Overview
Contemporary Singapore has been described by observers in different ways. While the country has been perceived by some as a model of economic success and multi-ethnic, multi-religious harmony, others point out that beyond the shiny façade, Singapore is also known for its rich-poor divide and the omnipresence of oversight. The ‘little red dot’ – small as the country may be – appears to be a society that provides rich pickings for sociology students as despite its clean, green and efficient exterior, complexities abound when you scratch beyond the surface. Looking at various sociological themes like race, stratification, gender and deviance, students will learn to develop their ‘sociological imagination’: The ability to relate personal experiences of everyday life to the larger political, economic, social and cultural issues. Focusing on how different aspects of Singapore society have been shaped from top-down directives and bottom-up initiatives, this module aims to help students cast a critical eye on the young nation so that they can recalibrate their assumptions about its people.

Assessments

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>For verbal contributions (based on assigned readings and personal experience). Students may be randomly picked to respond in class, either individually or in groups</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper clippings</td>
<td>For every week from week 2 to week 11, every student must cut-out ONE news article on Singapore that is relevant to the lecture-topic for that week and keep it in an A4 folder. For each article, you must write a ‘reflective’ piece 200-250 words long; I am not looking for a summary of the article, but your personal views on it and how it relates to this module; there is no need for academic references. This exercise is to help you explore your ‘sociological imagination’; how you relate your personal experiences to the things that are happening in your society. The folder of 10 clippings/reflections is to be handed in during the last lecture. <strong>NOTE:</strong> You must have only 10 sheets of paper (each sheet to be used on both sides: 1 for pasting the clipping and the other for your writing) and they must be compiled in a flat folder.</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-term assignment</td>
<td>You will watch a video clip in class. After that, you will be given 1 hour to individually handwrite a closed-book reflection on that clip, based on the issues and readings discussed in the previous lessons. Your paper will be submitted after the hour is up.</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
<td>Format and date to be confirmed</td>
<td>60%</td>
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Desired outcomes

- Students use their sociological imagination to ‘think sociologically’ about Singapore so as to challenge their preconceived notions
- Students access a broad range of academic articles and pop-culture media to understand the various ways in which Singapore is perceived
- Students formulate intellectual views on what makes contemporary Singapore society tick

Timetable

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<td>The histories of Singapore</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Politics and governing by pragmatism</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Meritocracy &amp; elitism</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>Mid-term Assignment</td>
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<td>Popular culture</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Singapore into the future</td>
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<td>13</td>
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Week 1

Overview & ‘The sociological imagination’

I will go through the aims of this module, including what are expected of the assignments.

Singapore is made up of millions of individuals; we cannot begin to comprehend Singapore society without knowing its individuals and we also cannot understand the individual without dissecting the society in which s/he lives. This is in essence the ‘sociological imagination’; micro-to-macro and macro-to-micro perspectives from which we can consider the issues of society, and how such issues can be addressed. How can we use the sociological imagination when we study Singapore society? C. Wright Mills urged students of sociology to be more empathetic and proactive; can you combine your classroom-knowledge with real-world actions?

Required readings:

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Week 2

The histories of Singapore
“To the victor belong the spoils”, so the saying goes; when applied to the writing of history, it implies that the ‘winners’ (i.e. those in power) monopolise the past by writing histories that are favourable to them. Some of the ‘winners’ in Singapore’s past had attempted to construct one jointed, uncomplicated, definitive narrative of our history that weaves all our complexities together – while leaving the inconvenient bits out – so as to smoothen our nationalism-journey. In the recent past, however, other narratives of our history have emerged that either run parallel to the existing one, or counter to it. In effect, we are now faced with multiple ‘histories’ of Singapore, where certain ‘knowns’ have been validated (or reinterpreted) while ‘unknowns’ are beginning to surface. Such reckonings of our multiple histories are an important part of the ongoing construction of Singapore society.

**Required readings:**

**Optional reading:**

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**Week 3**
**Politics and governing by pragmatism**

When two or more people start interacting, they have to learn to share the space they are using. These ‘agreements’ to facilitate sharing constitute ‘politics’; it runs the full spectrum from the politics between two petty colleagues to the feuding between countries on climate-change. In Singapore, we tend to associate ‘politics’ not just with the mundane, but how we are ‘governed’ from top-down (and how we expect to be governed from bottom-up). This politics of governance – stemming from a political party that has been in power for half a century and an effective civil service – penetrates all aspects of Singapore society. In this lecture, we try to understand the ‘pragmatic’ nature of our political governance and, using case studies, how it affects our everyday lives.

**Required readings:**

**Optional readings:**

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Week 4
Elitism and meritocracy

In the recent past, Singapore society had been critical about elitism from amongst its ranks; people displaying an “I-am-better-than-you” attitude have been lambasted and harassed online. In a country where meritocracy – levelling the playing field so that we all have equal chances to ‘succeed’ – is an alternative to the ideology of pragmatism, where does this elitism (and anti-elitism stance) stem from, since achieving success (and experiencing failure) is a natural outcome of this belief? Looking at how meritocracy (and elitism) operates at different strata in Singapore, we scrutinise how it has infiltrated all aspects of our society and what its consequences may be.

Required readings:

Optional readings:

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Week 5
Grassroots / civil society

In Weeks 4 and 5, we discussed governing from the top and how policies filter down to the rest of society. In this lecture, we take a different bottom-up perspective: How do grassroots and civil society operate, and how do they influence society on issues close to their hearts? While there are still overtones of government-oversight in some of these groups – especially the pseudo-political grassroots – some of these organisations have created spaces (both real and virtual) to get themselves mobilised and heard. How will these ground-up movements grow as our society opens up progressively?

Required readings:

Optional readings:

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Week 6
Race & ethnicity

Those who are the products of the Singapore education system have memorised this by heart “...regardless of race, language or religion...”. But ‘race’ (the way we look) and ‘ethnicity’ (the cultures we practice) continue to be part and parcel of our lives in Singapore, whether be they in the realm of policies or our mundane daily existence. Tracing how our nation of different peoples converged on Singapore since the 1800s, we consider how and why our differences have been minimised and magnified by the different governments through time. From the ground up, we consider how the issue of race figures in our everyday lives.

Required readings:

Optional readings:

Week 7
Class & inequality

From 1965 until now, the Singapore economy has seen phenomenal growth. Beyond the superficial trappings of a wealthy metropolis, the gap between the have and the have-nots has grown significantly too, so much so that a significant portion of the population may be considered poor. Looking at the class structure of Singapore – focusing mostly on the lower class, but also on the squeezed middle class – we discuss how the inequalities have arisen, and the steps taken by the government and NGOs to address the issue.

Required readings:

Optional readings:
Week 9
Gender & sexuality

How have the roles of men and women in Singapore changed from the time of our independence to now? How have successive family-oriented policies contributed to these changes, in particular, for the Singapore woman? We will also consider how issues surrounding ‘sexuality’ have evolved from the ‘no-sex-until-marriage’ attitude to the politics of heterosexual and homosexuality today.

Required readings:

Optional readings:

Week 10
Popular culture

While some issues in Singapore tend to affect some and not others, it may seem that food is at the heart of our concerns as a people. Beyond our love for food, we are also known for our own brand of humour; a mash-up of Singlish, stereotypes and nudge-nudge-wink-wink allusions to things-better-left-unsaid. Looking at food and humour, we delve into the how these everyday aspects of popular culture are essential parts of our society.

Required readings:

Optional reading:
Week 11
National identity

How can we attempt to define what is Singaporean-ness? In this lecture, we explore the different ways in which our Singapore identity is molded, from national day parades to national education to our National Museum.

Required readings:

Optional readings:

Week 12
Singapore into the future

Week 13
Review