

# **Problem-Based Learning Report**

## **Introduction**

### **Problem, Issue and Setting**

In order to sustain its economic growth and remain competitive, Singapore aims to be a global village by adopting an open-door policy towards foreign workers, be it professionals or lowly-skilled workers. However, these foreign workers are mainly treated based on which category they belong to. We often regard the white-collared workers as competitors but at the same time, they still have our respect. On the other hand, we tend to look down and have negative perceptions of the lowly-skilled workers. We believe that the insufficient integration between locals and lowly-skilled foreign workers has led to the problem of stereotyping and discrimination towards foreign workers. Our group aims to highlight the reasons leading to the problem we are addressing. We have identified global inequality and racial and ethnic inequality to be in relation to this problem.

Let us first look at global inequality. The United States has a mean wealth of \$144,000 per person, the highest in the world, while India has a mean wealth of only \$6,500 (Kay, 2006). This disparity could come about due to the location of their land which is often hit by natural disasters such as droughts and famines. The frequent series of unfortunate events leads to the continuous destruction of crops and loss of wealth which make their efforts go to waste. Due to such natural disasters, poverty, lack of job opportunities and overpopulation, these foreign workers come to Singapore in search of a better life. In order to come to Singapore, foreign workers have to sell their properties and take up loans. Singapore, being one of the most globalised countries in the world, opens doors of opportunities to workers from developing nations such as India and Bangladesh.

Another issue is racial and ethnic inequality. The discrimination imposed on them roots from the negative perceptions formed towards them when people realized that they are from India and Bangladesh, as they are a minority group when they are in Singapore. However, Singaporeans fail to recognize their efforts and contributions towards the country. The labeling effect has blinded Singaporeans from seeing the efforts these foreign workers put in to give us the luxury, for example the condominiums and apartments, that we enjoy today. Therefore with the kind of treatment they receive and lack of support in a foreign land, some of these workers turn to crime. This further affirms the negative perceptions that Singaporeans have of them, thus, leading to self-fulfilling prophecy.

## **Sociological Insights**

Prejudice is an attitude while discrimination is an action. Prejudice is prejudging people or a certain group. On the other hand, discrimination is treating someone or a group unfairly. It could be based on

appearance, income, education, lifestyle and even habits. People discriminated are called the minority group.

According to sociologist Louis Wirth, minority groups are groups of people singled out for unfair treatment on the basis of their physical or cultural characteristics and who regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination. Discrimination denies them of full participation in their society, like in the case of the foreign workers.

### Symbolic Interactionist's point-of-view – Prejudice and Discrimination

Looking through the lens of a symbolic interactionist, people are not born with the attitude of prejudging people and discriminating. It is when people socialize that they pick up values, whether right or wrong, from people they interact with. Children learn their values and beliefs from the families and racial- ethnic groups they grow up in. They pick up labelling from the people they come in contact with. In our local context, Singaporeans form their perceptions of foreign workers from the people they are associated with when they are growing up, especially their parents (Henson, 2008, p.259).

According to the symbolic interactionist, labels affect prejudice by causing selective perception that is, stereotyping. Stereotyping shapes our perception and causes us to be aware of some things but blind to others. Our views become myopic and we tend to look at members of the group as though they are all the same. Low-skilled workers in Singapore today are being stereotyped by Singaporeans as pickpockets, alcoholics, “dirty” and smelly. For example, it was reported on The Straits Times that residents form their own petrol group and spray water on the seats at the void deck such that these workers cannot sit. Reason being, the presence of the foreign workers is a disturbance to them. Racial-ethnic labels have special power over people. They are so powerful that morality issues that people learn in early life are ignored. Labels help people to compartmentalize by isolating negative acts from other areas of their lives. This helps them to still feel good even when they do bad things (Henson, 2008, p.259).

### Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is a sense of group identity so intense that members of other groups are viewed as inferior. It helps the dominant group, in our case, Singaporeans; validate its higher social position and larger distribution of society's resources. Members of the dominant group, Singaporeans in this case, see themselves as superior and therefore, deserve better things. The dominant group also see themselves taking up tasks that require more responsibility in the society (Henson, 2008, p.262). The visible differences and discrimination the foreign workers face cause them to forge a sense of identity with one another and thereby, creating cohesion, as can be seen not only in Little India, but also in places like Lucky Plaza, where the Philipinos gather on Sundays and public holidays.

### Functionalist's point-of-view – How does a functionalist see the foreign workers doing the “dirty work”?

The lowly-skilled foreign workers usually take on jobs at construction sites and shipyards, jobs that Singaporeans will not do because they are dangerous, strenuous and only provide a meagre pay.

In this report, we also look into wealth disparity. According to the symbolic interactionist, poverty is relative. We compare ourselves with others to evaluate where we stand in life. Somebody may be considered relatively well-off in his hometown, may be considered to be poor in another country. We

can relate this to the foreign workers who HealthServe is working with. They may not be considered very poor in their countries as they do not really have problems with their daily three meals. However, in Singapore, the salary they earn are used mainly to pay back their loans in the beginning of the first few years in Singapore and so, they cannot afford better food other than gravy and rice. Also, they come to Singapore wanting to make it big during their youth, as they desire to be upwardly mobile. People who are struggling with poverty will not even think about social mobility if they are already having trouble with the basic necessities of life, according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. We can also see this from the fact that they sold all that they had- cattle, lands, vehicles and even houses, so as to climb up to the next level of the social class ladder in their country.

Also, poverty is a personal problem, not a social problem. The Reformers saw poverty as the result of corrupt cities. Modern temptations like crime and alcohol abuse restrain people in the cycle of poverty. Poverty should not exist, and it is due to the character of the poor (Henson, 2008, p.220).

Meanings of poverty change as social conditions change. In view of the functionalist's perspective, income inequality helps society. Some jobs in society are more important than others. They require talented people who are skilled in that field. As such, these positions offer high income and prestige to attract these people (Henson, 2008, p.220). For example, in the Singapore context, the job as a civil engineer and a construction worker are valued differently. Both parties may be working in the same work site, working on the same project, but they do not receive the same amount of salary. This is because the engineer has to go through years of training in school and is equipped with skills and knowledge, while being a construction worker does not require as many academic qualifications. Therefore, income disparity helps society function.

### How poverty is functional for society

Functionalists say that poverty itself is functional for society. According to sociologist Herbert Gans, poor people are needed because their poverty leads to unique contributions to society's well-being (Henson, 2008, p.220).

Firstly, they take up society's dirty jobs at low costs. For example, in Singapore, the lowly-skilled foreign workers make up for the labour shortage in areas where Singaporeans would not take up jobs like construction work, as the level of education in Singapore increases.

The poor generate job opportunities for people such as social workers, welfare agencies and policemen. For example, HealthServe provides low-cost medical consultation of \$5 and free counselling for every visit. The poor also make the economy more competent by spending their minimal pay on left over goods and second hand goods. They also make others wealthy by working for the rich. In this way, they also help some to become upwardly mobile, as people who strive to reach the fringes of the middle class. For example, the stores in Little India that, sell foods and things at a lower price, so as to make it more affordable for the foreign workers. The poor also provide entertainment and education as their lives become storylines for movies, novels, plays and television programmes. For example, in Singapore, there is a team that puts up a play in Little India, on Labour Day that depicts the lives of these foreign workers working in a foreign land and the problems that they face. They also help to motivate others to get better education and to work harder so as to avoid ending up in poverty (Henson, 2008, p.221).

## Conflict Theorists' Views on Social Inequality

Inequality comes from a basic social need. To offer higher rewards and to fill some positions is to justify the power of the wealthy and the denial of the poor. Social inequality results from a fundamental struggle over the limited resources available. According to Karl Marx's general theory of social class and class relations, social class depends solely on the means of production, like tools and factories, used to create wealth. It is the conflict between the owners and workers, and between the rich and the poor, because the capitalists use society's institutions such as its legal and political systems to promote their own interests and as a means to control their workers (Henson, 2008, p.220). However, if the workers realize that they are being exploited, they will lose their false class consciousness and will start to upheaval. In our context, there are cases of foreign workers being exploited and mistreated by their companies (Henson, 2008, p.222). However, many such cases are swept under the carpet, to avoid foreign workers from being sent home once the company finds out. According to Karl Marx's general theory of social class and class relations, the employers are making use of the legal system stated in the contract as a means to keep the workers from speaking up. The workers have the freedom to voice out their problems, but the price to pay is to be sent back home immediately once the case is closed. Who then will want to voice out their discontent?

## The Culture of Poverty vs. the Culture of Wealth

According to anthropologist Oscar Lewis, people remain poor because they have already developed a way of life that traps them in poverty. This way of life is called the culture of poverty. They see the line that divides them from the mainstream, which makes them feel inferior and insecure, just like in the case of the low-skilled foreign workers in Singapore. It could also be the way Singaporeans treat them. Many of them develop low aspirations, and as a result, get discouraged by their circumstances and think only about the present, not the future. Some become self-destructive and turn to alcoholism and physical violence. Their way of life makes it almost impossible for them to break out from the vicious cycle of poverty (Henson, 2008, p.227).

However, all is not gone. The way out for the foreign workers is through self-improvement and upgrading their skills. HealthServe provides free English lessons to teach them Basic English to aid them in their daily communication with the locals. It also provides counselling to provide a listening ear and gives encouragement, so that these workers will not become self-destructive or turn to alcoholism.

## Policy Initiatives

Several policies have been formulated for the lowly-skilled foreign workers in Singapore. However, none has been devised such that the huge gap between these foreign workers and locals are narrowed. In fact, most of the policies have further broadened the inequality and made integration between foreign workers and locals more convoluted.

One relevant policy would be the Marriage Restriction Policy. Under the Marriage Restriction Policy, it is illegal for a work permit holder to tie the knot with either a citizen or permanent resident of Singapore. One important point to note is that, work permit holders are not the same as employment pass holders who possess a particular specialized skill and earn

more than \$2500 per month. Therefore, this policy is not applicable to them. This seems to show certain discrimination towards the lowly-skilled foreign workers (Registry of Marriages Singapore, 2002). The aims of this policy are to make sure that these lowly-skilled foreign workers do not sink roots in Singapore and become a burden to the society when they are unable to fend for themselves and their families here with their low salary (Ministry of Manpower, 2007). This policy may have been created for the well-being of our country; however, it is rather biased. It favours the highly-skilled foreign workers and puts down the lowly-skilled foreign workers. Furthermore, its main aim, which is to prevent unskilled foreign workers from sinking roots here, is not being fulfilled as Singaporeans can still marry foreign brides and settle down here with no difficulties at all. Therefore, comparing these foreign brides to work permit holders, priority should be given to those who have contributed to Singapore's economy (Registry of Marriages Singapore, 2002).

The second policy is the immigration policy, which we feel also plays a role in causing people to view foreign workers as insignificant. This policy has been developed to ensure that lowly-skilled foreign workers remain a transient workforce in Singapore, thus, making their repatriation during economic recessions possible. As the government believes that too much lowly-skilled migration is disrupting to the country, being able to send them back when Singapore's economy is not doing well may be a realistic solution. However, it seems that the foreign workers are just being made use of and at our disposal when the society does not need them or finds them a burden. This may decrease their value in the eyes of Singaporeans, increasing the discrimination against them.

## **Recommendations**

To tackle the problems of global, racial and ethnic inequality, we have come up with recommendations which we feel might be effective. We feel that raising awareness and creating opportunities for interaction is ideal. Giving the foreign workers a medium to voice out their opinions is essential for human rights and thus we feel that the Government can initiate sharing sessions with foreign workers where translators could be brought in to break down language barriers. To help ease the problem of exploitation, we think that laws which work against bad lodging can be established. For example, rules regarding the ratios of number of foreign workers to containers. To reduce discriminatory behaviours towards this minority group, we feel that a campaign can be initiated to encourage acceptance towards these foreign workers. Furthermore, to nip discrimination from a young age, the education system can step in by using subjects such as civics and moral education to educate students at a young age. However, these recommendations are at a macro-level and need serious consideration and time before they can be implemented. At a micro-level, as a group we have come up with two ideas to raise awareness, which we showed during the grand celebration. Firstly, we put together a photo montage and poem to be uploaded on YouTube, which aims to show people how foreign workers do dangerous jobs we would not and how we can touch their lives by volunteering with HealthServe. Secondly, we made bookmarks which we feel can raise awareness.

## **Reflections**

When we initially embarked on the integrated learning journey this semester, our minds were dotted with several doubts. The prospect of working with foreign workers was new to us and we had mixed emotions of fear and excitement. However, these fears were put to ease when we met these foreign workers, talked to them and learnt about their lives in Singapore. All this was possible with the help of HealthServe and Asia Evangelistic Fellowship. Throughout this semester, we worked on projects and assignments based on foreign workers and HealthServe. This experience has given us an insight into the real situations the foreign workers are in. It has taught us not to judge and discriminate them based on what we hear, but to empathize with them. When we spoke to them, we realized that they too are just like us and face many problems such as exploitation, accommodation and discrimination. We explored their lives through doing role-plays, dramas and interviews, and even when down to construction sites to take photographs of them. Only through this experiential learning were we able to understand better the situation foreign workers are in. For example, when we visited construction sites, despite being given boots and helmets for protection, we could not help feeling fearful of the dangers these sites posed. To mark the success as well as the end of the integrated learning was the Grand Celebration. As we worked hard towards making this day a success, we faced many challenges which we overcame by working strongly as a team. To our surprise, we clinched the second prize. We felt really good about it and as we look back on the path we took towards the grand celebration, we realized that it was filled with both smooth and rocky parts and the thing we all brought home in the end was indeed our meaningful experiences and new perceptions.

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