

The Attitudes of Tertiary Students toward Foreign Construction Workers

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Abstract

This study examined the attitudes of tertiary students toward foreign construction workers. Several similar researches had been conducted overseas, but not in Singapore. In this study, 15 tertiary students were divided into three focus groups and were asked questions about their perceptions toward these workers. We found that most participants recognised the problems faced and contributions made by them. However, most of them still hold on to certain negative opinions about these migrant workers, be it from their own experiences or hearsay. Through this study, we hope to identify the different perceptions of locals toward the workers and that the findings would be helpful in the integration of the foreign workers into the society.

The Attitudes of Tertiary Students on Foreign Construction Workers

Foreign workers have been around in Singapore for decades, working hard to earn a living for their families back home. Be it skilled or unskilled, they contribute to the economy of Singapore. However, most of them are usually not being regarded as equals. Some locals are uncomfortable with them, some are prejudiced against them, while some have nothing against them. What then causes Singaporeans to have certain perceptions about these foreign workers?

In other countries, research had been done on the attitudes of locals toward foreign workers. In America, a survey was conducted by News2USA on 1000 Americans and 369 foreign workers. The results showed that most of the Americans felt that they were extremely, very, or somewhat accepting of the foreigners. Majority of the foreigners also found Americans to be very, or somewhat accepting of them (News2USA, 2000). In contrast, the British were found to be unhappy with the large number of immigrants. The main reason for the discontentment was due to the competition of public services such as housing (Asiaone, 2004). In South Africa, there was a high social intolerance of the migrants. They were negatively stereotyped due to minimal interactions with them and were perceived as threats to the rights of locals, with the media and government playing a part in exaggerating the problems. Most South Africans opposed to immigration as they believed that migrants put a strain to their society and economy and that they would spread diseases (Crush, 2000). Studies had been done in Japan on the perceptions of illegal foreign workers. Almost half of the locals who took part in the survey were unhappy with the illegal workers as they were “violating Japanese law” and disrupting peace and order. Also, half of them favoured deportation of these workers (Hall, 2001). In Singapore, some people found the workers to be

nuisance as they hang around the residential areas and some workers do encounter unfriendly situations with Singaporeans at times (Yeong, Lee & Lin, 2007).

Though much research had been done on in this field, little is being done in the local context. Some aspects of the past research are not applicable. Firstly, the survey done in America did not specify the reasons as to why Americans are welcoming to foreign workers. Secondly, the studies conducted in Britain and South Africa included refugees and illegal workers. There are no refugees in Singapore, thus the studies are not very appropriate. Thirdly, the report on Singaporeans' behaviour towards foreign workers did not indicate the attitudes behind those behaviours.

By doing focus groups with some Singaporeans, we intend to examine the general perceptions of Singaporeans toward foreign workers and identify the rationale behind them.

Method

Participants

Participants included 15 tertiary students from two Polytechnics in Singapore (Ngee Ann Polytechnic and Republic Polytechnic). Out of which five were males and the other 10 were females. All were between the ages of 17 to 21. The composition of their ethnicities was as such: five Indians and 10 Chinese. The number of participants in each focus group ranged from two to eight, with an average of 5.0 people in each group. None received any rewards or compensation for their participation. Participants were recruited through quota sampling, whereby our friends we asked to help out in our study in order to reach the number of participants needed.

Apparatus

We created an original and new 12-item inventory created by us to qualitatively measure one's attitudes towards foreign construction workers. Questions such as "What is the first word that comes into your mind when we talk about foreign construction workers?" and scenarios like "If a foreign worker is walking towards you, what is the first thought that runs through your mind?" helps us to gauge the participants' perceptions of foreign construction workers. Their responses will then be analysed and categorised into labels which best describe their attitudes towards foreign workers. Refer to the appendix for the detailed questions and results.

Equipments such as laptops and mp4 players were used to record the entire duration of the focus group in an audio format.

Procedure

Participants were gathered in a quiet place in order to avoid distractions. Before beginning the session, participants were briefed shortly about the study and given instructions to follow. They were to talk one at a time and encouraged to answer all questions, and as honestly as possible. Also, interactions between participants (i.e. giving comments on each other's opinion) were highly encouraged. In addition, participants were informed that all recordings will be kept confidential.

During the process, the person-in-charge posed questions of discussion listed in the inventory and in the exact order. The focus groups were recorded in an audio format for future reference.

The discussions were then transcribed and analysed. Each relevant response was given a label that best described their thoughts and feelings towards the foreign construction workers.

Results

Our study has revealed that many students in Singapore are having varying ideas about foreign workers. There are those who acknowledge the benefits of their presence in Singapore, and those who feel that employing foreign workers is simply futile. In this section we will summarise the positive and negative perceptions that Singaporean students have on these migrant workers and we will also identify the contributions to the formation of the negative attitudes.

We conducted this study expecting to find mainly negative perceptions about foreign workers. However the students interviewed had revealed that not all their beliefs about the workers are negative. In fact, 11 out of 15 of the students recognized that these workers are helpful in contributing to Singapore's development in many areas, such as the economy and the building of housing estates. 10 out of 15 of the participants showed a deep understanding about the problems being faced by the workers. Their difficulty in adapting to a new culture and their lack of knowledge on social norms in Singapore are just two of the examples stated by the students. There were also a few who expressed great empathy towards the workers. They sympathised with the fact that the workers have to work very hard to support their families back home. When questioned about the media's role regarding the foreign workers, some students felt that there is negligence by the media as little is being done in highlighting the issues on the welfare and rights of foreign workers. We discovered that many of the students had great awareness about the foreign workers and that a handful of them had positive attitudes towards them.

However, most of the participants tend to think of foreign workers more negatively. 6 out of the 15 participants gave some discriminating comments about the foreign workers such as not being able to "see them at night", or stereotype them as dirty people who do not bathe. Some participants are annoyed over the workers. They feel that they are a disturbance to the locals, especially when they drink and make a nuisance out of themselves. Some feel afraid

and uncomfortable around the workers due to their “weird stares” and were most likely to keep a distance from them or move away if they ever approach them. Also, some participants expressed disgust over foreign workers as they feel that the workers “seek pleasure in pushing people around”, and actually “masturbate openly in the public”. Yet there are also participants who are indifferent towards these workers. They do not show concern for them and feel that it does not matter to them and that what happens to them is “their business”.

From our study, we have discovered that exposure (or lack thereof) plays an important role in shaping the society’s impression of foreign workers. The amount of exposure a person has is reflected in their perceptions. Those who were given more exposure to the issues pertaining to the migrant workers, tend to have more positive attitudes (e.g. empathy) compared to those who did not. We have identified the media, experience and also hearsay as crucial factors to the amount and type of exposure a person receives.

As observed by the participants, the media seems to be indifferent and negligent when handling matters related to foreign workers. Participants mentioned “who will go and report on foreign workers?” and that “not much is touched on the rights of the foreign workers”. From the participants’ responses, we observed that the media’s lack of concern over the situation of the foreign workers’ leads to the society at large being indifferent as well.

Besides the media, one’s own experience(s) also contributes to the construction of their perceptions. Participants have brought up incidence(s) where feelings of discomfort and/or frustration were aroused due to the actions of the foreign workers’. A common example would be a staring incident. As a result of these unpleasant experiences, negative attitudes of them were formed.

Hearsay is another factor that contributes to the negative attitudes the participants had towards foreign construction workers. Many observations they listed regarding these foreign

workers showed signs of discrimination and exaggeration, for example “they are very dirty; they don’t bathe” and “seemed like he was taking drugs”. These comments are in fact not based on actual experiences with the workers and neither do they have actual evidences to support their claims. It was based mainly on the interaction and conversations with the people around them, either friends or family members, who themselves made assumptions without actual proof. Negative attitudes would thus start to spread in this manner, resulting in similar perceptions among many other people.

For a more detailed result of our study, refer to the appendix.

Discussion

Our study was aimed at finding out the attitudes and perceptions of tertiary students in Singapore towards foreign construction workers. The results we have obtained showed that students generally have an inclination to exhibit negative attitudes and hold false assumptions regarding these foreign workers. Compared to the Americans in a study conducted in 2000 (Americans are surprisingly accepting of foreign workers, 2000), Singaporean students have shown very little acceptance towards the foreign workers. Many of the 15 participants shared common attitudes and feelings towards the foreign workers such as disgust, discomfort, fear and indifference. However, there were also conflicting ideas on whether the presence of foreign workers is significant or not. It is true that the majority of responses were negative and the students did over-emphasize on the faults of the workers. Even so, there were those who acknowledged the contributions made by these foreigners. Some students also showed empathy towards the foreign workers by understanding their situation (having to work hard to support their family). On the whole, the students’ negative perception of the foreign workers outweighs the positive views on them. However, the focus groups were unable to depict the

overall perception of all tertiary students in Singapore. Also, the results acquired from this study are not completely reliable, considering the fact that there was a lack of diversity in participants where only 15 participants took part and that students were all around the age of 17 to 21 years old. Although there are flaws in this study, it has provided more evidence for the existence of discrimination towards the foreign construction workers in Singapore. Our study is useful for combating discrimination against foreign workers as it gives our society a better insight as to how we feel towards them and how we are actually treating them.

Appendix

1. What is the first word that comes into your mind when we talk about foreign construction workers?

Label: Generalisation

Definition: Preconceived perceptions of foreign workers

Example(s): “Bangla”, “China man”

A total of 3 out of 15 participants gave derogatory names to foreign workers.

Label: Intolerance

Definition: Refusal to endure their behaviour/characteristics

Example(s): “first word that comes to my mind is dirty”, “weird stares”, “I think their cold stares”

3 out of 15 participants are unable to tolerate foreign workers’ behaviour.

Label: Discomfort

Definition: They do not feel comfortable around foreign workers

Example(s): “weird stares”, “I think their cold stares”

4 out of 15 participants observed that they felt discomfort in the presence of foreign workers.

2. What is your general impression of them?

Label: Discrimination

Definition: Negative comments

Example(s): “I can’t see them at night”, “they are very dirty, they don’t bathe”

6 out of 15 participants displayed discriminating attitudes towards foreign workers.

Label: Disgust

Definition: They have strong feelings of dislike towards the foreign workers

Example(s): “I think they are just, you know, not clean, or dirty”

Label: Irritation

Definition: They feel annoyed at the way the foreign workers behave and act towards them

Example(s): “But then again they shouldn’t be staring at us!”

Label: Helpful

Definition: They feel that the foreign workers are beneficial to our country’s development

Example(s): “They are here to earn a lot and help us build our houses”

Label: Understanding

Definition: They know what the foreign workers are going through

Example(s): “I think they have not been able to adapt to our culture here”, “they save all just for their family”

4 out of 15 participants are aware of the problems these workers face and are able to empathise with them.

3. Do you have any experience with them that led you to this belief?

Label: Empathy

Definition: Knows that they are saving for family, observes that they eat little

Example(s): “their rice is just rice and nothing else”, “means they are saving like crazy for their family”

Label: Discomfort

Definition: They do not feel comfortable around Foreign workers

Example(s): “And so they were all staring at me like from up, like from my head to my toe”

Label: Frustration

Definition: They feel irritated at the way foreign workers behave

Examples: “so they were looking at me, as though i was asking them to look at me. It’s quite annoying also”

Label: Realisation of problems

Definition: They are aware of the foreign worker’s lack of knowledge on appropriate social norms in Singapore

Example(s): “I think they haven’t seen women that often. So, it happens, they stare longer and I think they are more... I think they are shy and nervous so it translates into being lecherous”

4. *If no, do you have any family or friends that shared their experience(s) with you?*

Label: Exaggeration

Definition: False assumptions being made about their actions

Example(s): “seemed like he was taking drugs”

Label: Mind-reading

Definition: Intentions without actual proof

Example(s): “she feels that they are very lecherous”

Label: Disgust

Definition: They feel irritation and dislike towards the foreign workers

Example(s): “It seems as if they seek pleasure in pushing people around. Feels disgusting after a while”, “...actually masturbating openly in public. They were super disgusted by the scene...”

Label: Uncomfortable

Definition: They feel uneasy in the presence of foreign workers

Example(s): “And she felt very uncomfortable sitting opposite him and eating”, “Its the way they look at us”

5 out of 15 expressed discomfort when approached by foreign workers.

Label: Deprived

Definition: They feel that in Singapore, the foreign workers are lacking a female companion

Example(s): “I think they are just deprived la”

5. Do you think that the media played a part in the formation of your belief?

Label: Indifferent

Definition: Not concerned over situation of foreign workers, observes that society at large do not really care as well

Example(s): “who will go and report on foreign workers”, “doesn’t really matter”

2 out of 15 realised the indifference Singaporeans has towards the needs of foreign workers.

Label: Negligence

Definition: Media neglected the report on foreign workers’ welfare and rights

Example(s): “Not much is touched on the rights of foreign workers”

Label: Caused inconvenience

Definition: They feel that the way the foreign workers behave causes a lot of problems for the locals

Example(s): “the main issue is that they do not follow the customs that we follow here. I think that leads to a lot of inconvenience”

6. Scenario:

- a. If a foreign worker is walking towards you, what is the first thought that runs through your mind?*
- b. How would you feel?*
- c. What will you most likely do?*

Label: Sympathy

Definition: Feels for the situation they are in

Example(s): “after all some of them are really very pitiful”

Label: Cynical

Definition: They mistrust the actions and motives of foreign workers

Example(s): “Are they up to something?”, “But sometimes they tend to seek attention. So ya, I tend to be more wary towards them”

Label: Apathy

Definition: do not feel for them

Example(s): “I feel nothing”

Label: Fear

Definition: They feel afraid around foreign workers

Example(s): “okay I wanna run away”, “I wanna move away”, “You look very familiar and he asked oh can I have your handphone number, I think I know someone of you. They are like that, so it gives us insecurity actually”, “Don’t come near me”, “Keep a distance away from them”

5 out of 15 displayed signs of fear towards foreign workers when asked this question.

7. *In your opinion, what do you think is the society's perception of foreign construction workers?*

Label: Stratification

Definition: Think that foreign workers are just foreign workers and not a part of our country.

Example(s): "Just foreign workers who come to Singapore to earn money"

Label: Ignorant

Definition: They do not care for the foreign workers

Example(s): "They think that they are not significant at all", "they don't really give a damn"

2 out of 15 participants feel that our society does not care for foreign workers and take them for granted.

Label: Prejudice

Definition: They tend to be bias towards foreign workers and they discriminate them

Example(s): "I think we are prejudiced against them"

Label: Blaming

Definition: They feel that foreign workers behaviour forces the society to perceive them in a such a bad light

Example(s): “But I believe that they have a part to play in forming out prejudice of them”

1 out of 15 participants feels that the workers themselves should bear a certain amount of responsibility for the prejudices that are formed against them.

8. *How do you think they contribute to Singapore’s development?*

Label: Generalisation

Definition: Think that most or all foreign workers are rubbish collectors

Example(s): “They help us do all the dirty jobs”

Label: Recognition

Definition: The ability to identify contributions made by foreign workers

Example(s): “if they never build those buildings, Singaporeans build meh?”, “They help us build our houses and all these. ya, as part of the construction and cleaning”

6 out of 15 participants are aware of how much foreign workers contribute to the development of our society.

Label: Not appreciative

Definition: They feel that foreign worker’s presence is not needed in Singapore

Example(s): “I mean these are jobs that can actually be filled by some of our jobless people”, “But if foreign workers were banned from Singapore totally, then the government would have

to pay higher wages to us Singaporeans to do the jobs, which can actually solve the jobless problems”

1 out of 15 participants feel that we can actually do better without foreign workers.

9. Do you feel that their contributions are important?

Label: Recognition

Definition: The ability to identify contributions made by foreign workers

Example(s): “Of course important la, if they don’t become construction worker then Singapore building who build?”, “Yes”

A significant 11 out of 15 participants recognise the importance of these workers’ contributions.

Label: Not appreciative

Definition: They feel that the foreign worker’s presence is not needed in Singapore

Example(s): “I just think is overhyped like you know, we can’t do without them”

10. What problems do you think they faced while in Singapore?

Label: Awareness

Definition: They know the problems that the foreign workers are facing in Singapore

Example(s): “Like maybe they lost contact with their family”, “Apart from that, the food, they are trying to adapt to it, and the culture, culture shock”, “Like i see them working from morning to night, even after night and they don’t get paid well”, “No friends and family here”, “discrimination”

10 out of 15 realised that these workers face many problems while working in Singapore.

11. Are you aware of any government policies that cater towards them?

Label: Awareness

Definition: They have knowledge about the policies catering foreign workers

Example(s): “you are supposed to give them proper accommodation. You cannot house them anywhere”, “When they suffer from injury, they can get medical claims”

Only 2 out of 15 participants have at least a basic knowledge of policies pertaining to foreign workers.

Label: Unawareness

Definition: They do not know of existing policies catering the foreign workers

Example(s): “No”

Label: Ignorant

Definition: Lack of concern Singaporeans have over foreign workers

Example(s): “report it n news also no one will see”, “no one will care”

2 out of 15 participants are aware that Singaporeans are usually not interested in news regarding foreign workers.

12. Add to their discussion. Talk about their contributions (I build Sengkang!). Cite some examples, e.g. void deck and MRT.

After knowing all these, has your perception of them changed?

Label: Ignorant

Definition: Lack of concern Singaporeans have over foreign workers

Example(s): “that’s their business I won’t care”

Label: Empathy

Definition: They recognised their hard work.

Example(s): “they have little time for rest”, “Ya they deserve rest”

2 out of 15 participants recognize their need for rest and that they do deserve to rest after a hard day’s work.

Label: Discrimination

Definition: They feel that they are more superior to the foreign workers.

Example(s): “Singaporeans are just too high-class la they feel that these construction workers and these foreigners are really sort of low class and pest to them so that’s why they are not treating them well”

Label: Stubborn

Definition: They strongly believe that there is no need to sympathise the foreign workers

Example(s): “I do believe that they have contributed a lot, but they don’t do it for free right”,
“No. Still the same”

Label: Annoyance

Definition: They feel that the foreign workers are a disturbance to locals

Example(s): “Some more foreign workers, drinking and making a nuisance out of themselves, will I feel the same as security?”, “But most of the time foreign workers do, I mean you enter a packed train and you stink, it does cause inconvenience so I think it snowballs from there”

4 out of 15 participants expressed annoyance at the behaviour of some of the foreign workers.

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Focus Group:

1. What is the first word that comes into your mind when we talk about foreign construction workers?
2. What is your general impression of them?
3. Do you have any experience with them that led you to this belief?
4. If no, do you have any family or friends that shared their experience(s) with you?
5. Do you think that the media played a part in the formation of your belief?
6. Scenario:
 - a. If a foreign worker is walking towards you, what is the first thought that runs through your mind?
 - b. How would you feel?
 - c. What will you most likely do?
7. In your opinion, what do you think is the society's perception of foreign construction workers?
8. How do you think they contribute to Singapore's development?
9. Do you feel that their contributions are important?
10. What problems do you think they faced while in Singapore?
11. Are you aware of any government policies that cater towards them?

Add to their discussion. Talk about their contributions (I build Sengkang!). Cite some examples, e.g. void deck and MRT.

12. After knowing all these, has your perception of them changed?