series of housing, training, and education grants given to low-income (gross household income S$1,700 or less) married couples or divorced/widowed women with custody of children, when they commit to having no more than two children (Ministry of Social and Family Development 2015). The grants are disbursed in most generous forms (i.e. over a shorter time period) when recipients undergo irreversible sterilization.

[24] Teo Youyenn, "Interrogating the Limits of Welfare Reforms in Singapore." *Development and Change*, 46 (1) 2015b: 95-120.

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This work was first published in "Living with Myths in Singapore" (Ethos Books, 2017). Our thanks to Ethos Books for permission to republish the article.

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