ROMANCE, DATING AND MARRIAGE IN SINGAPORE: YOUTH ATTITUDES,

IDEALS, AND THE "CHECKLIST SYNDROME"

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ABSTRACT

Through focus group interviews with Singaporean youth, this study partially replicates Williams and Guest's (2005) research on urban middle-class attitudes towards marriage in Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. In line with the original findings, Singaporean men and women value marriage as a desired milestone in life. Female participants were dissatisfied with local men for being unromantic and male participants saw women's expectations as unrealistic. Using Eva Illouz's (1997) conceptualization of romantic love as a key domain in which capitalist, profit-driven logic and values operate, I analyze the dilemma of who and when to marry as a product of state discourses and policies geared towards modernizing the nation through economic and technological excellence. To bridge the gap between Singaporeans' high professional and personal expectations, and the contingent realities that exist in an unpredictable global economy, future policies need to address both practical and ideational considerations relating to love, marriage and family.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mirabelle Yang was born and grew up mostly in Singapore. She read Philosophy and Psychology at the University of Bristol as an undergraduate and completed a master's degree in Social Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies before coming to the US as a graduate student in Development Sociology. She is currently doing her PhD in Anthropology at Cornell, where she will be looking at new conceptions of love, gender and self in postconflict Cambodia.

For *Mum*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Abstract

In light of declining or delayed marriage and ultra-low fertility in Singapore, youth attitudes towards dating, romance and marriage are of interest to sociologists, demographers and policymakers. Through focus group interviews with Singaporeans aged 19-26, this study partially replicates Williams and Guest's (2005) research on urban middle-class attitudes towards marriage in Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. In line with the original findings, Singaporean men and women, like their counterparts in neighboring countries, value marriage as an institution and desired milestone in their own lives. Consistent with common local notions and stereotypes, male participants expressed dismay at the high standards women set for romance, and female participants were dissatisfied with Singaporean men for being unromantic. Using sociologist Eva Illouz's (1997) conceptualization of romantic love as a key domain in which capitalist or profit-driven logic and values operate, I analyze the dilemma of who and when to marry in Singapore, with its implications for family formation and parenthood, as a product of state discourses and policies geared towards modernizing the nation through economic and technological excellence. To bridge the gap between Singaporeans' high professional and personal expectations in an unpredictable global economy and the contingent realities that exist on the ground, future policies need to address both practical and ideational considerations relating to love, marriage and family.

1.2 Background

How are attitudes towards dating and marriage in Singapore shaped by sociocultural processes? Marriage trends in Singapore have evolved in the past 40 years, as Singapore modernized and developed, with demographic consequences such as declining birth rates, an ageing population, and other implications for family policy. According to the 2009 census on marriage and divorce, rates of marriage have fallen from 1999 rates of 57.2% for women aged 15-44 and 54.8% for men in the same age bracket to 43.6% and 41.1% respectively in 2009 (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2010). As has been the case elsewhere in Asia, marriage is also being delayed, the current median age for brides and grooms being 27.4 and 29.9 years respectively. The last comprehensive survey of attitudes towards intimate relationships amongst Singaporean youth (Saw and Wong 1981) was conducted in 1979 and published more than thirty years ago. This study aims to answer the call for new qualitative data that will help shed light on significant trends such as delayed and non-marriage, the marriage squeeze, and the role of marriage and relationships in the Singaporean life course and the life satisfaction of Singaporean men and women.

Given Singapore's aging population (e.g. Teo 1996; Reisman 2009), declining marriage and fertility (e.g. Pereira 2006; Jones 2008) and rising divorce rates (e.g. Jeng & McKenry 2000; Straughan 2009), this research will be useful for policy-makers, educators, social workers and mental healthcare specialists interested in gender relations, family, youth development and demographic change. The importance of close personal relationships in maintaining emotional wellbeing and overall health,

and improving life chances has been well documented (e.g. Bowlby 1988; Waite 1995; Waite & Gallagher 2000; Hirschl et al 2003). In gaining a holistic understanding of partnership dynamics and prevailing attitudes towards marriage and romantic relationships, we can be in a better position to address social problems and interpersonal tensions modern couples and families experience in globalizing Singapore and beyond.

1.3 Research question

The central research question concerns how sociocultural processes shape young people's attitudes towards dating and marriage. Specifically, how are gender relations in romantic partnerships and/or marriage in Singapore configured by globalization, neoliberal capitalist flows and logics, modernization and state policies? And what factors influence the decision to marry?

1.4 Definitions of dating

For their nation-wide survey, Saw and Wong defined dating as "going out with a member of the opposite sex either alone, or with one other couple, or with a group (i.e. more than one other couple)" (1981: 11). In his honors thesis on courtship spaces in Singapore, Ronald Tay adopts Cate and Lloyd's definition of courtship to cover "relationships that move to marriage as well as those that end before marriage which might more accurately be called "dating relationships" (Cate and Lloyd 1992:1, cited in Tay 1998). Current notions of what constitutes dating based on focus group data for this study will be detailed in Chapter 4.

1.5 Research hypothesis

Globalization, capitalist economic development, modernization, education and national policy shape gender norms and ideals in romantic and marital relationships by overtly or implicitly promoting individual and social distinction, characterized by lifestyles of conspicuous consumption and upward social mobility. This hypothesis is based on Eva Illouz's arguments in *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1997).

1.6 Objectives of study

The overarching inquiry for this project concerns how attitudes towards dating and marriage in Singapore are tied to the sociocultural construction of the gendered self. Besides a partial replication of Williams and Guest (2005) to gather comparable data on urban middle-class youth attitudes towards marriage, relationships and dating, this thesis explores issues of gendered identity in romantic and/or conjugal partnerships, and what it means to be in such a relationship in a contemporary, 'developed' Southeast Asia nation - amidst globalizing change, advanced economic growth and modern cultural influences. The stated aim of the original study was to "give voice to those who have been observing and experiencing current marriage market attitudes and behaviors directly" (2005: 165) in the neighboring ASEAN countries of Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines. Building off it, I ask:

1) To what extent do constructions of femininity and masculinity, represented in criteria of eligibility or desirability, and what a partner wants out of a relationship affect modal behaviors in dating, marriage and sexuality?

2) How are these notions of desirability or eligibility themselves related to other social patterns within Singapore and across the region?

A comparison of Singaporean youth attitudes with those of other Southeast Asian nations contributes to a better understanding of gender and population dynamics in this region. Existing work on marriage and relationships in Asia has often taken a more societal, reproduction and kinship-oriented perspective (e.g. Quah 1998; 1998; Heng & Devan 1995; Lee at al. 1999; Phua & Yeoh 2002), informed by the theoretical backdrop of Asian family values and communitarianism. In this study I wish to also focus on the perspective of the individual and consider the dialectic between the public or 'glocal', and the private and personal. As such, a concurrent aim of this study is to *understand how globalization, education, individualism, capitalist economic development and other drivers and forms of social change have shaped heteronormative gender and its ideals in romantic relationships and marriage* by replicating Williams and Guest's study.

A hypothesis for the Singaporean context is that they do so by promoting individual and social distinction, characterized by lifestyles of conspicuous consumption and upward social mobility. Illouz (1997) submits that ideas of love and marriage in the material cultural milieu of capitalist modernity are not free of the taste, values and ideological underpinnings of mass culture. Through an analysis of open-ended interviews with adult American men and women from various class backgrounds, lifestyle magazines, advertisements, advice columns and self-help books

from the 1990s, she demonstrates that contrary to popular discourses on love as occupying a separate order from the realm of commodity exchange, romance is commoditized and commodities are romanticized: romantic moments involve rituals that require certain forms of consumption such as travel, dining out, gift-exchange, grooming, fashion and lifestyle items. My thesis explores such a scenario in Singapore.

In summary, the main objectives of this study are:

1) A partial replication of Williams and Guest's 2005 study, "Attitudes toward Marriage among the Urban Middle-Class in Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines". In accordance with its two hypotheses, the study found that women's growing economic autonomy and unsuitable economic circumstances are factors that contribute to delayed and non-marriage in urban Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. Williams and Guest also found evidence to suggest that "both men and women still largely view the institution of marriage as important in general, as well as personally" (163).

2) Besides partially replicating the above study, this research seeks to address how gender relationships in romantic partnerships and/or marriage in Singapore are configured by a capitalist logic and global economy. A secondary, recurring theme concerns the factors surrounding one's decision to marry - whether it is a choice made for "love" or for "convenience" and/or other practical reasons.

1.6 Utility of research

Williams and Guest's study sought to better understand marriage market attitudes and behaviors in neighboring ASEAN countries of Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines. Building on that aim, this study asks how constructions of gender eligibility and desirability and what young Singaporeans want out of romantic or conjugal unions are shaped by social forces within the moral and political economy of dating, marriage and sexuality.

Given the issues of aging population, declining marriage and fertility and rising divorce that have surfaced in the developed world, including parts of Asia, a comparison of middle-class attitudes in Singapore with those of other Southeast Asian nations provides a deeper understanding of gender and population dynamics in the region.

1.7 Thesis overview and outline

In Chapter 2, I contextualize dating, marriage and gender relations by outlining relevant research findings on gender, marriage and romance in Singapore. From there I lay out the conceptual framework and a working hypothesis derived from the research question. Chapter 3 covers the data collection procedure and methodological issues that arose in carrying out this project. A close analysis of the focus group data is undertaken in Chapter 4, which also compares the current results with those from the 1979 Singaporean survey on youth attitudes towards courtship, marriage and family (Saw and Wong 1981) and Williams and Guest's (2005) original study. In Chapter 5, the themes and implications of the research results are discussed. Finally, Chapter 6

summarizes the findings of this study and highlights key points, before synthesizing them in the conclusion and suggesting future directions for research.

CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT

Singapore is a somewhat anomalous, if not interesting, site of sociological inquiry for various reasons. It has a recent history, attaining statehood before truly becoming a nation (Tamney 1996: 88) and is English-speaking with a Chinese ethnic majority. Its population as of June 2010 is 5.08 million, of which Chinese comprise 74.1%; Malays -13.4%; Indian: 9.2%; Others: 3.3% (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2010). When the British arrived in 1819, the island of Singapore was a tiny fishing village at the tip of the Malay Peninsula with only 150 inhabitants (Newbold 1839i: 279, cited in Saw 1969: 37). Under the colonial administration, Singapore grew to become a busy port city and since its independence in 1965, has developed into a very modern, 'westernized' and prosperous island city-state with the highest per capita GDP in the world according to 2010 indicators (The Wealth Report 2012).

2.1 Historical context

As was the case in neighboring countries (Manderson & Liamputtong 2002), gender norms in Singapore have been sharply defined in the past:

> [b]oys and girls underwent very different kinds of socialization, and any social contact between them was under strict adult supervision. Dating between boys and girls as we see it today was not possible. Most marriages were arranged, and it was not unusual for the bride and the groom to meet for the fist time at their wedding. Romantic love was not viewed favourably since it could easily upset the kinds of marriage arrangements that formed the basis for family alliances within the wider kinship network. With rapid changes in the social and economic structure of society, the institution of co-

education, and the general impact of Western cultural influences, boys and girls have much more freedom now to associate with each other and dating behaviour[1] has become both accepted and prevalent (Saw and Wong 1981: 10).

Saw and Wong allude to the emergence of romantic love and a dating culture as a corollary of modernization, economic development and schooling that brought them into increased contact with "Western" social mores (1981: 28-29). As incomes rose, more young people came to have the money and time to engage in leisure activities together. Freedman (1957) observes that the "schoolroom" was seen as an incubatory site for romantic encounters in the early days due to the popular association of modern education and 'free love', which in the East Asian context at the time translated to "the unhindered selection of a partner" without parental interference (1957: 155), and not – heaven forbid – "experimental cohabitation", which would have been unthinkable in the 1950s.

Freedman ties modern marriage in Singapore to its rise in China, where it was linked to modernism and nationalism in the post-1911 era where "the new dogmas of sexual equality became integral parts of nationalist ideology" (1957:175). He did not elaborate on the mechanisms of diffusion, so one is left to infer that this consequently

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[1] The authors did not qualify their statement by ethnic group, so I follow their assumption that it applies generally to all Singaporean youth. Singapore declares itself to be a multicultural, egalitarian society, but a significant body of work (e.g. Heng & Devan 1995; Clammer 1998; Moore 2000; Chua 2003; Lian 2006; Barr & Skrbiš 2008; Goh et al. 2009) has shown that state ideology operates to secure the consent of the population in the reproduction of ethnic difference beneath a cloak of nationalism, assimilation, meritocracy and professed equality. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully address the hidden complexities of ethnicity in its focus on gender relations and youth attitudes towards dating and marriage because the young people who were interviewed did not emphasize their ethnic identities as structuring forces. This does not mean that race or ethnicity are unproblematic aspects of relationships and marriage that should be dismissed; only that they did not emerge as strong themes in the focus groups that were conducted for this research.

spread to Singapore through the predominantly Chinese migrant population, who maintained close ties with their country of origin, especially in the earlier half of the 19th-century. Following mainland Chinese trends of marriage reform, the ascendance of modern marriage, characterized by romantic choice and monogamy, heralded the proliferation of nuclear families. Saw and Wong cite the 1957 census results showing that "one family nucleus" households comprised 63.5% of all Singaporean households at the time, increasing to 76.4% in 1966 (ibid: footnote 2). According to them, modern marriage "was based on the free consent of the marriage partners, and was monogamous and equalitarian in terms of the rights and obligations of the husband and wife" (ibid: 28-9) – at least in principle, as the institution of polygyny was certainly not uncommon. The rise of romantic love as a basis for marriage amongst "English-educated Chinese university students" was also noted by Stephen Yeh (1969) in his dissertation on Chinese marriage patterns in Singapore (Saw and Wong 1981: 29). The 1961 Women's Charter mandated that all marriages had to be registered, and that they were to be monogamous. It also established the legal age for marriage to be 21 (or 18 with parental consent), along with a separate administration of Muslim marriages according to Islamic custom.

The 1981 study based on the 1979 nation-wide survey of 1000 randomly sampled youths (484 males and 516 females aged 14 to 21) found that the ideal age for marriage was 25.7 for boys and 23.0 for girls, and that the ideal age increased with education level and income. Out of 6 fixed-choice factors, "love" was ranked as the

most important[2] reason for marriage, followed by "to have children" and "constant companionship"; the other three factors, "social norm", "sexual fulfillment" and "financial security for the woman" were not significantly represented. With regard to what traits an "ideal modern husband" possessed, respondents chose from a given list of 8 characteristics "generally thought to be important[2]". The three most important were "hardworking and responsible," "being understanding and considerate towards the wife" and "having a steady job and income"; for "the ideal modern wife" they were "being a good mother", "being faithful to her husband" and "respecting her husband's decisions" (Saw and Wong 1981: 34).

The table below is reproduced from the original study and displays what male and female respondents ranked as ideal characteristics of the "modern husband and wife" compared to the aggregate ranking. Overall, less importance was placed on men to be a good father, a faithful husband, a decision-maker and to perform domestic duties or be supportive of their wives' work compared to the top three characteristics mentioned earlier. For women, cooking skills, affinity with their in-laws, decision-making and career were lesser considerations in ideal wifehood. Saw and Wong did not explain how they arrived at the 8 fixed-choice characteristics, nor why some of the qualities (such as ability to get along with in-laws) were gender-specific. However, marked gender differences in conceptions of ideal spousal roles are not evident in the table, and the fact that "being supportive of wife's work/career" and "having her own job/career" are the least important characteristics of an ideal modern husband and wife

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[2] The surveyors take for granted a universal acceptance of the 8 characteristics that were "thought to be important", omitting to explain how they arrived at them. In doing so they may have inadvertently limited the range of survey options available to their participants.

respectively indicate a consensus on the place of women in the domestic arena. Having said that, the respondents' relative inexperience may have predisposed them towards the mores of their parents' generation, since many of them were still schooling and not of working or marriageable age. Therefore, it is possible that they may not have given the question of what an ideal spouse should be like adequate or critical consideration.

IDEAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MODERN HUSBAND AND WIFE IN DESCENDING ORDER OF IMPORTANCE BY SEX

Ideal husband			Ideal wife		
Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1. Hardworking and responsible	Hardworking and responsible	Hardworking and responsible	1. Being a good mother	Good mother	Good mother
2. Being understanding and considerate to wife	Understanding and considerate	Understanding and considerate	2. Being faithful to husband	Faithful	Faithful
3. Having steady job and income	Good father	Steady job and income	3. Respecting husband's decisions	Respecting husband's decisions	Respecting husband's decisions
4. Being a good father	Steady job and income	Faithful	4. Being supportive of husband's career	Supportive of husband's career	Supportive of husband's career
5. Being faithful to wife	Faithful	Good father	5. Getting along fine with in-laws	Good cook	Getting along with in-laws
6. Being able to make the major decisions in family	Decision-maker	Decision-maker	6. Being able to make independent decisions	Getting along with in-laws	Able to make independent decisions
7. Sharing in housework and childcare	Sharing housework and childcare	Sharing housework and childcare	7. Being a good cook	Able to make independent decisions	Good cook
8. Being supportive of wife's work/career	Supportive of wife's work	Supportive of wife's work	8. Having her own job/career	Having her own career	Having her own career

Table 1: Ideal characteristics of modern husband and wife in descending order of importance by sex (from Saw & Wong 1981:3)

Income and educational differences were not significant factors in the choice of a dating or marriage partner for the majority of Saw and Wong's respondents. They

submit that "as income and education rise, there is an increasing liberal attitude towards marrying across group lines" (49), especially class and education lines. Within these intergroup marriages, ethnicity was the strongest social barrier, followed by religion, class and education (ibid). In other words, differences in education and income level did not appear to be as powerful a deterrent to marriage than ethnicity or religion, since economic and educational progress was creating more parity as Singapore modernized. Respondents generally saw ethnic and religious differences as more fundamental barriers to union. Along this vein, Saw and Wong cautioned against attributing "a higher willingness on the part of those coming from wealthier families and those with a higher educational level to date or marry someone of a different ethnic or religious affiliation" (1981: 39).

More than three-quarters of the surveyed youth believed that children were integral to a happy marriage, the average ideal number of offspring being 2.32. Women were expected to stay at home and look after the children and respondents subscribed heavily to a gendered division of labor – far fewer girls indicated that they would remain employed after giving birth, and the proportion of boys who approved of their wives continuing to work after they had children was correspondingly low. Saw and Wong point out that "to many young people, the most important role of a married woman is that of being a mother, and performance of this role is seen as incompatible with her having a career/job of her own" (50).

2.2 Development, modernity and gender

To deal with the labor shortages brought on by Singapore's rapid economic expansion in the first three decades of nationhood from the 1960s to 1980s, the government urged women to join the workforce (e.g. Pyle 1994, 1997). Many did so, even as existing attitudes appeared to lag, with Saw and Wong's respondents believing that women with children should stay at home. In any case, better education and employment gave women broader, more informed outlooks towards life, financial independence and new positions and responsibilities in society beyond the traditional females roles of wife, mother, and homemaker (Kuo & Wong 1979; Wong & Kum 1993; Quah 1998; Chin & Singam 2004), even while traditional mentalities about the maternal roles and domestic responsibilities of women lingered. Singapore's drive to modernize brought about significant social change alongside economic and technological development. Its status as a meritocracy encourages competition and comparison - "conspicuous signs of meritocratic success (wealth, possessions, and social mobility) can [and do] ignite ambitions to rise above one's station in life" (Tan 2008: 9) through hard work, which explains why excellence and getting ahead are key motivating forces for its citizens. Unsurprisingly, Singaporean women, who are increasingly well educated, have distinctly gendered outlooks, values and aspirations even though this does not translate into a pronounced or widespread feminist consciousness[3]. Traditional arrangements are no longer accepted and they will assert themselves in a marriage and family (Quek & Knudsen-Martin 2008). Modernization

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[3] Feminism has not been positively viewed by Singaporeans, as can be seen in Lyons' collection, from interview transcripts, of "words and phrases associated with the term 'feminism'…: militant, lesbian, bra-burning, anti-men, Western, high-brows, Western educated, middle-class, man-hating, sexually promiscuous, feminists are people who are really not women, really aggressive, women who don't shave their legs, liberals, radicals, women with a chip on their shoulders, ranting and raving, making noise" (Lyons 2004: 64).

appears to have placed them on a separate trajectory in that they have "modernized"

faster than their male peers[4], resulting in a huge disparity between male and female

Singaporean professionals:

> Somehow when the girls come to this status, they are
> leaps and bounds ahead of the men. Take 1000
> graduate ladies and 1000 graduate men, you'll find 75
> per cent of the girls are more sophisticated, carry
> themselves well, speak well, [are] more broadminded
> and only 30 per cent of the men are like that. - Dr.
> Eileen Aw, first Director of the Social Development
> Unit[5], interview with Pearl Lee, cited in Chin and
> Singam (2004: 214).

Ostensible gender equality seems to have wreaked havoc on gender relations in

the dating and marital sphere as Singaporean women increasingly look for traits

Singaporean men tend to lack and for lifestyles and opportunities Singaporean men are

less disposed to provide. Kelsky (1999; 2001), amongst others (e.g. Tsuya 1994),

documents a similar trend in Japan, where "professionally ambitious" Japanese

women orient themselves towards an "internationalist modernity" while Japanese men

are perceived to be "backward (*okureteru*)… privileged by the domestic system and

intransigent defenders of 'feudal' Japanese tradition" (Kelsky 1999: 237).

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[4] Why this has been the case is an interesting question. Perhaps women, used to being subordinated, are more adaptable, flexible and inclined to change with times; also, with patriliny, daughters 'marry out', and the burden of maintaining 'tradition' may fall more heavily on sons, especially in Chinese families who favor male children since they are the ones carrying on the family name. The patriarchal norms of the past worked for men and did not serve the interests of women, so it makes sense that women easily eschewed them when educational and economic conditions improved.

[5] SDU, or Social Development Unit, established in 1984 and now known as SDN or Social Development Network. The government's matchmaking service, whose subscribers have to bear the shame of being taunted as '**S**ingle, **D**esperate and **U**gly'. All local students of Singaporean universities are given immediate membership upon graduation. The headline in a previous incarnation (LoveByte.org.sg) of its online portal proclaimed, "Yes!!! [sic] We believe in our mission of promoting marriage among graduate singles and inculcating positive attitudes towards marriage among all singles in Singapore to achieve strong and stable families in Singapore."

Perhaps as an effect of the meritocratic ideology prevalent in Singapore, the Singaporean woman is unwilling to compromise and lower her standards, as is suggested by one of the focus group participants, who explains delayed marriage with reference to an inculcated tendency to find the perfect partner:

> People are always saying now you should wait for… the right one, you should wait for… the Special One! Like in the movies… some chick flick. And… you should… err… you know, it's your life – I mean, you have to take hold of it, that kind of thing, then… everybody just thinks that they should wait, instead of like, compared to the past.. people just… I dunno, match-make, and then go for it; [like] "I have a guy, and then I'm of marriageable age, and then – just marry.

A comparison of the traits men and women seek can be made in the "checklist" below, which summarizes information from Singaporean dating agencies on what local men and women want in a partner:

What women want

Men who are:
- ✓ Taller than them. Optimal height is more than 1.75m.
- ✓ As educated or more educated than them.
- ✓ At a position in a company that is comparable to their position.
- ✓ Older. Optimal age is up to four years older.
- ✓ Confident.
- ✓ Earning more than them. Preferably in the following professions - lawyer, doctor, engineer, banker and pilot.

What men want

Women who are:
- ✓ Pleasant looking (not too pretty).
- ✓ Slim.

- ✓ Family oriented.
- ✓ Not at a higher level than them in terms of profession.
- ✓ Younger. Optimal age is up to four years younger.

The information above is reproduced from The Straits Times, January 5 2013, "Singaporeans and marriage: the checklist syndrome."

Coupled with the finding that Singaporean women have high material expectations and give substantial consideration to their partner's income compared to women in the US[6] (Li et al. 2010: 397-8), it is not difficult to see how the emphasis on such criteria narrows one's options and chances of success in the marriage market. Williams and Guest also reported that "one reason for the move away from marriage among more elite women is that the current version of a desirable spouse is in scarce supply" (2005:164). Therefore, "[u]nless Singapore men change, or Singapore women's educational and labor market opportunities are taken away forcibly, it looks like marriage will be a rite increasingly postponed" (Chin & Singam 2004: 215).

2.3 The status of women

On the surface, Singaporean women currently occupy a relatively decent position in society; in the words of Wong and Leong, "the position of Singapore women in several crucial respects [health, education and training, and labor force participation] has approached that of their sisters in the more developed world" (1993:3). Despite the presence of glass ceilings and gendered income gaps (e.g. Lee 1998) and poor female political representation, "the Singapore woman is, on average, educated and socially mobile" (Chew 2008: 187).

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[6] But see Li et al.'s Discussion (2010: 401) for limitations of the study.

The prosperity Singapore enjoys is a key factor contributing to political apathy and a sluggish consciousness of women's issues. The status of women in Singapore society is commonly perceived to be unproblematic. Earlier generations of women had to deal with familial obligations, stricter upbringings and the customs or dictates of their particular ethnic groups, such as the traditional Chinese preferential bias towards sons and large income gaps between the genders. Wee (1999:iii) brings our attention to the fact that "in this past, a girl grew to womanhood with at best a year or two of schooling and few job opportunities – these for the most part menial and miserably paid – and faced twenty years of more or less continual pregnancy in marriage to a man who had little schooling, while struggling with low earnings and an insecure livelihood" (cited in Chew 2008). These hardships have gradually lessened as attitudes, norms and women's opportunities changed for the better.

While wage differentials exist and women are under-represented in the political arena[7] the inequalities experienced by women in Singapore certainly do not seem as glaring as those in other Asian countries[8]. Chan (2000: 40) points out that "[a]t present, the PAP[9]'s policies are accepted and tolerated because the PAP

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[7] At present, 18 out of 84 seats in parliament belong to women, and the political influence they wield is nominal.

[8] But see Heng & Devan (1995); Lyons (1998); Doran & Jose (2002) as well as Chan and PuruShotam cited above for explications of state sexism and policies that instrumentalize women.

[9] People's Action Party. The ruling political party in Singapore since 1959. The PAP was led by Minister Mentor (his current cabinet position) Lee Kuan Yew from then to 1990. Its dominant political ideology has been characterized as 'Western conservatism, Asian-style' (Tamney 1995: 173). Lee Kuan Yew's son Lee Hsien Loong, dubbed 'Singapore's philosopher-prince' by the BBC, is the current Prime Minister. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3556982.stm

government has successfully provided for the economic and social needs of the population, and can legitimately claim to have improved the lives of its people, including women". PuruShotam (1998) highlights the role of women as the reproducers of the middle-class[10] lifestyle in Singapore to stave off a "fear of falling" (Ehrenreich 1989), which "places on [them] the burden of reproducing a way of life that is at once about the 'better' life and about their subordination" (ibid:127).

Tamura (2003) argues that to remain in power by satisfying the "mammonism" of the middle class, the government will have to keep stoking Singapore's economy and feeding a culture of excess (c.f. Slosar 2009). Chua (1998: 996) observed that economic growth and its attendant culture of consumption "are constitutive of the legitimacy of the PAP government and serve to underwrite certain undemocratic practices in the nation (Chua 1995); they provide the discursive space for the government to define ideologically 'good government' against 'democracy' (Chan 1992)." Drawing from survey and focus group data, Chew (2008: 202-3) finds that Singaporean women are too caught up in balancing their professional and domestic lives and "preoccupied with the affordability of houses and cars, and immersed in ensuring a 'high standard of living' that they have very little time or need for 'non-material' issues such as 'equal opportunities' or 'human rights'. In this respect, the government can be said to have positioned women where they wish them to be."

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[10] According to Tan (2004: 13), "an overwhelming 87% of the population identif[y] themelves as 'middle class'".

Taken together, the arguments above demonstrate that an ignorance of gender oppression or inequality goes hand in hand with a lack of political consciousness. This calls for an analysis of intersectional patriarchal and state structures in the country.

2.4 Patriarchy in Singapore

Patriarchal mentalities and machinations in Singapore operate through the political hegemony of the predominantly male PAP. Singaporean women never had to fight for universal suffrage, but this was only because it became a nation long after women had won the right to vote in countries of the 'developed world'. Nonetheless, many government policies[11] reflected the patriarchal, Chinese, malecentric interests of the ruling elite that Ezra Vogel calls a self-styled 'macho-meritocracy' (1989:1053). These constructions of gender are briefly elaborated below.

Kenneth Paul Tan (e.g. 2001; 2009) makes a powerful case for the emasculation, feminization and infantilization of Singaporean society by the PAP government through state constructions of what the Singaporean woman is and how she should be. Tan (2001) conceptualizes the role of the Singaporean Man, envisaged and epitomized by the PAP, as protector of the nation, a role forged through compulsory military service for Singaporean males lasting at least two and a half

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[11] For example, it was not until 1997 or 1998, after two decades of lobbying, that foreign spouses of Singaporean women were eligible to apply for permanent residency, although only if he had a job, a work permit, or money to invest. Foreign wives of Singaporean men did not face such criteria. Because the PAP sees husbands as heads of households, male and female Singapore citizens were not treated equally when they married foreigners. Policymakers had to face the fact that more and more Singapore women were marrying foreigners; if their spouses were not permitted to apply for permanent residency, the couple and their children might simply leave Singapore for good. Women's issues fell on the government agenda only when they had deeper implications for other concerns, such as national survival, economic viability and loyalty to the country (Lee, Campbell and Chia 1999: 312).

years, and that of the Singaporean woman as the reproducer of upstanding (read: docile) citizens. These are examples of what Ong and Peletz term 'phallic and uterine nationalism' (1995:12). The 'Asian family[12]' enshrined in state discourse consists of a husband, wife and two children, and "[t]he ideal traditional woman is gentle, soft-spoken, yielding, passive and relies on intuition and feeling rather than logic" (Lee et al. 1999: 317), playing the role of virtuous wife and good mother. The patriarchal family is extolled as the basic unit of society, whose pinnacle is the head of state and his government. Love is co-opted into nation-building projects based on the nuclear family as a unit of society due to its role in monogamous, love-based marriage.

The Singapore government's gendered, moralistic family policies therefore "presume (and reproduce) men as breadwinners and women as caregivers" (Teo 2007) in subtle ways – for example, women receive far longer parental leave than men[13], and while it is the norm for highly-educated women to work, their families and children still come first. Married couples are given priority for public housing while single mothers are denied equal access (ibid). The governments patronizing, pro-nuptialist stance is exemplified in this wheedling advertisement:

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[12] Women are pitched as the 'keepers' and 'producers' of the 'Asian family'. Which is the bulwark against the social costs of modernity (and of dissent) and the dangers of fragmenting national and personal identities produced in the current (post)modern order" (Stivens 1998: 17). An elaboration of the state ideology on the 'normal family' in Singapore is found in PuruShotam (1998:135) and Heng and Devan (1995).

[13] But things are very slowly starting to change. The government of Singapore recently announced the implementation of enhanced paternity, shared parental and child care leave for civil servants, resulting in an increase in paternity leave from 3 to 7 days, with the option of additionally taking up to a week of the wife's maternity leave with her agreement (but only if she herself qualifies for government-paid leave). (Prime Minister's Office press release, 2013. "Paternity, Parental and child care leave enhancements for civil servants to take effect from 1 January 2013." (http://www.news.gov.sg/public/sgpc/en/media_releases/agencies/pmo/press_release/P-20130121-1.html?AuthKey=b59291ac-9de3-7c44-8403-6db9a70e3a8a).

Addressed to the single woman

Are you giving men the wrong idea?

Are you giving men the wrong idea? It's wonderful to have a career and financial independence.
But is your self-sufficiency giving men a hard time? They say that you expect a lot from them and have become intimidating and unapproachable.

Surely that can't be true. You really are a warm and friendly girl, and look forward to a home of your own and a family.

Perhaps it's time to give the guys a break. By being more relaxed and approachable. Friendlier and sociable. That way, they'll get to know you – which is how relationships begin.

After all, you don't want to give men the wrong idea.

Addressed to the single man

Do you keep up with the times?

Do you keep up with the times? If you're going for success in life, you have to keep up with the times, right?

But when it comes to your relationships with girls, does the same apply?

Or are you in the old mode and chauvinistic in preferring girls who aren't your equals, who will be awed by your and be at your beck and call?

If it is true, you aren't keeping up with the times. For a man needs a partner, someone to give help and encouragement, someone you can be proud of (just as she's proud of you). That someone is most likely to be your social and intellectual equal. So chat up the girls. Make friends with them.

That way, you'll get a real partner in life.

The texts above are from a 'Singapore family life poster' used in 1988 and are reproduced from Phua & Yeoh (2002: 22).

The "Great Marriage Debate" of the 1980s was triggered in 1983 by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's anxiety, based on 1980 census results, about the

emerging trend that females with university degrees, and particularly those with graduate degrees, are less likely to marry and procreate (Lyons 2004: 30). This anxiety was fueled by three concerns about "the future quantity and quality of the population arising from current marriage and reproductive patterns" - "below-replacement fertility," a graying population and a "lop-sided pattern of procreation" whereby "the less educated reproduce themselves at higher rates of fertility than the better educated," precipitating a population that is less intellectually able under principles of eugenics (Yap 1995: 39). This would threaten Singapore's economic viability and very survival. Since then, government initiatives have been launched to encourage Singaporeans to marry (each other) and reproduce. Such propaganda prodding citizens to marry and procreate with each other is both disconcerting and amusing because of its unctuous, paternalistic tone.

2.5 Women's[14] choices today

Today's women, especially those who are well-educated, well-paid or both[15], are not wholly persuaded by the prospect of marrying and starting a family because they may not find the local, middle-class way of life they will live out very satisfying. Unless either or both of them come from wealthy families, owning private housing

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[14] I focus more on women's perspectives, due to the lack of academic literature on Singaporean men and local masculinities (but see Khoo & Karan 2007; Pugsley 2010; Williams, Lyons and Ford 2012) and my reluctance to speak for, or make broad claims about them. Hopefully more research on this unmarked category and very interesting area will soon be available.

[15] According to "the Singapore Dating Guidebook", a modern corporate woman is known as a "SNIP", or "**S**ingapore **N**ew **I**ndependent **P**rincess" (That Dazzling Diva, 2009).

and transport[16] is not easy, given the shortage of land space (Chew et al. 1998: 83-85). They will most likely live with their in-laws and save up to buy their own house, often a HDB flat. It is a very predictable life course, one that is hardly exciting or romantic for anyone with dreams of marrying a rich, attractive man and living in a nice house.

Singaporean women now have a choice, and the power – because they wield more social, cultural and economic capital than before - to reject the Confucian, anomie-inducing discourses on Singaporean womanhood imposed by authorities such as the government, local men, their mothers-in-law and their own families, which, as described above, largely reduce it to wifehood and motherhood. The ideology of romantic love may offer a means of identity construction as a feminized object of romantic or sexual desire (Holland & Eisenhart 1990; Hirsch & Wardlow 2006), with its basis in the expression of affective individualism (Stone 1977). However, the data for this research suggests that this is not necessarily empowering because it is fraught for those in the female role, due to the contradictions of performing the feminine on one hand, and acting in ways reflecting masculine agency, such as appropriating typically tolerated male prerogatives like postponing marriage, or choosing to have multiple relationships or sexual partners.

The character and meaning of marriage in Singapore has also shifted with economic development and globalization (e.g. Jones and Ramdas 2004, Chen & Xu 2007, Straughan 2009). With the prosperity and higher standards of living resulting

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[16] 77% of Singaporean youths aspire to own private property and 95.3% hope to own a car (Chew et al. 1998: 83-4). In a country where it currently costs upwards of SGD$82,000 (The Straits Times, Jan 7 2013) to purchase a certificate of entitlement (COE) in order to register a vehicle, car ownership is not a possibility for many young people.

from the government's aggressive modernization campaign of the past five decades, Singaporeans are perhaps experiencing some degree of meaninglessness from the acute consumption they are surrounded by and encouraged to partake in, leading them to seek or emphasize a core value around which their lives and consumption can coalesce. "Where basic needs of housing, food and health care are met fairly adequately, it is inevitable that people will look for higher level, intrinsic needs of love and companionship. That the motivations affect women more so than men is indicative of women's changing expectations of marriage" (Straughan 2009: 35). The implications of the romantic love ideology with respect to gendered norms and patriarchy will be explored in the Discussion.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

3.1 Research design and procedure

As a partial replication of Williams and Guest (2005) that concentrates on youth attitudes, focus group interviews were conducted with four groups (2 male and 2 female) of Singaporean youth aged 18-24. These correspond to the four focus groups comprising never-married men and women in each of the countries Williams and Guest surveyed.

3-5 participants spanning the age-range for each group were recruited through various means: e-mails to university listservs, word of mouth and snowballing. As with previous studies, the focus group method was used because the potential synergy between the focus group members may open up new discourses beyond the information targeted by the interview guide. In addition, the subject of the interview is a familiar conversation topic among young people and among friends. The existence of prior acquaintance between some of the focus group members enrolled via snowballing establishes familiarity and amicable interactions, which can yield a more robust discussion. Morgan and Krueger note that on occasion, "groups composed of strangers would make it exceedingly difficult to conduct focus groups in organizations, communities and other ongoing social settings" (1993:6). This sampling approach "help[ed] to encourage openness in the discussions that might have been difficult to achieve if participants were strangers to one another" (Williams & Guest 2005: 170) and have no prior association because the absence of established rapport

may mitigate against self-disclosure on personal issues. In addition, the snowball method was useful as participants brought their friends from the same age group (18-24) to the focus group interviews

I moderated the female group and paid a male moderator trained in qualitative research to interview the focus group for males. Same-sex note-takers were present and the interviews were tape-recorded for accuracy and transcribed with the inclusion of comments from the note-takers in the final write-up. As with the original study, thematic analysis was used to process the data.

The focus groups took place over two consecutive summers in 2009 and 2010 as a result of time and financial limitations which made it necessary to apply for further funding in the interim period. In the first year both male and female interviews were conducted in a café centrally located in the business district for ease of access (participants were traveling from their homes in various parts of the island) and because it was thought to be a sufficiently neutral venue. The following year they were held at a private lounge area in one of the universities[17] many of the participants attended. The length of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to 2 hours.

3.2 Participants

A total of 17 never-married Singaporeans (9 female, 8 male) aged 19 – 27 took part in the focus groups. In both years, the male groups had four participants each and the female group had 3 participants in 2009 and 6 the next year. All the participants were native-born Singaporean citizens enrolled at tertiary institutions in Singapore at

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[17] The university is not named here to ensure full confidentiality to participants

the time of the interviews, and were overwhelmingly arts and social science majors, with the exception of an aeronautical engineering student and a business student. Of the remaining students, two were in film and communication studies, one in Southeast Asian studies, one in Political Science and the rest (10 out of 17) in Sociology. Due to the format of the recruiting process (notices sent to department mailing lists and through word of mouth and snowball sampling) some of the participants had prior acquaintance with each other and with the moderators; there were also two dating couples within the sample, but they were interviewed separately as the focus groups were divided by gender. 12 (6 female and 6 male) of the participants were Singaporean-Chinese, 3 were Malay (1 male, 2 female), and 2 were Indian (1 male, 1 female, who is half Chinese). A full list of participants, who are identified throughout this work by their pseudonyms, and their biographical information can be found in the Appendix. Effects of ethnicity are not expected to unduly influence the focus group findings because the interview questions sought to elicit participants' sense of what youth attitudes towards various issues on a very general level. However, the likelihood that these views represent those of the dominant Chinese majority is an issue that needs to be rectified in future research that consider attitudes within the Malay and Indian communities.

3.2 Methodological isues

Due to time and funding constraints, modifications in focus group size and composition had to be made. The low number of 3 participants in the 2009 female focus group falls below the limit for an adequate focus group, but allowed for an

intimate and extended discussion amongst its members. Participants of all four focus groups were enrolled in institutions of higher education and from at least middle-class backgrounds. As such, they were by no means a representative sample. The general structure of the Singaporean education system and life course made it difficult to recruit youths below the age of 18, as Singaporeans typically enter university in July or August of the year they turn 19. Consequently, the ages of participants in this study shifted upwards from the 18-24 range of the original study (Williams et al, 2005) it is partially replicating, to 19-27 years. Such a wide age-range is not recommended due to the differential life experiences and the possibility that the younger participants will defer to older ones, but this is perhaps mitigated by the fact that maximum age difference between participants in any focus group was 6. The absence of male participants between the ages of 18 and 21 due to compulsory military service (known in Singapore as National Service or NS for short) after the completion of secondary education is also reflected in the ages of male participants, all of whom are above 21. Due to the gendered age structure of tertiary education in Singapore, the majority of males in any given university cohort is 3 years older than the females. In any case, the small sample size does not allow for an extrapolation to the national youth population, but "the point of conducting a focus groups is [simply] to listen and gather information" that provides insight into the issue being studied (Krueger & Casey 2009: 2-10). As Williams and Guest highlight in the original study, "the intent of focus groups is not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people perceive a situation" (Krueger 1994:87).

Marked similarities or differences in response based on participants' disciplinary backgrounds were not apparent, as the sample size was too small to identify clear correlations. However, the fact that more than half of the seventeen participants were majoring in sociology can be discerned in some of their statements and observations coming from a social science perspective. For example, participants described Singaporeans as "economically rational" actors, and understood young people's motivations through government incentivization, and by examining the "belief structures" and "needs structures" of men and women from late adolescence to emerging adulthood in college, and later on in working life. Such instances underscore the effect of (in this case, sociological) education on the mindsets, practices and interpretations of young people with respect to dating, romance, marriage and gender norms. With this in mind, it might be difficult to generalize their attitudes to those of other Singaporeans who may not be as inclined analyze seemingly personal issues in overtly sociological terms.

In terms of the interview process, the moderators of the male focus groups took the liberty of conducting very informal interviews with the participants; often interjecting with their own comments and opinions. I was not able to intervene and direct the interview in such a way as to minimize this because of my absence, as a female researcher, from the male focus groups. While their style was not fully professional, it is possible that they managed to elicit more information and depth of sentiment than a formal, structured interview style might have. The ensuing conversations were rich with local flavor and idiosyncrasies typifying the kind of talk

males engage in with friends of the same sex. Although focus group leaders are not supposed to express their own views because their vocality may discourage dissent, this did not seem to be an issue judging from the animated interactions in both male focus groups that fulfilled the goal of "obtain[ing] perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment" (Krueger & Casey 2009: 2).

Because of the issues mentioned above, the findings can only be tentative and preliminary, suggesting the presence of certain orientations among college students in Singapore. Nonetheless, the patterns and resonances detected in the responses from the four focus groups can be compared with Saw and Wong's 1979 survey results to show potential changes in Singaporean youth attitudes towards sexuality, relationship-, marriage- and family-formation in the thirty years that have since passed. Properly facilitated, larger-scale projects can then address the methodological limitations, and the lacunas that emerge from this research.

If a full-scale study could be conducted with adequate financial and institutional support, the following steps can be taken to avoid some of the shortfalls encountered in this study. First, focus groups (at least four male and four female groups) can be held until informational saturation is reached, where no new themes or observations emerge in the dialogs. Next, the focus group discussions can be organized by ethnic identity, on top of gender, and facilitated by trained moderators of the same gender and ethnicity. Finally, LGBTQ focus groups will also give insight into the dynamics of heteronormativity and how local gender constructs are shaped,

understood and negotiated by those who are marginalized by the dominant discourses of sex and gender.

Youth from a wider range of educational and class backgrounds can be interviewed to obtain a more representative sample of young Singaporeans, although organizing focus groups along socioeconomic lines might make participants uncomfortable if their SES, even if determined through self-identification, is made known, given the stigma attached to lower class backgrounds. Focus groups with participants of the same ethnic group identification may better illuminate any ethnic differences in attitudes and practices. The focus group data will also be well supplemented by a nation-wide replication of Saw and Wong's 1979 survey. Both sets of findings can then be compared to determine if the focus group data square with the survey results.

The original survey can be modified and improved by offering a more inclusive set of choices to respondents with respect to what people do when on a date, reasons for marriage and their preferred qualities in a modern husband/wife. It is unclear how Saw and Wong developed the survey instrument, and the current and comparatively liberal sexual atmosphere may admit ideal characteristics of an ideal spouse other than the ones used in the survey (see Table 1 on page 13) such as physical attraction and romantic or sexual compatibility, along with educational and family background, which was curiously absent in the 1979 survey. Given the status-conscious mentalities of upwardly mobile Singaporeans, class, family status and occupational prestige presumably inform judgments of character. If this survey were

to be replicated, its enumerators would do well to solicit characteristics of an ideal husband and wife from a wide sample of participants in a pilot study and include an open-ended section on ideal qualities according to gender, so that respondents may rank and add their own preference(s). Restricting them to fixed-choice options may skew the survey findings.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Results

The focus group transcripts were closely analyzed, and large segments of interview data are reproduced in this section, interspersed with my own interpretations to allow the participants' words to speak for themselves. I identify six themes in the focus group conversations – 1) the indeterminacy of the term and concept of dating, 2) changes in youth attitudes towards courtship and marriage, 3) the enduring significance of marriage, 4) romantic love and expectations about romance, 5) gender "wars" or critiques of the opposite gender and 6) Singapore's affectively impoverished cityscape as a barrier to romance. Due to the limited number of focus groups conducted, the descriptive summaries larger-scale studies call for are less appropriate because each statement is more idiosyncratic and salient, thus carrying more weight in such a small sample. This also allows readers to closely scrutinize the interpretive claims by examining the evidence provided. Most of the responses are in Singlish, the local dialect of English, and they are reproduced word for word.

4.1 Dating in the Singaporean context

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Saw and Wong defined dating in their nation-wide survey as "going out with a member of the opposite sex either alone, or with one other couple, or with a group (i.e. more than one other couple)" (1981: 11). In his honors thesis on courtship spaces in Singapore, Ronald Tay adopts Cate and Lloyd's definition of courtship to cover "relationships that move to marriage as well as those that end before marriage which might more accurately be called "dating relationships" (Cate and Lloyd 1992: 1, cited in Tay 1998). In this study, participants interviewed

had divergent, sometimes unclear and contradictory responses when asked what constituted dating. Khatijah, 20, had this to say:

> For me dating is like a very…. I don't understand what dating means, cos when you're – do you mean that you're together with him? Or do you mean that you're going out with him? Or do you mean that you're just spending time with him?.. I don't get it. So – but maybe being on a date would probably like, to me- have this – it's just a stereotype? Go watch a movie or something… And then you have dinner… just typical… I don't know… what people nowadays actually mean by dating.

Dating was loosely defined by some as a means to befriend and learn more about a member of the opposite sex, exploring one's options to see what both parties have in common. Others saw it as a combination of friendship and some form or measure of intimacy with the opposite gender and yet another felt that the meaning of the term 'dating' has evolved and is no longer a formal affair where "[during the] Eighties, dating that time was very traditional, the first date when you guys meet up – guys usually out-dress themselves, and really make an impression whereas today – it's like through Facebook… you can communicate through Facebook – you can not even date, as the first "date" itself is not even considered a date; I would consider it just an outing perhaps?" (Adam)

Taken together, their responses indicate that dating covers different degrees of commitment, intimacy and exclusivity, from a casual to a more formal or serious stage at which both sides are officially "attached" or in a relationship. As Adam put it, "I think dating usually happens when the guy or girl already has a- both of them has a mutual agreement that both of them are in a relationship already, and probably – for me – that takes place after… a dating ritual, perhaps."

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Dating therefore spans the gamut of behavior from casual meet-ups to time spent together as a formal couple, the temporal element roughly correlating with the seriousness of commitment. These initial 'dates' early on the in the acquaintance (low-commitment) proceed with the aim of culminating in a serious, exclusive relationship cemented by mutual agreement (high-commitment).

There also appears to be a difference between going out on a date with someone, and dating someone – with the former being more of an activity that can take place before a real relationship is established, when there is at least some interest on both sides, however small, with the potential to develop into something deeper:

Heidi: If the guy shows that he is interested in you, then that's a date la. But if it's just friends then uhh… it's not a date la! …

Serene: Mmmm… I guess, this one is like… going out for like… or meeting up for a specific thing like a movie or what, like…. I think just in general enjoying the company and like finding out more about them, in a more comfortable setting la. Yah, I suppose. That's very formal…

Khatijah: Yeah…[chuckles], maybe like the period before you get together, you just like go out… chill together, have fun, maybe that's dating.

Heidi: It's the "something going on" stage.

[Laughter all around.]

Khatijah: Yeah… "Are you with him?" … Not really…

[Laughter]

Moderator: Ohh, so it's when you're still deciding… or just…?

Heidi: When y'all are not officially boyfriend and girlfriend, [Khatijah: Yeah… [Laughing]]. But y'all are like… [you] like each other… [Khatijah: yeah… just datinggg…], HOPING… to get together eventually…

[Everyone laughs]

After some dates, the "dating ritual" phase of "courtship and friendship", as Adam calls it, lays the foundation for a possible progression to a more official relationship. However, two of the female participants, Sheila and Chloe asserted that people in Singapore "did not date", because dating for them is a casual, non-exclusive activity (i.e. one could be dating several people at any one time); as opposed to "going out" or being in a "steady" relationship with someone. By their account, dating was a brief process that quickly transitioned to a formal relationship. Possibly because of this quick passage and the assumption that dating inevitably leads to a relationship, or is at least expected to lead to one, they felt that dating is exclusive – there is an obligation to not see other people unless the intention to is specified at the outset, and even then the implication was that it would not be a welcome move:

Tammy: Therefore, I think guys are all a bit iffy about asking girls out, like.. if you ask a girl out, then - you're giving the girl a message to say, Hey, umm-

Aisha: I'm interested…

Tammy: I'm interested in you, therefore you know-

Andrea: Leading up to a relationship-

Tammy: Yah…

Moderator: So it's always- like, usually leading up to a relationship-

Tammy: Yah.

Aisha: I guess when you're… dating in Singapore, it's kind of like.. umm, the guy and the girl, you have to go exclusive, you know? In that sense, the dating is exclusive to each other.

The significance dating tends to be imbued with is echoed by Adam, who says: "when it comes to dating, when you make the outing very salient that you are dating

her, then that's a bit of a sensitive issue. If you make the outing salient, like you're dating her, like you really dress up, or you wear so casually like you're just going out as friends, it's better to go out as friends, then you see… if things move up… As I said [you perform the] courtship and friendship ritual, then you slowly bring up to the relationship level with mutual consent…". The significance attached to dating as a signifier of one's romantic interest is also alluded to in the excerpt below:

Moderator: So you haven't found it difficult to - to meet girls?

David: Yah, I don't think so.

Tat Meng: I agree with that la… basically you need to start with a bunch of friends first, then you single one or two out…

Gerald: WAAAAAA

Moderator: JI BAI[18]!

[Minor uproar]

Tat Meng: [Indistinct] It's not what I mean la! It's like… for example, you start with a group, when you want to transit into like… when you have a particular interest in a girl… I think it's very weird to just… suddenly ask her out.

Adam: Let's divide and conquer man!

Tat Meng: Yah, I think… most of the time I would scare people away… that kind of thing.

Moderator: I guess sometimes people do make use of the fact that in a group setting when you single someone out, it's like a sign already right?

Adam: Yah, that's why [you] must not make it salient!

Tat Meng: Yah… I think it's more like a gamble. If you go one on one, then, it's like you might scare her away, that kind of thing

Moderator: Yah, but if you don't try, you don't know la!

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[18] A Hokkien swear word.

4.2 Changes through time – youth attitudes thirty years on

Thirty years ago, the appropriate age to begin dating was thought to be above 18, although the actual ages of those who had been on their first dates was around 16 – 17 (Saw and Wong 1981: 11-12). Saw and Wong note that "the early starters seemed to be concentrated in families with fathers who worked as professionals, technical personnel, administrators, and managers, although an early start did not seem to be related to a higher level of household income (ibid: 13), but concluded that there was insufficient evidence to deduce whether the onset of dating was influenced by "the parents' liberal attitudes or permissive child discipline." They also observed the positive correlation between dating frequency and household income. Since "dating requires pocket money for expenses, there is an increasing frequency for boys and girls coming from wealthier homes to go dating." (ibid: 21)

From their 1979 survey, results indicated that the top three desired qualities for a dating partner to have were:

1) Personality ("being understanding, considerate, interesting, mature, decent, etc.")
2) Compatibility ("common interests, ability to interact and communicate, etc.")
3) Poise / social grace ("well-groomed, well-mannered, graceful, gentlemanly, etc.")

The researchers were "surpris[ed] to find that both physical qualities and mutual attraction were not regarded as important, given the theoretical proposition that a strong element in the so-called youth culture pertains to romanticization of boy/girl relationships, the emphasis and concern over physical appearance, and the influence of pop fashions." (15).

Although somewhat similar to findings from the recent focus groups, participants in the 1979 survey whose criteria for a dating partner did not match the fixed choice options presented would have had their views elided. They might have been concerned to give a "proper" response, denying the role physical attraction or chemistry is apt to play in romantic relations. In addition, "compatibility" is a more relational, rather than an intrinsic quality, that overlaps to some degree with personality in that both point to getting along with each other.

With regard to the importance of parental and peer approval towards one's dating partner to the extent that it influences the choice of partner, little has changed. All respondents in the current study agreed that parental approval was important for who they married, even though it was not an absolute criteria that would make or break their choice. Neither have dating activities varied widely from those of the past. Saw and Wong presented respondents with multiple choices of "what they thought most young people in Singapore do when they go dating alone", and their list of fixed-choice options included:

> Go to movies (92.1%)[19]
> Go for strolls and shopping (81.4%)
> Go to coffee houses and discos (60.7%)
> Talk in private place (58.4%)
> Talk in public place (47.7%)
> Visit each other's family (43.7%)
> Study together (43.2%)

The most popular activities based on their survey – going to movies, and shopping were well represented in the focus group responses. Surprisingly, dining out was not listed as in option in the survey – this stood out in almost all responses to the

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[19] All statistics taken from Table 2.8: Percentage distribution of youths' opinions on what most young people in Singapore do when dating alone (Saw & Wong 1981: 21).

question of what sort of things people do, or places they go, when they are in love; in fact "candlelight dinners" came across (unsurprisingly, given their metonymic association with romance) as exemplars of romantic acts, and as a somewhat compulsory activity for any self-respecting couple who claim romantic involvement with each other. Eating out was certainly less common in the 1970s and 80s, and one wonders if this is linked to increasing abundance of dining establishments designed to enable and encourage conspicuous consumption, revealing the intersections of status, material culture and romance. This will be further addressed in Chapter 5.

The clear sexual double standard[20] reported by Saw and Wong may be attenuated today, but it is still deeply lodged in the romantic psyche, as will be seen in the male participants' sentiments regarding the number of men women should date before they settle down – "the fewer the better", and both genders' acknowledgment that women had a shorter shelf life in the "marriage mart", that divorce generally had more repercussions for women, making it harder for them to remarry, and that the onus was on women to put their children first. This replicates Williams and Guest's findings that women in Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines have fewer options in the marriage market (2005: 182), seen in a narrower age window in which to marry, and more constraints on remarriage.

A methodological point to note is that the 1979 survey documented in Saw and Wong's report sampled 1000 youths (484 male, 516 female) aged between 14 – 21, who were interviewed personally by a team of sociology students using a structured,

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[20] For example, 43.9% of their sample agreed with the statement "boys should have more sexual freedom than girls" (1981: 57).

close-ended questionnaire while the age range of the focus group participants in the present study was 19-26. Both studies are therefore incommensurable on several levels, but the dearth of formal research in this area does not provide us with any other point of comparison. Although one can expect the participants of this study to hold more progressive views given the later date and chronological age at which they were interviewed, the continuity and persistence of certain attitudes, such as the importance of parental approval, are interesting findings that will be discussed later.

Saw and Wong concluded that from their survey results, Singaporean youth subscribed to values "conforming to those held by the older generation" with respect to love, marriage and family that would today be seen as conservative and patriarchal. They cite the fact that their respondents ranked "having a family" as the next reason after love as the basis for marriage, their belief in the husband's role as breadwinner and decision-maker and in the wife's role as a good mother, faithful wife, dependent and follower as examples. Men were not expected to perform their share of domestic work and children were thought to be an essential element of a successful marriage; women's paid work and careers were deemed less important than their responsibility for their children's wellbeing - best accomplished by being a stay-at-home mother.

Back then, interracial marriage was also less accepted, with ethnicity (and the frequent intersection of religion) constituting a significant factor in the choice of a dating or marriage partner. As Saw and Wong observe, "[a]lthough the young people by and large share rather homogenous values with regard to marriage and family living, ethnic differences are still apparent, especially when differences between religious faiths reinforce differences between ethnic values" (1981: 78). They also

note with surprise the stability of gender roles and expectations with regard to education level: "[m]arriage may be more for love and companionship for the better-educated youths, yet the better-educated ones do not necessarily perceive the ideal wife to be independent or having her career" (ibid: 80). This perception has shifted significantly in many ways, as will be seen in the themes and patterns that follow.

4.3 Significance of Marriage

4.3.1 Importance of Marriage

In their 2005 study on urban, middle-class attitudes towards marriage in the neighboring countries of Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, Williams and Guest found two recurring themes in their focus group discussions: 1) the importance of marrying "the right person"; and 2) economic considerations are significant in the decision to marry, postpone marriage, or remain single (2005: 171). Although non-marriage is seen less of a stigma or abnormality by the Singaporean respondents, marriage is undisputedly seen as a social convention, a stage of life that precedes, and is necessary, for starting a family by most participants (this last reason was overwhelmingly cited in the male focus groups). Other factors included parental pressure, religious ordain and traditional practice.

This is also largely consistent with Williams, Guest & Varangrat's (2006) findings on the reasons for marriage in Thailand – but here marriage is more widely taken for granted as a choice (one that is favored by many), rather than a real necessity. This is probably due to the fact that the economic position of women is comparatively stronger in Singapore than in Thailand, in terms of educational

attainment and average income (Gender Inequality Index, Human Development Report 2012). In the majority of cases in Singapore, it would be safe to presume that the choice to marry is conditioned more by societal and parental expectation or personal desire than by economic necessity.

With Thailand's growing middle class, "many recognize that there is less economic need for young women to get married today than was true in the past, [but] the young unmarried women interviewed in the focus groups have clearly internalized what they see as society's norms and their families' preferences" (Williams et al. 2006: 105). While formal marriage ceremony is not a requirement for younger women, it is still an obligatory social practice, especially for their children to be seen as legitimate (ibid). This view is largely held by the Singaporean youths interviewed in this study.

Women in all four countries (Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam) also generally preferred to marry men with the following qualities cited by Williams and Guest – maturity, financial stability and diligence (2005:176), although the last quality did not have the same kind of salience for Singaporean youth (it was not mentioned at all) – perhaps because it is an ingrained value that is taken for granted and/or because being hardworking, while important, is not as crucial in a country where economic survival is less of struggle. While Singaporean men wished to avoid marrying shrewish and bad-tempered women, Singaporean women, like their counterparts in the other three countries did not want to marry alcoholics, drug addicts, womanizers or abusive men. For most of them, infidelity was cited as the top reason for which women would get a divorce.

While the ups and downs of married life are widely acknowledged, albeit in passing, nearly all members of the four focus groups wanted to marry and "settle down" at some point. This is consistent with the findings of the original study, in which "the majority of participants expressed widespread acceptance and enthusiasm for marriage" (Williams & Guest 2005:182) even though there was also some uncertainty about its value.

Although the Singaporean participants thought non-marriage for others was completely acceptable, marriage was something they desired for themselves, with the exception of a few, who were unsure about the utility of marriage and/or the reliability of men as husbands, although they did believe in long-term or committed romantic partnerships. Participants were puzzled as to why anyone would want to remain single. Couplehood and matrimony are fused in the notion that people who don't (eventually) marry are thought to be missing out because the implicit assumption is that they do not have a partner. While such individuals are by no means ostracized, there is a sense that they are atypical, solitary. As Heidi comments, "And you'll always think that [unmarried individuals] are lonely, they're sad…[laughter all around] and they really should find someone [laughing]". Amongst the youths interviewed, marriage is largely thought to be a natural part of life, even a destination of sorts that "makes one's life complete":

Serene: Like- like, it's at the end... end of your journey… It's- it's like, once you… you get married, then… I think you- you more or less like, settle, and then you're ready just to… live out the rest of your life, two of you.

Heidi: It's just like [a] natural thing what, you find boyfriend… get married… then you have kids… and then yah la.

> Khatijah: Yah. And hope you don't divorce.
>
> Heidi: Yeeeeees.
>
> Serene: [I mean] it's someone you can grow old with lor.
>
> Heidi: Yah.
>
> Khatijah: Yah.

Marriage is also seen as a structure of emotional support. All four focus groups emphasize the importance of communication, understanding and companionship in relationships and marriage. For Serene,

> people who.. who don't see a need to get married or have someone in their lives… like, just- for- for company or anything, I guess they're quite strong la. Like, you know - … Cos I like, I- I… I try to be independent, I think I am… but then, aaahm, there are other things I have to rely… rely on him for, like just to talk, or when I'm lonely and stuff, but – I guess people who don't need or- who don't have umm… who just don't need to do that, they're quite strong. Yah - I think it's a nice thing to balance out, like- cos it's- I mean, career here is quite important… so I don't think it should always be all about… career… yah. So I- I mean, it- yah… this kind of thing la… it'd be a nice balance, and it'd be sort of… keep you sane, cos a lot stress you out…

However, a distinction exists between legal, registered marriage and the actual wedding. Youyenn Teo (2007) points out that "this separation of the legal and ceremonial parts of marriage is somewhat "unnatural" and quite unique to Singapore"

and lays out a standard Singaporean pathway of what she terms the "housing-marriage process", comprising four steps[21]:

> 1) secure housing;
> 2) arrange to be legally married (popularly referred to as "ROM," the Registry of Marriage);
> 3) hold a "customary" wedding (the ceremonial part of marriage characterized either by a wedding banquet or reception, a church wedding, or both); and
> 4) move in together

(Teo 2007: 438)

In land-scarce Singapore, where 84.1% of the population lives in public Housing Development Board (HDB) flats (Singapore Department of Statistics, *Population Trends 2010*: 7) the first residence most couples are able to afford is usually a HDB flat. Because of the time-consuming application process for a new flat and the requirement that the couple be legally married when it reaches their turn to choose a flat, many young people start applying for one of these apartments a considerable amount of time before they actually marry, as they can begin the application if they are engaged to each other – they only have to produce their marriage certificate when they select their flat. As such, asking one's boyfriend or girlfriend if he or she wants to "get a flat together" is quite analogous to a marriage proposal, or at least an extremely obvious instance of "testing the waters" to avoid losing face if the proposition is rejected. Many couples use the time between steps to save money for their flat and wedding before holding the ceremony and living together (ibid).

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[21] She notes that "[t]he order of these steps may vary slightly: some people live together after the legal marriage but prior to the customary wedding while others live together only after both legal and customary ceremonies… [n]onetheless what comes across clearly is that when contemplating marriage in Singapore, it is also natural to think about buying public housing" (Teo 2007: 438).

The formal wedding ceremony or wedding celebration meant more to some of the female participants while others did not see a need to spend on a lavish banquet due to the high cost. This was seen as a production to be undertaken for one's parents' (if they could afford it) sake, especially if the parents adhered to Chinese custom and wished to enjoy the honor and prestige of hosting a grand wedding for their children. The idea that formal ceremonies, as opposed to simply registering one's marriage, are more of an obligation to one's parents or in-laws and their friends was echoed by many male participants, probably because the groom's side is typically expected to foot most of the wedding bill. In the Malay and Indian communities however, wedding ceremonies are very important, because:

Khatijah: Let's say you just get registered, and you don't have a big ceremony, people will think like… you got pregnant first, then you got married.

Moderator: Ohhh…

Heidi: Ohhhhhhhhhh [understanding]

Khatijah: Or there's something you don't wanna- that there's a reason why you don't wanna have the big wedding? Like why you don't wanna tell everyone you're married. Cos that's like the sole purpose of- of you being on the dais and all that, because people come, and people know – that they are married now. So that when they like, going out together, people won't think that they're just boyfriend and girlfriend – that- that they're like holding hands and kissing each other… yah, so it's pretty important in the Malay community.

Moderator: Ahhhh…. So it's like- really like more of an announcement, to let every-

Khatijah: Yeah, exactly. And at the same time of course you wanna enjoy it, cos it's your- it's your wedding la.

Illustration 1: The bridal gaze. Photograph courtesy of Angela Li.

The sense of female satisfaction derived from the ceremonial and symbolic forms representing one's induction into marriage is constituted via the "bridal gaze", defined as "the aggregated outlook of the wider audience, such as kin, family, colleagues and friends" (Chan & Xu 2007: 88). In their article examining wedding photographs, the bridal gaze, consumerism and the commodification of romance in Singapore, they argue that contemporary bridal photographs featuring the couple "in elaborate costumes and flawless hairdos, the bride with thick make-up… demonstrate romantic love in pictorial form… [t]hrough gazing at the spectacular photographs, romantic love and conjugality are applauded by friends and relatives" (ibid: 89). This could apply equally to the spectacle of the wedding ceremony, a couple's "big day", where they are impeccably put together in wedding finery and placed at the centre of attention. These forms of "romance-ritual-consumption" (Illouz 1997: 143, cited in

Chan & Xu 2007: 101) had more significance for the female participants, evidenced in Heidi's assertion that "girls like it [weddings] more, cos girls get to dress up [Moderator chortles] … So the guys are like, what's the big deal… but girls are like, WAAAAAH IT'S WEDDING, it's the only day where like, you're the pretty one…" and Chloe's declaration "I want a wedding! I don't want a marriage," presaged by the dialog below:

Chloe: Yah. And if you wanted to get married, I think – I mean it's every girl's ideal - to have a.. you know, to walk down the aisle [Sheila agrees], and all that.

Aisha: You've all been brainwashed!

[Laughter]

Chloe: Yah… [laughs]

Andrea: [Laughing] I think so too!

[More laughter]

Moderator: Do you think it's equally important or important in the same ways for men and women?

Chloe: More for women la. [Agreement from participants.] Men don't really care.

Tammy: Yah.

Tammy, on the other hand, was more concerned with the symbolically binding aspect of a wedding ceremony than its performative, customary aspect or its ostentation: "I don't mind having a small ceremony? But, this ceremony – I just know it protects me.. cos when the guy suddenly leaves, or whatever – I'm entitled to some of his assets [chortles]." For her, the wedding ceremony is a rite formalizing one's marriage and the commitment it stipulates. Marriage and its ritual practices are an

important safeguard for women who are in a position of disadvantage as time passes, because

> being exclusive to a single male for a long time diminish- diminishes a woman's value. And marriage helps to.. you know, ensure that we won't lose value too fast, I guess… Because… [pauses] I dunno; you see – you have babies – [then your] figure goes. Ahhm… you.. a woman reaches her *peak* in about.. [her] early thirties? A man.. reaches his peak in early forties. And so… you know, when you lose your youth, you will lose- you'll gain what? It's like a kind of.. insurance? Yah… so.. marriage… will benefit a woman far more than it will benefit a man.

The most obvious reason for marriage highlighted in the male focus groups was, in David's words, "[t]o have children… that's pretty much the reason in Singapore what, right? … To start a family. Because like you know, it's not socially acceptable to have children [out of wedlock]." The pragmatic approach of the male participants towards the necessity of marriage structured by government policies and their attendant perks is apparent in the exchange below:

Adam: Yah, if you're not married then you have kids then it's illegal, it's *ill*egal, in Singapore.

Gerald: It doesn't get the benefit –

Moderator: [indistinct] to raise children la –

Gerald: In fact, there was this [Straits Times] Forum article about this person, she was saying she was damn sad la, cos her husband dump her or something, then she didn't get the child registered, then cannot get school subsidy and a lot of things la…

Adam: Then I would think yeah, it's for the incentive structure.

Moderator: Ok.

Adam: Yah. You get more incentives.

Moderator: You get the baby bonuses and shit…

Gerald: Four months [of maternity leave] off leh!

Adam: I mean, one whole year without paying income tax is f***ing [indistinct] man!

Moderator: Ok… [Adam interjects: Yeah!] … That's nice… err anything more emotional [that induces you to marry]? Hurhurhurhurhurrrr..?!?!

Adam: You don't need to pay utility bills for two years if you have two kids[22].

[Exclamations all around]

Adam: Yeah.

David: Oh another reason is applying for the flat right - if you're married then you can apply for a [HDB public housing] flat. [Agreement from other participants] If you're not married-

Moderator: Some more aah you all studying sociology, sure no money one.

Gerald: Yeh yeah yeah that's the thing. [Chortles] Good point. [We are] Sad people, you know.

It can be seen that marriage is important, not least because the state designs family-oriented policies that privilege those who are married. Youyenn Teo (2007)

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[22] This, along with Adam's earlier claim about the illegality of having children out of wedlock, is factually inaccurate, and may suggest that young people – especially those for whom marriage is not yet a prospect - are unclear about government incentives for parents. Perhaps widely publicized incentives and workshops advertising the range of perks parents are entitled to would encourage more Singaporeans to have children. Some of these pro-nuptialist, pro-natalist and family-friendly measures include the Social Development Network (formerly the Social Development Unit or SDU) to encourage social interaction and marriage between singles and the Fiance/Fiancee scheme that allows couples who plan to marry to be waitlisted for purchasing a public housing flat. The Baby Bonus scheme introduced in 2001 provides a cash gift, matching government co-savings for the child's "Child Development Account", along with subsidized education, childcare, healthcare and tax reliefs. The Marriage and Parenthood Package inaugurated in 2008 provides a middle-income, two-child family with roughly SGD $20,000 in Baby Bonus cash and co-savings, $53,000 in infant and child care subsidies, $10,000 in tax savings, 4 months of paid maternity leave per child, 6 days of paid child care leave per year for each parent, all of which add up to $142,000 in support until both children turn 7. For a summary of measures promoting marriage and parenthood as of June 2012, see Appendix A of the National Population and Talent Division, Prime Minister's Office's occasioanl paper *Marriage and Parenthood Trends in Singapore*, available online at https://www.nptd.gov.sg/content/NPTD/home/_jcr_content/par_content/download_0/file.res/Issues Paper - Our Population Our Future.pdf.

posits that the Singaporean government consolidates its mandate and manages its citizens by configuring the family as the axis around which priorities are organized. It does so by crafting its policies[23] and rhetoric in such a way that family ties are a centripetal force unifying individuals and that the family becomes the fundamental social unit that trumps other possible allegiances based on ethnic, gender, religious or class identities. As Teo argues, Singapore's gendered, "nuptialist" family policies

> reproduce state power through three interconnected mechanisms: they establish regular and predictable relationships between state and society; they produce coherent "Singaporean" subjects as members of families and undermine the articulation of counter-state (ethno-racial and gender) interests; [and]… give content to notions of 'tradition' and 'modernity'" that "solidify the states claim to being the only agent able to balance the twin tensions that are at the core of the nation's survival (2007: 423-4).

In the exchange on the previous two pages, the male focus group members' lively interest in the incentives promoting marriage and family formation (much to the dismay of the more idealistic moderator) supports Teo's thesis. Even though they are aware of the government's active role in rigging the "incentive structure" in such a way that steers the Singaporean life course towards monogamous lifelong marriage with children, their tone seems to indicate a willingness to go along with such a scheme, either out of convenience, or to take advantage of fiscal perks – such as tax exemptions and childcare subsidies.

4.3.2 Expectations within marriage

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[23] For example, female employees who wish to receive paid maternity leave from the government have to "be married to their child's father at the time of birth or conception" (Teo 2007: 429). While marriage at the time of birth as opposed to the time of conception has different implications, the bottom line is that the women are married when they become mothers so that the child does not grow up in a single-parent family.

Couples are expected to be faithful to each other, produce offspring and be filial to elders (especially women to their mothers-in-law, although this subject was not extensively discussed). Women are also somewhat expected to stay at home, in the minds of some participants, and be able to cook. Husbands are supposed to be primary breadwinners; for a considerable number of female participants it is unacceptable that the wife goes out to work and the man stays at home. Men are also expected to take care of the children but it was granted "it's always the mother-in-law [who] takes care [of the kids]… [t]he father is always working" (Aisha). The roles Singaporean males and females play as husbands and wives will be further discussed in the final section on contradictory ideals and expectations, and the persistent sexual double standard.

4.3.3 What is a successful marriage?

A successful marriage is defined by the male participants as one that is "happy, fulfilling, long-lasting", "when you can see eye to eye on most issues"; "you must still like each other after all the years and time definitely isn't a factor", and is said to contain "the three Ps of life – Patience, Passion and Perseverance" (Adam). Communication and mutual understanding were also emphasized in both male and female focus groups, as well as compromise as a key ingredient, along with a respect for each other's preferences and needs, such as that for personal space. Some of the experiential elements of a successful marriage are discussed below in one of the female focus groups. Also underlined is the importance of financial stability to marital success.

Serene: So successful marriage would be like having a happy family… and then, you know like your dad is still there… and stuff like that. You just feel that… like – you're

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secure, I think so, like secure, you're stable… you don't have anything to worry about, apparently – ok, apart from maybe… umm, maybe small-small problems la, but, I think the big picture would be like, just... you feel like you've made it, and then you've found the right person la. No doubts or anything. Yah.

Heidi: I think [successful] marriage [you have] to like… do things together, like your life – you have to take into account the other person. Right? Cos in a relationship like, you can- it's still your own life, and then... yah, but I think in a marriage you have to… yah, you have to think of your spouse… it's different. I think it's different how we… like- I think.. if you can continue the romance all the way it's very good already. Yah.

Khatijah: … to my parents, everytime when they see a young couple getting married – it's like they say marriage is not a burden, it's just another phase in life where you should enjoy with your partner? So it's not like oh, cos I'm married… oh my god, I have to think of my husband every time. It's – it should be like, two people in love, having fun with each other… So, I guess it's- it- for it to be successful, it's very important that you're financially stable. Because money – if, like, you're financially stable, half of your problems would be done off, like done away with, cos they're all about money? And then, the other half is just probably like you getting along with your partner.

While some participants did not see any distinction between what constitutes a successful marriage and a successful relationship, others felt that a feature differentiating the former from the latter is the permanent commitment and faithfulness it demands:

Heidi: I think in a relationship you know that- that.. you're not s- not say stuck with that person, but you don't owe it to the person to like, forever be with.. him. Like you know you can always like break it off what. But in a marriage – you shouldn't be entertaining thoughts that you wanna go out still la, I suppose. That's the difference lor. Yah.

Serene: Yah, I guess marriage is more or less like, you don't have that much freedom anymore…

This difference is construed as a quantitative rather than a qualitative difference, as a successful marriage "entails almost the same things, but marriage has

more. Cos [in the case of] marriage I think, in essence you spend most of your time with each other" (Tat Meng).

4.1.4 Marriage for convenience, or for love?

Khatijah: Why would they marry if they're not in love?

Serene: I dunno, maybe for convenience lor? I suppose.

Khatijah: Cos it's wrong…

Serene: But I guess it can work…

Khatijah: Unless you're match-made [Interruption by Serene?: (indistinct).. forced to…]… if you're not then why would you wanna marry someone you don't love?

When asked if "being in love [is] an important factor in the decision to get married," participants answered in the affirmative, insisting that romantic love was an uncontestable basis for the decision to marry. For instance, Serene maintained that "for, like the majority of the people, it's like, maybe 98%, they always marry, because they fall in love… they wanna be together for the rest of their lives… I think it's still quite old-fashioned in that sense." The notion that marrying for love is "old-fashioned" is interesting and symptomatic of the internalized timelessness and universality of romantic love, while in the historical and social science literature (e.g. Giddens 1992; Coontz, 2005) it is argued that the mythic status of romantic love is a product of modernity.

Moderator: Uhh… so, in your generation is the love factor more important to get married?

Daniel: Of course la

Moderator: So, if your friends are getting married and they're not in love –

Brian: That's kinda stupid right?

Moderator: Ok

Brian: Because if there's no love in marriage, eventually it's gonna break down right?

Donald: Why would they even get married in the first place?

Brian: Maybe for convenience…

Moderator: Yeah, you never know

Moderator: Umm… maybe they just want to get HDB flat

[Snickers all around]

Tat Meng: [Incredulous] Hah? You mean what – they - they are not in love, and they are going to get married?!

Adam: Wah.

Assistant Moderator: Yah, some people do that.

Moderator: Yah, out of convenience, that kind of thing, matchmaking…

Assistant Moderator: Or maybe they've been together for too long already, they've lost the spark, [but] they just want to be together.

[Moderator relates anecdote about an Indian friend who was forced by his parents to break up with his Pakistani girlfriend of 5 years in order to marry a girl of their choosing.]

Assistant Moderator: So do you all think that love is very important?

Tat Meng: Yah. Then what's the point of getting married if you don't love each other?

[Agreement all around]

Moderator: That's true. But if - say there are some circumstances…

David: OK I mean, definitely it has to boil down to… what does marriage mean to someone la. I mean, if you want to get married then there's no point having not a loving relationship and then end up divorcing soon after. I mean, you definitely need love as a bond between the both of you. If you don't have, then, like you get married

for other points – for other reasons, like maybe convenience, wealth all these - these kind of reasons tend to die out sooner or later, I think.

[Assistant Moderator: Spend all the wealth already]

However, they began to contradict their earlier statements when probed, and provided instances of either people they knew who married without first being in love with each other, or hypothetical situations where practical considerations rather than emotional attachment led to marriage. While participants automatically proffered the socially constructed script of romance-based marriage, their later claims belie the ideology of romance and the "modern love marriage" contracted upon pure passionate mutual affinity. This incongruity will be examined in greater depth in the discussion section on opposing trends and tendencies.

4.4 Romantic love and expectations about romance

Both female focus groups agreed unanimously on the importance of romance in a relationship and in marriage; without it, marriage would be "very dry, very boring" (Khatijah, with agreement from Heidi that "all girls want this"). Romance is thought to be especially important in marriage, "as a reminder… to your relationship, how he feels about you" (Serene), "[c]os like… you're dating – and then, it's all nice, but when you get married, suddenly he stops being romantic, and you're like, woahhh, what happened?" (Khatijah). Romance is therefore a key preservative for marriage – "it keeps the spark going and then – you can last longer" (Sheila). At the same time, some female participants revealed that they had to dampen their romantic wishes and expectations to avoid disappointment.

> Moderator: Do you think Singaporean women are romantic?
>
> Andrea: Yeah. … As in [amidst giggles], wishful thinking – as in they wish.. for romantic stuff, cos they always watch Korean dramas and Channel 8 dramas[24].
>
> [Acknowledging laughter]
>
> Moderator: Then what about the rest of you?
>
> Tanya: I think.. I'm a romantic, but I've learnt not to expect too much.
>
> Andrea: Mmm (agreement)
>
> Tanya: Because, well, this is romantic – my dream - but this is reality… therefore, you know – in order to get myself not too traumatized or disappointed, [in a theatrical, high-pitched sing-song] let's just move to reality for a bit.. yahh…
>
> Aisha: Exactly.
>
> Tanya: Yaaah…

They were divided as to whether they themselves were inclined to match or reciprocate the romantic gestures they desired from men:

> Moderator: And do you think- on the other hand, do you think Singaporean women are romantic?
>
> Heidi: Yah, I think they are.
>
> Khatijah: Really?
>
> Heidi: Yah!? Don't you think of, like, doing sweet things for the person?
>
> Khatijah: Yah…
>
> Heidi: Like Ohhhhhhhh!
>
> Serene: …. You [Khatijah] do!
>
> Khatijah: Yah…. I do…!

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[24] See Foonote 45 in Chapter 5 on the media influence of Korean TV dramas.

[Participants all giggle]

Heidi: Yaah… [and then] I think girls like to do like all these make-nonsense thing [handmade gifts]… ahhh dunno la, that's for me la, like to do this kind of like- stupid, like-

Khatijah: [in a silky voice] Cos he think more sincere…!

[Laughter]

Heidi: [sheepish]… yaaaah…

Khatijah: I bet you write cards and letters and make cookies for him..

Heidi: Yah… this kind of nonsense lor…

Khatijah: Yeah, and cook for him or something right?

[Moderator laughs.]

Serene: Maybe we have a bit more… I dunno if it's just because we're being biased or what, but maybe we just have a bit more, like initiative [Khatijah and Heidi agree], I suppose… yah.

While members of the first focus group believed that women were more pro-active than men in enacting romance, Chloe felt that it fell to the men to be romantic, because "Singaporean women wait for the men to [do romantic things]". Conventional gestures of romance such as gifts, expensive dinners to commemorate "special dates" (e.g. anniversaries, birthdays or Valentine's Day), surprise picnics, home-cooked meals and flowers were thought to be "sweet" and romantic for some of the participants. For others, small acts of consideration like holding the door open, carrying their bags or shopping were also lauded as they "make you feel good".

Female focus group members recognized the existence of gendered differences in notions of romance. With the exception of Andrea, who reported that she was more

partial to someone who is "mentally compatible" rather than one who behaves romantically, participants seemed particularly taken by small, personalized acts on their own part and from their romantic partners. This can be seen in the exchange below and Heidi's earlier confession that she and girls in general liked to "do, like, all these make-nonsense thing[s]" like writing cards, cooking and baking for their boyfriends.

Aisha: But maybe, romance means differently to the guys? You know, like – we.. might want like, candlelight dinners and like, flowers and all that stuff, so guys might think that... just showing concern is romantic enough, so – we might-

Sheila: That's true.

Aisha: In that way, we understand each other differently and like- yah.

Moderator: So, like, yah – for women, maybe – what do you consider, or what is generally considered romantic? … Amongst the people you know, or for yourself…?
Sheila: I think we do small things for the other person, rather than all the candlelight dinners..

[Agreement]

Andrea: Yah like it has to be-

Aisha: But it has to be felt by the other person what, so if like, you know- if it's just oh you *should* do that to- for me, instead of like, oh, it's not just a romantic gesture you know that kind, so- if the girl itself doesn't think it's romantic, then there's no point. For me la I think, so-

Andrea: Personally what's romantic to me is not flowers, or…

Sheila: Mmm [agreement].

[Agreement from several other participants.]

Andrea: toys…

Sheila: It's like the small things they do..

Andrea: Yah.. it's more like-

Aisha: Handwritten notes, that kind of thing

Andrea: More like – he… knows you?

Sheila: And he makes the effort…

Andrea: In ways you don't expect.. and… like, [it's a] very… mental kind of thing.

In response to the often-voiced charge that women in Singapore were too demanding in their romantic expectations, Khatijah was adamant about the straightforwardness and ease of effort involved in romance. In the excerpt below, Serene expresses sympathy towards the denigration of Singaporean men for being unromantic, but Khatijah eventually convinces her otherwise:

Serene: I think it's quite unfair? I suppose? Yeah it's quite unfair. Actually [name suppressed] did mention before, like we have like a classmate, [name suppressed], but then he – I think he read an article about, oh you know like, "Women are so unfair, you know - they expect us to provide everything, and then it's not only earning the money, and then we have to do this and do that…" So again it's a- it's a big… burden to like, like… a lot of pressure for them la, I suppose, that's why maybe they don't… yah. They fail to meet our expectations. Yah.

Khatijah: Why? I mean, if you buy your… wife or your girlfriend a box of chocolates and say, here, you know, this is for you – I just wanted to buy something for you – it's not that difficult!

Serene: But won't you just think it's cheesy lor? And stuff, I suppose?

Khatijah: Noo… ! It's just doing something for your love life- [Laughter] it's not that difficult, it's like I'M ASKING YOU TO DO THIS FOR ME… naaah… I'm not asking you to wash the dishes, just - you know, buy me a box of chocolates, that's sweet..! Not that difficult, right?

Serene: [concedes] Not really difficult la…

Chloe, on the other hand, comes to the defense of local men.

Chloe: Yeah… I don't think it's their fault, I think it's just our society. We don't- I mean, we don't… like you see.. in the shows, we don't go out on dinner dates and… right?

Sheila: Candlelight dinners

Chloe: Yah –

Sheila: And then you walk home, you know, that kind of thing?

[Laughter all around]

Chloe: So you don't expect them to do too much, as in-

Sheila: And it's Singapore - so what can you really do? Singapore Flyer[25] and - ?

[Participants all laugh]

Moderator: So what do you think – what is it about Singapore that.. kind of.. like, maybe sounds like it's not… conducive?

Aisha: I think the dates are also very.. quite standard

Sheila: [exclaims] Yaaah!! You go for dinner.. and movie…

Andrea: My friend said – couples in Singapore always break up because there's nothing to do in Singapore.

Sheila: Actually, you know.

[Sputters of laughter]

Andrea: And maybe because Singapore's such a.. practical, pragmatic society.

[Agreement all around from Tammy, Aisha, and Chloe especially]
Tammy: Yah, because of the education[26]?
Andrea agrees.

In follow-up correspondence, she writes [verbatim]:

"I think Singapore, like any emerging asian country (e.g. Korea, Japan, China), is still face/class-conscious. So despite women receiving equal opportunities in education and in the workplace, they still feel a need to marry within their social class, if not higher. I guess Singaporeans don't realise this as it has become a way of life for them. For

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[25] Singapore's equivalent of the London Eye.
[26] The long-term effects of the Singaporean education system and its pedagogy, especially in its tendency to induce conformity, regimentation, inflexibility and to stifle creativity deserve to be critically examined in a dissertation, if one does not already exist.

example, in my experience, the most common questions that would arise in any social setting would be, "What school are you from?", "What CCA [co-curricular activity] are you in?", "Where do you stay?". However, I do think these ideals are more prevalent in our parents' generation, and through upbringing they impart these same values to us.

Having said that, I also think women in my generation (around 30 & younger) are more exposed to the world outside of Singapore and while having spent a great deal overseas studying or working, they increasingly realise that status is not such a determining factor.

I think what matters more now! , to me at least, is finding a man that is independent (someone whom can hold his own, support himself & his lifestyle, without constant reliance on his parents), respectful (respects your views, your decisions instead of undermining them), capable (not just financially, but also handling household chores and errands that is typically left to the woman) and at the same time, filial and conservative. I think the qualities are very indicative of where we are brought up, an asian country with an abundance of foreign influences.

I think it is easy to find a husband. I think it is hard to find someone whom you can live with for the rest of your life. haha, as sad as that sounds.

Especially for Singaporean women, the odds are against us. We are not the typical asian woman, demure and coquettish, like those I encounter in China or Thailand. Neither are we as bold and rambunctious as our western counterparts (most of us at least!). ! So, we are "neither here nor there". Some may call it a good blend of East & West, but I find it ambiguous and confusing.. If I don't know what I am, how am I going to find my significant other? BUT, I am also a romantic and optimist, and I think everyone has that "someone". It is a matter of timing (which we are not in control of) and location! location! location! And what better location than a public transportation-friendly island that gives us everything the world has to offer (almost) ! Besides, our men are not hopeless! They are not patriarchal like those in Japan & Korea and not as frivolous as the Westerners (what I really mean is they do not take sex AS lightly). Plus! Our boys have gone to hell & back during National Service, so they would be equipped with skills ranging from warfare to sewing!

So yes, it is comparatively easy to find a good husband in Singapore (: !" – Chloe

In sum, the female participants have mixed opinions about the legitimacy of the romantic expectations they have. While it is something they all desire and consider crucial for relationships and marriage, some like Chloe take a softer stance towards the

foibles of Singaporean men and are mindful of structural factors that impede or undermine the expression of romance in ways that seek to emulate its idealized portrayal in global media. Others, such as Khatijah, do not buy into claims that romance is a problematic feat. These structural factors will be explicated in the final part of the chapter.

By contrast, the male participants were far more dismissive, even disparaging of romance and its significance for relationship and marriage satisfaction, with only Brian as its champion. The male focus groups had a difficult time giving examples of what they considered romantic. According to Brian, romance is tied to chivalry, "[i]t's the typical stuff like things you see in the movies and stuff like that, things that you expect… open doors, pull chair open." For Daniel, however, "being romantic is overrated." Members of the other focus group, who expressed apathy - and even fatigue - towards romance, reiterate this sentiment. For example, when asked if romance is important for relationships, Gerald replies that "I don't care la, but she [the girl] probably does la," to the agreement of the rest. Daniel goes even further to assert that romance is totally unimportant, while Suresh concludes that it "depends on the individual, each individual… how much importance he gives to being romantic, or for romance to be part of their relationship. If the girls doesn't expects [sic] it, then [I] think they boy doesn't need to go to the extent." This was met with some skepticism from the others, who felt that women all secretly desired and expected romance in their lives and relationships in spite of any front they might put up.

The second focus group expressed a similar cluelessness as to the nature of romance, understanding it to involve small acts of practical consideration and routine interaction.

Moderator: So, what is romance to you?

David: I dunno. [Moderator: (laughing) DUN CARE la..!] Whatever romance is, I don't really bother. [Assistant Moderator: As long as you got the girl] In my own relationship, I think the things you do everyday, or the big things you do from time to time, yah, that's what matters lor. … I think the strength of the relationship is to be found in, umm, like – uhhh, day to day communication and – and…

Moderator: How you build it daily la, from there…

David: Yah, rather than like – what, what – Valentine's Day surprises..

Moderator: So you think that romance should be injected on a daily basis rather than sporadic – instead of sporadic presents.
.
David: Yah. When you do things, you always spare a thought for her, like maybe when you buy a drink, then you buy another one for her… that kind of thing.

Moderator: Or you buy something you want to drink, then you take from her-

[Titters all around]

Moderator: So, anyone else? Romance?

Adam: I would stick to my previous argument – like, when you are in a loving relationship, both individuals already acknowledged that you are in a relationship, then it's like, whatever you guys are doing after right is - can be romantic already, it doesn't need to be on a moment that calls for it, like Valentine's day, I mean, that is just in –

Moderator: So it's more of an experience than just a concept, or something tangible
Adam: It's a daily activity, whatever you do can be romantic in any way. So I would say that it has changed over the years, this is what probably I have observed.

Moderator: Are there any specific things that you consider romantic? Cos what you're saying that, from after a certain point in time, whatever you do on a daily basis could be considered romantic - but it could even involve taking a shit or brushing your teeth, you know – things that you do together, but I mean, like - anything in particular that goes beyond?

Adam: Goes beyond? For me it's just simple things in life that you just do, just – cos, no need to be totally huge, for example, a simple picnic at Marina Barrage can hit the spot sometimes.

Moderator: Do you think that it is important for a relationship to have such components, for a relationship to grow?

Adam: Yes. Singapore is a very boring place.

Moderator: It is, true that. How – Tat Meng, what do you consider romantic?

Tat Meng: Mmmm, I think anything that – I think that simple things will do, I think like – basically like what he say - spare a thought for each other, that kind of thing show that you care, show that you put in effort to… last the relationship. But I think that girls want to - they look forward to surprises. I think it's what they want more [Moderator: Even though they don't say right…?] … It's very shag[27] la, I think.

Moderator: HAHAHAHA… "It's very shag"… HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!… But do you think that it's important enough that you will still continue to do it?

Donald: It's the wrong word!

Gerald: [indistinct]

Tat Meng: I think it needs romance la - but I think… sometimes… what the girl requires may be too much, I do feel that's why I would say very shag. [Laughter all around, Moderator: "Too much aah? *Tai guo fen*[28]! Then you dowan to do already." (More laughter)] Like, those kind of like… ok for example like, anniversary, that kind, need to say I love you a lot of times, that kind of thing… yah.

Moderator: That's why you have recorders – just replay. [Chuckle]

Tat Meng: [Laughing] Ok.

Moderator: How, Gerald?

Gerald: I think in general, actions that are out of the ordinary la, so - like even like picnic by Barrage[29] you take her stuff, but thinking of something big, it's very tiring la. I think it's just something that is not what you usually do –

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[27] "Shag" (pronounced as "shack") – Singlish for "tiring", "exhausting" (a contraction of "shagged").

[28] "太过份"Mandarin for "too much" or "going too far".

[29] Here Gerald is referring to Marina Barrage, a recreational spot mentioned earlier in the excerpt by Adam

What emerges as the responses from the male participants are juxtaposed with their female counterparts' is a rather hilarious but awkward picture of dissonant tendencies and cross-purposes. The high points of the male focus group interviews coalesced around the hoary accusation that Singaporean men are not romantic enough. This criticism was met with a defensive indifference that did not nearly conceal their irritation in one case (Daniel's unapologetic "Yeah, nothing wrong with [the claim that Singaporean men are unromantic], I don't give a damn. You [Singaporean women] can say all you want"); outright indignation from Brian; and raucous laughter followed by unabashed acknowledgment of the fact in the other focus group, and even some vindictiveness on Adam's part:

Moderator: All right, next one. Singaporean men have been chastised for not being romantic enough-

[Manic laughter, camaraderie all around]

Gerald: We've just shown ourselves – we've just shown ourselves!

Moderator: Yah yah – [laughing] Aiyah I think we shall skip this question la.

Hahahaha. So what do you all make of this claim? Any feed – [bursts into laughter] – this is damn funny.

Tat Meng: I think we are answering the questions ourselves already
Adam: [maliciously] I think Mirabelle [Moderator: You can tell her, it's recorded (laughing)] is the one, she is very subjective… I think her past boyfriends - *whoa* - cannot make it la.

Moderator: Awwww, don't say that.

Adam [snarkily]: "Ooops, *oops*"

Moderator: So, what do you all think?

Assistant Moderator: All agree aah?

Adam: It's a claim la, but –

David: I think it's what you – I think girls and guys - they think differently about what is romance, that's why they will think that we are not romantic enough.

Moderator: So you feel that all these complaints are generally – come from

David: from a girl's point of view

Moderator: - come from Singaporean women's point of view.

The consensus seemed to be that Singaporean men are indeed not romantic, at least not from the perspective of Singaporean women or by "conventional" standards:

Moderator: So do you think Singaporean men in general are romantic?

Tat Meng: Not by the… popular media kind of standard la…

Moderator: So the Western kind of standards…?

Tat Meng: Mmmmm [agreement]

Moderator: Which would be… what?

Tat Meng: Should be.. for example, bring her to nice stuff, followed by walk in the park, followed by… I dunno

Moderator: So would you consider that romantic?

Tat Meng: I would. Or you write – give her presents, stuff.

Moderator: The bigger things la…[Tat Meng: Yah, the bigger things] The *wayang*[30] things. David, do you think Singaporean men are romantic?

David: No impression… mmm…Yah, I dunno leh

Adam: I know my ex has some girls that.. they everytime argue that guys in Singapore are very boring. It was a long-standing assumption la, but I mean, again - it's really

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[30] Singlish (derived from Malay theater) for "dramatic", "showy", "ostentatious", or "put-on".

based on what they perceive from the media and everything else, the internet is just a fingertip away, and all those soap operas, they show guys - the ideal guy, perhaps.

Moderator: So - do you think Singaporean men are romantic?

Adam: How much you want guys to go for? I mean - want us to… be romantic everyday then our pockets will have so much [sic] holes, that's it.

Moderator: Yah, but I guess it doesn't have to be only monetary…

Adam: But I mean it's contemporary era, umm more or less, it still demands - whatever things we do, picnic also - we still have to spend money, that's the thing. Cost of living going up.

Moderator: So you're saying that that's a limiting factor to how romantic you can get?

David: Yeah. I think so. Cos I don't like spending lavish… lavishly…

Adam: Probably the romance level in Singapore will go up a bit when the GST package[31] comes in.

[Participants snicker]

Moderator: Gerald?

Gerald: Probably not la, at least from the people I hang out with, no la.

Suresh points out that some of them, *are* "romantic", "[b]ecause of that they are influenced by… from what they see on TVs and hear from their girlfriends… [y]ou compare what your female friends get from their boyfriends… and whether you get the same [for your girlfriend or romantic interest]." This suggests that the performance of romance is peer-regulated, and the males gauge how to fulfill romantic expectations by taking cues from what women they know receive from other males.

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[31] Here Adam is referring to the GST Offset Package, "a set of comprehensive measures announced in Singapore's 2007 Budget to help Singaporeans with the increase in goods and services tax" from 3% to 7% in April 2007, especially those from the lower-income brackets. (http://www.gstoffset.gov.sg/Overview.htm)

Reacting to the alleged lack of romantic imagination and fervor amongst Singaporean men, male focus group members were vehement that such claims were the result of the westernization and globalization of cultural tastes and norms. However, they did not seem to have a very clear idea of the "West" when probed, only venturing that a romantic date would involve "bring[ing] her to nice stuff, followed by walk in the park, followed by… I dunno" – Tat Meng's vague characterization of Western romantic practice.

Adam: Probably the media now shows Western individuals doing very romantic stuff, you know, probably these girls are influenced by them –

Moderator: On a lake, whereby [sic] we don't have in Singapore [David: *Correct*] – [but] we got *longgang*[32] la!

Gerald: Got la! Orchard Road a few days ago[33], wasted already.

Moderator: Now in Bishan, they're building a fake lake what, it's damn sad. It's really one of the saddest things I've seen.

[Guffaws all around]

Moderator: So do you all have anything to refute this claim or…? But honestly you all probably dug your own graves… hahahahahahaha!

Assistant Moderator: Cannot refute 'ready la…
Tat Meng: Taped and recorded 'ready…

[Several chortles]

Adam: I already said la – media influences.

Moderator: Ok. So you think there's no – there's no - it doesn't hold on its own, this claim?

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[32] Malay for 'drain' or 'canal'.

[33] Orchard Road, Singapore's landmark shopping street was seriously flooded three days earlier. http://www.straitstimes.com/BreakingNews/Singapore/Story/STIStory_541057.html

Adam: Yah. I would strongly suggest that. Cos I mean, look at the majority of magazines in Singapore; they cater to the feminine uhh, demographics right? So many magazines, 8 Days [a bestselling local entertainment and lifestyle magazine], all those. I mean, girls read magazines more perhaps, it's just a stereotypical notions that's for general assumptions right? Umm, then I would say that they are influenced by the media so much so that their expectations for guys have increased so much so that –

Moderator: Mmmmm. Anything else? Anyone else? David, anything?

Moderator: [Laughing] And you [Gerald], [with] your famous last words, "I don't care"? [Laughter all around] You have the onus to… go and faster defend yourself now.

Gerald: No la. I can't do that, if I really want to do that, for years - I cannot keep on doing that, so might as well let people know at the start that I don't care la – so that, if you want something romantic –

Tat Meng: I think that the less you do romantic stuff tight, the more the girl will want, then, it's like each time you do something romantic right, then it will have more impact - and you will… you will be less shag [tired]!

[Laughter all around]

What is striking in the discussions above is the instrumentality of participants' attitudes towards romance, compared to those of the females. The assorted complaints voiced by the male participants, such as Adam's assertion about not being able to afford "romance" may be at odds with Khatijah's earlier rhetoric about the simple act of buying one's partner or girlfriend a box of chocolates, where she exclaims, "I mean, if you buy your wife or your girlfriend a box of chocolates and say, here, you know, this is for you – I just wanted to buy something for you – it's not that difficult! … It's just doing something for your love life… I'm not asking you to wash the dishes, just – you know, buy me a box of chocolates, that's sweet! Not that difficult, right?!" This can also be compared with Tat Meng's observation that women like to be surprised. A discrepancy exists between the kind of romance that would satisfy women, and the

acts of romance men would happily perform. For while both sides identify "simple things" to be romantic, and Khatijah speaks of being surprised with a box of chocolates as a demonstration of affection, Tat Meng and Gerald feel that anything beyond the "simple things… basically like… [you] spare a thought for each other, that kind of thing, show that you care, show that you put in effort to [make] the relationship [last]" is tiresome, and chore-like.

From what has been said in the focus group interviews, it would seem that even though both men and women say that it is "the small things" that are testimony to love and romance, women may either expect these small gestures and tokens of romance more often, and also expect them to be of more (monetary) value. This places high expectations and a financial burden on men. Financial constraints are commonly cited in other Southeast Asia as a reason men felt they needed to postpone marriage (e.g. Williams Kabamalan & Ogena 2007). On the other hand, the male participants' rather lackadaisical attitudes towards romance and relationship maintenance sometimes reflect a cavalier disregard for the wishes of women, and a very pecuniary approach to romance tied to the belief that it can only be achieved by spending money. This is greatly lamented by the moderator of one of the male focus groups, who remarked despondently to me during the debriefing session about the very functional, unimaginative, workaday outlooks of the participants towards love and how they treated women.

David's comment that "girls and guys…think differently about what [romance is], that's why they will think that we are not romantic enough" hits the nail on the spot with respect to romance and romantic love in Singapore. Consider Heidi's

predilection for gifting boyfriends with hand-made items, which Khatijah says is "more sincere", and Aisha's example of hand-written cards as an example of "the small things" that constitute romance. While chatting informally with Daniel and Suresh after their interview, they grumble about women's fondness for giving and receiving stuffed toys and craft items such as cross-stitched initials and declarations of love, lucky stars and other such ephemera. Daniel expresses resentment at having to spend time folding lucky stars as tokens of his romantic interest and devotion, and equally resents being given such "useless" tokens: "What the f*** do I do with a jar of lucky stars?! I'd rather she just give me the money she spent on the materials." This conversational pièce de résistance tragicomically illustrates the variance between male and female perceptions and expectations of romance in Singapore.

Illustration 2: Lucky stars in jar and with a stuffed toy animal

Predictably, women appear to have a larger emotional investment in relationships given the amount of time some of them are willing to spend on material items that symbolize their commitment and attachment to their partners. Singaporean

men are indeed seen to be less emotionally driven. In line with stereotypical but widely accepted notions of women as emotional creatures, Serene attributes the alleged rationality and instrumental-mindedness of men to biology: "I think it's just in their DNA, like men [indistinct – drowned out by laughter from others] I really really think.. [indistinct: maybe they find it like easier?] to move on, like – they don't get… I mean they.. pick themselves up and move on… yah. That's what I think la, it seems that way." This is corroborated by the male participants' observation of the difficulty experienced by women in break-ups, especially with their first boyfriends:

Tat Meng: But the thing is that some of them want to make it work as soon as possible.

David: Yah.

Tat Meng: Yes.

David: I think girls have this kind of mindset, they hope that their first boyfriend is – you know like happily ever after that kind of thing-

Adam: Usually they will say they don't want to get hurt again.

Tat Meng: YAAAAH!

David: Usually the first boyfriend they break up with is the one who hurts them the most one

Moderator: Waaa you all *kena*[34] emo man…. [guffaw]

Male participants, on the other hand, did not touch on instances of being hurt by women or break-ups, but such a topic might not be easily broached in the company of male acquaintances because it could be seen as unmanly, or too personal. This brings us to the next section on the construction of gender in Singaporean society.

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[34] Singlish (derived from Malay) for "to be struck by".

4.5 Gender Clashes

Here, I extend the consideration of focus group members' gendered attitudes towards romance to their conceptions of the opposite sex. I link these disparities to a sense of female superiority and entitlement that fosters male resentment and chauvinism or bigotry. By focusing on the complaints and mutual attacks on either gender, I seek to demonstrate an incommensurability, at some level, between the local social constructions of masculinity and femininity. Table 2 at the end of the chapter summarizes the responses given to focus group questions on gendered norms and ideals.

While these responses are largely speculative and based on a limited and skewed sample of responses, it is interesting to note the characterizations each gender made of the other. To begin with, Singaporean women were far more critical towards their male counterparts than the reverse, although some male participants did lash out against females, it seemed to be more out of frustration with their own inability to satisfy women's expectations of them, than a sense that the women were inferior to them. This was not the case on the part of the female participants, who displayed flashes of female supremacy in these snippets:

Moderator: So, how easy do you think it is for a man to find a good wife today?

Heidi: In Singapore? … Very easy.

[Everyone laughs.]

Khatijah: Cos we're all good right?

[More laughter and agreement]

Below, Heidi suggests that Singaporean men who are "socially awkward" should get

help in comportment and social etiquette.

Heidi: Yah. I think- I think we need a bit more help la [to find good partners]. [Everyone laughs.] I mean-

Moderator: What kind of help?

Heidi: Like… I dunno… I- i mean, like maybe you get guys who are like, socially awkward, I suppose, like… yah. I dunno…

Khatijah: So those guys need help, not us.

Heidi: [resigned] Singaporean guys la…

[Moderator and participants laugh]

Participants like Serene and Chloe recognize that Singaporean men have been

disadvantaged by the portrayal of hegemonic western masculinities in the global

media, but there exists a strong pride in Singaporean women with respect to their

abilities, achievements and entitlements on the basis of their future or actual earning

power and high social status (high in the sense that women do not face overt

institutional oppression and are nominally treated as equals).

Moderator: So – what's the attitude of Singaporean women towards Singaporean men?

Heidi: Baaaaaaad…. [they] cannot make it….

[Moderator and other participants laugh loudly]

Serene: It's quite [a] bad attitude la…

[Laughter continues]

Serene: I- I think they are quite a lot of, like – compared to like American men, and like the French, who are supposed to be very romantic… then they will- will always lose, like… I think they… they're a bit too fussy la… I suppose…

Moderator: The Singaporean men?

Serene: Yah.. about Singaporean men. Maybe their expectations are a bit not realistic la, to me la.

Khatijah: Really?

Serene: Yaah!

Moderator: Oh, the expectations of the Singaporean…

Serene: Women

Moderator: … women to-

Serene: towards- [Singaporean men], yah.

Khatijah: Oh, ok.

Heidi: Yeah. Actually I think the women think we're better than the men… [tinkling laughter].

[Other participants laugh.]

Khatijah: Aren't we?

[Laughter all around.]

As for gender constructs and ideals, female notions of masculinity centered around the figure of the "new urban male[35]", inspired by the eponymous Singaporean fashion chain. Visually, masculinity comes through in fashionable dress and good bodies. A masculine male is "boyish, rowdy and sporty" according to Heidi, and he cannot be "scrawny" (Female Focus Group 2010). He is someone who "can take care of you but not in an overbearing or possessive way." While opinions differed regarding the importance of masculinity as it was defined, the Singaporean women interviewed *did not* find Singaporean men masculine.

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[35] http://www.newurbanmale.com/

For the male focus group who defined femininity as embodied in having long hair, being reserved, gentle and submissive, it was believed that Singaporean women in general *are* feminine. The second group cast femininity in a negative light, associating it with effete "*gu niang*" types. According to the online Singlish distionary[36], the term *gu niang* [Mandarin: 姑娘 *gūniáng*] which means "maiden" in Mandarin, in used in Singaporean parlance to refer to "a helpless or dependent woman," and also one who is "feminine and ladylike". Participants in this group understood femininity to exemplify typically "female" characteristics associated with physical and emotional weakness in a way that demanded too much from their romantic partners. Tat Meng describes such behavior: "Ok, I really do not like those kind of, you know, super demure, super – umm, you know like damn *gu niang* types, [someone chortles] - who cannot get into the sun [agreement from Gerald], or like – or like, every time she encounters some setback she'll call me then I must rush down to her, you know - and pacify her kind of thing." However, Adam estimates that only 20-30% of Singaporean women fall into this category.

From the focus group data, it was clear that despite multiple definitions of masculinity and femininity, the differences in their priority and the positive or negative valences attached these conceptions, Singaporean women were far more dissatisfied with and disparaging towards Singaporean men than the other way round. Men were unhappy with Singaporean women's' seemingly insatiable thirst for

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[36] http://www.singlishdictionary.com

material gratification[37] and financial security that they as men had to provide, if not in relationships then certainly in marriage.

The final important theme pertaining to gendered attitudes towards Singaporean men and women revolves around contradictory norms and sexual double standards (imposed by both males and females), despite a professed desire for gender equality - in turn a fuzzy notion that was poorly elaborated by respondents. For instance, many female participants indicated that the role of a husband is to be the primary breadwinner, stressing the importance of men's ability to be a stable provider for the family, but wanted to pursue careers of their own. They complained about men feeling threatened by the professional advancement of their wives, and about the expectation or injunction that women stop working to become stay at home wives after they marry. Although the breadwinning role of men is perfectly compatible with women's careers and family income greatly augmented by women's contributions, a kind of tension and duplicity does exist because (at least some) women wish to have fulfilling careers and command high salaries, perhaps outstripping their partner's earnings, but will not tolerate househusbands.

Heidi: I think some guys don't like it if their wives earn more.

Khatijah: Yah!! Exactly!

Heidi: Yah.

Khatijah: It's like, when we get married, I don't want you to work anymore.

Heidi: Yah…

Khatijah: Just, probably cos I earn more than you right?

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[37] Negative media images portraying Singaporean females as "selfish, materialistic, frivolous, demanding and overly-westernized" (Tan 2009: 45) compound the issue.

Heidi: Yahhh. I think some husbands are like that.

[They laugh.]

Khatijah: I think-

Heidi: She cannot be more successful than him.

Khatijah & Serene: Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah.

Heidi: Yah… that one-

Khatijah: It's just an ego thing-

Heidi: Yaaaaaaaaaaaah.

Serene: Yaaaah, that's true.

Khatijah: Yah.

In fact, if they weren't opposed to househusbands, female reactions to the idea of a stay at home husband range from "a bit strange" to "it's very weird", noting that it was an uncommon occurrence, "not something very normal that most guys choose to do," because of the stigma attached to the reversal of roles, and being seen as "henpecked".

Tammy: I think society still expects people to stay at home? … Yah.

Aisha: Even though we [women] are kind of like- you know, move up [in terms of status]… but- they still expect us to-

Tammy: Yeah, I feel that- what do you mean roles- err- why can't we have stay-at-home dads?

Moderator: Cos it just doesn't look very nice.

Tammy: NO laa!

Moderator: What do you think of stay-at-home dads?

Aisha: Why not nice?

Tammy: Why not???

Sheila: I would like my man to be working.. [Andrea and Chloe agree] and-

Tammy: But if he's good at cooking- and taking care- and has more patience-

Sheila: Then come home and cook!

[Laughter]

Some female participants (Serene, Tammy, Andrea) were amenable to the idea on practical monetary grounds, arguing, "if the wife earns more money, then obviously, the issue is you should get more money what, so the wife should just continue working, instead of… caring about your "face" so much." But the prevailing attitude seemed to be that the social norm tends more towards Heidi's position, reflected in her statement "I think I'm still very traditional in that I still think that the guy must work, [and] the girl stays at home.. yup." Male participants' attitudes towards househusbands largely mirrored those expressed by the females, although money was the pivotal factor: some said they were happy to be househusbands if they were rich enough to afford it; that is, if their wives earned so much that it didn't make a difference whether the husband worked or not.

Much can also be gleaned from the responses of male participants. It is clear that sexual double standards persist in many aspects of gender relations, norms and ideals. To begin with, male participants[38] unanimously and unequivocally agreed that

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[38] Even one of the moderators himself admitted so in a leading question to participants: "I guess it's [the number of previous partners males think is desirable or acceptable for their prospective girlfriends to

males were entitled to have more relationship/sexual partners prior to marriage. This is revealed in the number of dating partners men deemed acceptable or desirable for themselves, and for women: 3-5 for women (the ideal is actually 1, as Suresh unabashedly put it, "The ideal number is one la…", but it was acknowledged to be an unlikely reality), and 5 or more for men, because they are "more daring and exploratory". The following exchange comically discloses David's initial naïveté in disaggregating sex from relationships (perhaps based on the apparent sexual conservatism that institutes serial monogamy within a committed relationship as the norm in Singapore) and his backpedaling when confronted with the now near-ubiquity of premarital sexual relations. More importantly (and outrageously!) is the moderator and participants' chauvinism and complicity in concurring that the number of partners men could have is, "UNLIMITED!"

Assistant Moderator: Just curious aah, the figures that you come up with – do you associate them with how pure or how chaste or how clean she is or not? That's why you all have the figure in mind? Somehow do you all have this kind of feeling? Like, the amount of ex-boyfriends that they have right, do you somehow associate that with how many guys they've slept with, and maybe that's the thing that, you know – so, do you think it bothers?

Gerald: [realizing that sex in involved] Ohhhhh!

Adam: Oh, oh, oh. It's a moral issue.

Moderator: Yeah you can have to that into consideration as well la, cos that - the number would definitely lead to questions…

Assistant Moderator: Yeah. So would that bother you all?

Adam: Of course.

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have] lower for guys right? I mean, you want the girls to…[trails off]" (2009 Male Focus Group transcript).

Tat Meng: Yah, I think it would bother me.

Moderator: But for you [David] it doesn't matter right?

Tat Meng: But just now did you ask the same question?

Assistant Moderator: No, we asked relationships. But now, like, sex comes in.

Moderator: But on the assumption that relationships are… will, 60 or 70% of the time consist of sex as well [Assistant Moderator: Maybe 90.] Ok, realistically speaking, 90 [percent]. Then – you know… so if that's the case – that being the case, I mean – don't tell me you thought the girl will go out with 20-30 guys without doing anything right?

David: …

Assistant Moderator: Yah la! Yah la! PRECISELY.

Moderator: Dude! Hurhurhurhruhrurhurhur!

Assistant Moderator: Wake up! [It's] 2010 already!

Moderator: Ok let's assume that it's that level of relationship she has assumed with other guys, would your take be different on that?

David: [Silence] Yah I guess so

Moderator: That being considered, is there a certain number of ex-relationships that you would be able to deal with, on a personal level?

David: Mmm… 3?

Moderators and other participants: HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHAHAHA!

Assistant Moderator: Hahahahaha, from "dun bother" to "three"!

David: Cos just now I thought your question was, [Moderator: Just going out is it? Assistant moderator: Yah, you're too innocent already] Yah – No, just now I thought your question was, how many relationships did you think would *I* have before I got married[39]!

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[39] From the transcript, it is evident that David did not misunderstand the question when it was posed, stating initially that the number of relationships a romantic partner previously had did not concern him at all. The subsequent exposure of his seeming duplicity and the boisterous but good-natured teasing he was subjected to by the moderators and fellow focus group members, some of whom were friends or in

[More laughter]

Moderator: But we all agree that the number for us, is… UNLIMITED!

[Uproarious laughter]

Another potential contradiction can be found in Adam's preference for women who are "demure, who, ummm bridges the gap between the contemporary and the traditional, it's like the West, like those - I wouldn't say the contemporary dressing, like those skimpy shorts, or really really, you know, really radical. For me, I just think that conservative girls is [sic] feminine women. NOT that I want them to be disempowered, but rather I would still want – I still believe in – in feminine empowerment." He is later challenged on this by Gerald, who poses the question of he would react if his future wife decided not to have children, which Adam expects to have. Adam retorts "*NO,* [I want someone] who can *make decisions*; I did not say independent woman" – which runs counter to his earlier professed belief in "feminine empowerment". Despite their claims and the sincerity of their interests in promoting gender equality, the focus group transcripts yield muddled, ill-formed notions about what it really amounts to. For both male and female participants, it seems to entail nothing more than an equal division of household labor. Participants' responses are packed with patriarchal undertones or a tacit acceptance of traditional gender roles. Even as women recognize and exercise their autonomy, bemoaning, for example, the ageism that penalizes older women (thought to be anybody over the age of 35) and/or divorcees in the "marriage mart", while older men have the option of "getting a wife

the same department, raises the issue of embarrassment before one's familiars, in interview contexts where participants know each other. While there are advantages to interviewing friends together, as outlined in the methods section, this incident highlights a pitfall to such an approach.

from Vietnam", they subscribe to traditional female roles that still involve some level of subordination to their husbands, reflected in Heidi's belief that women are supposed to "make [their] husband feel good if he's tired after a day at work".

Serene: Yah. If you're still young and you get a divorce, I guess you- you're still like, in the market la.

Heidi and Khatijah agree.

[Laughter all around.]

Serene: I think the market here.. is like… 35. Thirty… yah, about 35.

Moderator: So what happens after you're 35?

Khatijah: Then you're out of the market..

Heidi: Yaaaaah.
Moderator: So.. like how, is it- cannot, like… issit - cannot date, or like… people laugh at you for dating… or…?

[Laughter]

Serene: I guess so… f*** you'll be like … something wrong… cos [indistinct]. I mean, I don't think there's anything wrong, but then there will always be this certain age… that.. you'll find it hard to find people who would be interested…

Heidi: Yah.

Khatijah: Yah. Like you said just now, everyone's taken.

Heidi: Yah… everyone's taken 'ready, by then…

Moderator: So you think around after thirty-five, is like…

[Heidi and Serene agree]

Aisha: Maybe for women la, maybe for men it's slightly older.

Heidi: Ah yah, for men it's older.

Serene: It's different.

Heidi: Yah.

Participants seemed to have a rather cursory idea of gender inequality, defining it straightforwardly as an all-encompassing equality in every sphere – "[i]f guys can do it then girls also can la!" (Adam). This was agreed upon by all participants. Although female participants also cited infidelity as one of the foremost grounds for divorce, a marriage, according to David, can still be salvaged if the husband is unfaithful, but not if the wife is the cheating partner: "[i]f it's the guy who commit[s] [adultery], then maybe la.. if the girl, then [cannot]-". This statement was met with concurring laughter from the participants, and reveals another instance where a participant's subsequent comment belies their earlier overarching stance taken toward gender equality.

When asked about how marital roles could or should be changed for the better, female participants indicated only that men should share in domestic work and childcare, and "cook once in a while". Male participants felt that there should be more support for working women in terms of policy and practice to help them fulfill maternal roles because there was concern about domestic workers having to take over the responsibility of parenting in dual-income families. What concerned them was that the care of children might be taken over by outsiders; the ideal situation involved the perpetuation of Singaporean female domesticity. For Adam, marital roles are to be negotiated individually and agreed upon by couples as their relationship progressed, but women "should be given some leeway to make decisions." Therefore, despite the official line of support for gender equality, participants of both genders exhibit or

condone patriarchal tendencies and male chauvinism, even as female chauvinism, manifested in the belief that Singaporean women are better than the men (see pages 77- 79), exists.

4.6 Singapore is "boring" and not conducive to romance

The activities dating couples engage in have not changed over time, but there seems to be a heightened sense of dissatisfaction with the Singaporean "romance-scape". When asked to compare dating in Singapore with their impressions of dating in the West, focus group participants spoke of the limitations of the urban, land-scarce, recreationally sterile "air-conditioned nation" (George, 2000) as a place for romance. This is closely tied to the earlier theme of romantic love and expectations about romance.

Serene: Yah, I think [dating in Singapore is] the same, except Singapore's more boring, cos there's nothing much to do here.

Khatijah: Nothing… yah.

Heidi: Yaaaaaahhhh…. [it] sucks right? You're like.. go shop… same thing. Yah.

Serene: Yah. It's like- some, like, routine la, I suppose.

Serene: Yah.

Khatijah: So boring.

Heidi: I think like – yah, overseas, sometimes they move in with the boyfriends, after while. But in Singapore's not so common to move out[40].

Serene: Oh yah, you can't really do that.

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[40] Cohabitation is not a very common practice in Singapore due to the high housing prices and parental or social disapproval in more conservative families and circles. Couples who do not find enough privacy at their respective homes may go on holidays together, or if they are unable to afford it, have "staycations" or check into cheap hotels, some of which have hourly rates.

Heidi: Yah you can't move out.

Serene: Yah.

Khatijah: Yah, you can't.

Moderator: Then when you go out, what do you do?

Serene: Actually there's really nothing much to do…. [Khatijah: Yeah..!] explore new places I suppose… but [if] it's just Killiney [where Serene stays] then it's just go movie, go eat… go watch movie… that sort of thing.

Khatijah: I'll go to places like Henderson Waves, [Heidi: Yaaaah…] or the beach, or Botanical Gardens…

Heidi: I mean after awhile, you try to make it a bit more exciting, when you realize that.. it's quite stagnant. Like ok let's go do something interesting… then you're like… eurgghh… errr…. Yeah…
Khatijah: Yeah.

Male participants also mocked the government's attempts to beautify the local landscape (dialog on page 71) and blamed the local surroundings and urban built environment for not facilitating their attempts to fulfill women's romantic aspirations in relation to place, atmosphere, culture and leisure options, hence making their lives as men difficult. The moderator himself then goes on to juxtapose the River Thames with the newly minted, manmade "Bishan Lake" as romantic spots, undermining the latter with reference to its recent fabrication and artificiality in comparison to the historically renowned English river.

Goh (2000: 1599) observes that "[i]n terms of physical geography, Singapore (with its small size and relatively uniform climate and geographical features throughout) has much less to draw upon in its creation of an urban identity – unlike cities whose attractive environs become part of the character and image of the city

itself, like Seattle, Vancouver, San Francisco, Denver, Zurich, Sydney and others". An impediment to successful dating in Singapore thus inheres even in its very geography due to the perceived affective poverty of the local landscape as a space for romance. Together with the high cost of living, stressful modern lifestyles and the national logic of perpetual economic improvement, which "requires that [Singapore] sustains and rehearses (through its landscape as much as its policy) aspects of a cosmopolitan and upwardly aspiring value system and style, even if only a small percentage of its households will actually realise an upgrade in property and lifestyle" (ibid), these structural factors impinge on romantic and marital possibilities in Singapore.

Table 2: Summary of focus group findings

	2009 Female Focus Group	2010 Female Focus Group	2009 Male Focus Group	2010 Male Focus Group
What men look for in a date/ girlfriend	Looks / Attractiveness Ability to hold good conversation Having things in common	Little discrimination if desperate or looking for a hookup/casual companionship. Otherwise, long companionship. Chinese hair, looking, "safe", submissive, conventional types that don't rock the boat Social status – family & educational background	Looks / Attractiveness Good communication Intelligence Love and companionship. Sex - willingness to engage in sexual intercourse	Compatibility – common interests, on the "same wavelength", similar consumption patterns Religion – to be of the same faith (Adam)
What men look for in a date/ wife	In Malay community – cooking ability	Domestic ability, intelligence, independence. Good looks. Size – must be slim; plus-sized girls less preferred	A good listening ear. A good person to share life's experiences with. Friendly, understanding, caring and kind. Good natured – not a "bad-tempered bitch"	Understanding. Respectful of spouse's needs and desires (reciprocal respect) Faithful Cooking ability Non-drinker and non-smoker Generally the same criteria as for a girlfriend
What women look for in a date/ boyfriend	Ability to hold good conversation Humor Fun, spontaneous Not petty	Intelligence, chemistry, mutual understanding	Security, stability	Money Physique – height and good build Looks Companionship
What women look for in a husband	Provider Stable career Financial stability Humor Good temper	Caring, understanding	Stability, honesty, faithfulness – must not be promiscuous wealth/income	Security and financial stability
How easy is it to find a dating/ marriage partner?	For men – very easy For women- "haaaaaaaaaard"	Mixed reactions. Serious date – generally not easy for men or women	Depends on effort and luck and standards. Ideal partner difficult to find, but a good one o not that hard: "can live with it"	Casual date not difficult. Serious relationship or wife – "f***ing hard"; bleak prospects

	2009 Female Focus Group	2010 Female Focus Group	2009 Male Focus Group	2010 Male Focus Group
Roles of married women	Cooking, cleaning – home-maker Career (optional) Make husband feel good after a day's work	Marital fidelity Produce offspring Be filial to elders Work Home-maker	Professional – work Domestic - cook	Support each other. No fixed rules. Equality in expenses, household chores, responsibilities.
Roles of married men	Primary breadwinner Must help take care of children House-husbandry not an option	Breadwinner, but may depend on who commands higher salary. Some objection to househusbands, but others more pragmatic if wife earns more.	Bring money home, but must also take care of the household. Stigma against househusbands – seen as useless	
Attitudes towards opposite sex	Bad - "they cannot make it" (Heidi)	Critical – "Offer too little, ask for too much" (Tammy) One defense of Singaporean men (Chloe) – see page?	Bad – "fucked-up" (Brian) Others did not understand the question, or felt that Singaporean mens' attitudes towards Singaporean women were "fine"	Disdainful – women thought to be superficial, only interested in looks and conspicuous consumption. Women preoccupied with financial and relationship security
What is masculinity (for female participants and femininity (for male participants)	"New Urban Male" Boyish, rowdy, sporty Metrosexuals need not apply.	Cannot be scrawny, smaller-sized or shorter than girlfriend. "Can take care of you but not in an overbearing, possessive way" (Sheila) Maturity	Long hair Reserved Gentle Submissive Stylish Made-up, well-groomed Pretty Sweet	Conservatively dressed Demure Negative idea of femininity: "gu niang" types – frail, overly fragile, precious, need girls who are high-maintenance, dependent, helpless, don't like being out under the sun "Princess-y"
Are Singaporean men/women considered masculine / feminine?	No, they are too metrosexual. But masculinity not an important trait.	NO. Many scrawny males. But masculinity a desirable trait for some, "you don't want to marry a wimp"	Yes, in general	Not by the definition given, only 20-30% are feminine in that way

Chapter 5

Discussion

5.1 Material consumption, technology, "face", and the performative dimensions of modern romance

The sociological themes that surface from the focus group data point to several patterns and tensions. While a direct link between constructions of gendered romantic desirability and notions and practices of dating, marriage and sexuality (research question 1) was not categorically obvious, it came across that being in a relationship is a source of pride and social recognition. Especially for the younger generation, this is mediated though material goods, technology and other forms of consumption.

If Saw and Wong found it surprising that the 'youth cultural' accentuation of conformity and social acceptance did not elicit higher-rankings for "bring[ing] a partner along for some social functions" and "show[ing] one's friends one is acceptable to/popular with members of the opposite sex" (1981:14) as bases for relationships, they may find their conjecture validated amongst contemporary youth. Today's relationships appear to be played out in part, and watched by others on their internet profiles. Earlier on page 36, Adam touched upon Facebook as a platform or channel for establishing relations with potential dating partners. A recent study found that 68% of Singaporean youth aged 15-24 use social networking sites and that social networking constitutes their top online activity[41]. Also, 47% of young Singaporeans own laptops, compared to the regional average of 18%. Relationships and displays of love are a means by which one's image and social standing can be enhanced. For

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[41] Synovate Young Asians Survey 2010

example, at one point during the focus group discussion, Serene asked Khatijah if she had seen the photos she (Serene) uploaded of a surprise bouquet of flowers her boyfriend Brian (a participant in the 2009 Male Focus Group) had put together for her. Social media use was not explicitly highlighted by the participants themselves, but is easily inferred given the numerous occasions they referenced Facebook and adduced evidence about the nature of relationships from what they saw posted on others' Facebook profiles (cf. Joinson 2008).

According to the focus group data, young couples in Singapore seem to have little else to do besides go to the cinema, shop together, eat out extensively and exchange gifts of jewelry and other luxury items as symbols of both relationship, social worth and the measure of success in both/either. As they get older, it is *de rigueur* for professional women to receive engagement rings that are at least 1-carat diamonds because anything smaller would cause them to lose face in front of their friends and colleagues[42]. The gifting and consumption that take place (from lucky stars to diamond rings as one progresses in age and income) are therefore sources of identity production as sufficiently desired or desirable individuals to receive gifts of high monetary and/or sentimental value. Online social networks (namely Facebook) facilitate such identity production, allowing personal preferences, values, activities and achievements to be broadcast to one's virtual community of acquaintances. This dovetails with recent empirical findings on social networking sites as spaces for self-

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[42] This was related to me by lawyer friends, and does seem to hold true from the photos of large sparkly engagement rings that I see uploaded on Singaporean Facebook profiles. Another friend was constantly pestered by his fiancée-to-be with the plaintive question of "Where's my rock, when are you going to give it to me?"

grooming and impression management (e.g. Stutzman 2006; Tufekci 2008, 2010) and the maintenance of social capital (Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe 2007). As Lampe, Ellison & Steinfeld (2007: 437) put forth:

> "In order to achieve relational and other goals, individuals attempt to manage these [online] impressions, strategically emphasizing some characteristics while de-emphasizing others. These same self-presentational behaviors exist offline, although online self-presentation is more malleable and subject to self-censorship than face-to-face self-presentation."

Goffman (1967: 5) defines "face" as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself"; virtual facework operates to maintain one's social standing amongst peers as a valued and loved individual. Young Singaporeans gain "face" by being on the receiving end of such material or verbal expressions of love, esteem and admiration that is observable to all via their social networking profiles. Conversely, failed relationships – especially ones sanctified in marriage are seen as a huge loss of face. Participants talked about the stigma associated with divorce and the shame of an unsuccessful marriage as a personal failure. Because the Asian family has been glorified and instituted as the mainstay of Singaporean society, marriage is a powerful social glue that sustains nation and person. These relations of national and individual constitution are structured, consolidated and reproduced through consumerism and purchasing power - glossed as "financial stability", a male provision female participants prioritized. Male participants recognized and lamented that in effect women desired the '5 Cs' of cash, credit card, condominium, car and country club membership[43] and more – to be romanced with thought and money. That acts of

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[43] Hallmarks of 'the Singaporean Dream"

romance and romantic love are tied especially to fiscal expenditure is demonstrated in the earlier exchange on pages 69 - 70 between Adam, David and the moderator, in which romance is explicitly linked with cost and created by spending.

Competing gendered desires and priorities that change with time and with the life-course or chronological age of men and women complicate the picture of youth attitudes. These include social pressures and discourses on conservatism, traditionalism, Asian values and the ideology of romantic love that can be framed under the rubric of "East" versus "West" and "tradition" or "custom" versus "modernity". The categories used here have been critiqued for their dualistic nature and are therefore contestable, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis to dissect them. These dichotomies are always invoked by the state (Tan 2009), whether tacitly or explicitly, to justify its policies by casting itself as a custodian of "traditional values", "establish[ing] itself as an agent of change concerned with bringing about economic prosperity while at the same time establishing itself as a 'protector' of the people's treasured 'values'" (Teo 2007: 424).

Partly as a result of government propaganda and fear mongering, these binaries are replicated in folk discourses on national and personal identity. The countervailing forces ascribed to either camp of influence i.e. "traditional", "Asian" and "modern", "Western" (Tamney 1996; Sheridan 1999) exert different pulls on young Singaporeans and the patterns that become apparent reflect the opposing tendencies present in a transitional society, purported to be the fastest growing economy in the world based

on its 17.9% growth rate in the first half of 2010[44]. This inchoate sense of heterogeneity is captured perfectly in Khatijah's attempt to articulate the difficulty of making broad claims and of identifying features that depict the reality of youth experience, because both liberal, modern attitudes and conservatism coexist, often even within individuals. In response to the focus group's attempt to determine if young people in Singapore acted in accordance with liberal sexual values and talked openly about sex after Serene and Heidi suggested otherwise, she puts forth, "I guess there are extremes la… [you] can never have like… yes this - they're like this [one way] or they're like this [another way], there's just a mix [Another participant interjects to agree]. But generally I don't know… I don't know whether Asians are like, less liberal now. Cos it's changed a lot since last time[45] [a few generations ago]."

This indeterminacy and flux is unsurprising in a young postcolonial immigrant society in a global age. Multiple influences are at work and various social phenomena, such as both sexually conservative and liberal attitudes, co-occur. These conceptions of conservatism and liberalism are also variously construed, depending on one's positionality and worldview. For example, Singaporeans who are "westernized", educated abroad, a sexual minority and/or embrace sexual freedom in light of how it is

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[44] Ramesh, S (8 August 2010). "Govt's goal is to ensure all S'poreans enjoy fruits of growth: PM Lee". *Channel   News   Asia*   (Singapore). http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1074117/1/.html

[45] Saw and Wong noted the disapproval Singaporean youths expressed towards couples that spent time together in private. They report that 58.4 of Singaporean youths' believed dating couples would "talk in a private place" as one of their activities. "From the answers to an open-ended question on what else they thought some young people might do during dates, a substantial proportion of the youths who had any further ideas believed that young people might engage in sexual intimacies, including intercourse. However, it is of greater significance that most of these responses were put in a highly moralistic tone, for example, "they might go to their love park and do all kinds of bad things", "they would fool around", and "the boys would take advantage of their dates" (Saw and Wong 1981: 22).

depicted and discussed in western media may not necessarily find in Singapore a widespread liberal sexual climate, but others identify in Singapore's booming nightlife great sexual license and an increasing acceptance of premarital sex, which they take exception to. Singapore does not have an established imagined cultural essence to serve as a homogenizing agent and to structure local gender relations around cultural identities; they seem instead to be constantly negotiated through and propped up by practices of consumption that inform one's sense of self-worth and belonging. As a capitalist city-state that is still in transition, material exigencies heavily configure marital and romantic relations. The Singaporean's government's promotion of consumer spending to distract the populace and maintain political apathy (e.g. Chua 1998; Tamura 2003) contributes to the materialism that drives the economic, social, family and personal aspirations of its people.

Another key issue detected in the comparisons between Singapore and the developed West is the acknowledgement that western media overwhelmingly shapes expectations of romance. This is problematic and seems to cause tensions between the genders because women expect to be treated with consideration and respect, both emotionally and through the performance of chivalry, domesticity and/or consumption in line with Western mores, etiquette and notions of generosity and social grace. As it turns out, it is not only Euroamerican media that is influencing young people's aesthetics and women's romantic preferences and their ideas and expectations of love. East Asian media culture, epitomized in the 'Korean Wave' of exported Korean television dramas that have become a craze (especially among women) across East and Southeast Asia (e.g Dator & Seo 2004; Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Shim 2013). In

their focus group interviews with Singaporean female viewers of K-dramas (as Korean dramas are called), Chan and Wang (2011) found that women were enamored with the "sensitive male characters who were willing to sacrifice everything for their love" (294). While these television dramas provided viewers with a respite from the stresses and drudgeries of daily life in Singapore upon entering the make-believe realm of the production, they also led to constant comparisons and fault-finding with Singaporean men, who as real people obviously could never match these fairy-tale characters. Korean dramas therefore "offer Singaporean women a utopian vision not unlike that of the romance novel (Radway, 1984), allowing them to fantasize that they are loved by a rich, handsome and most importantly, totally devoted 'Mr Right'" (295).

Padilla et al. (2007) use the framework of the "political economy of love" as an approach that aims to "trace large scale shifts in political economy to the lived experiences and practices of love and intimacy, while continually listening to the voices of people themselves, their subjective understandings of intimate relationships and interactions, and their struggles to establish and maintain intimacy within the shifting terrain of globalizing processes" (xii). Such an approach is useful for the current analysis, especially because Singapore, as a tiny, resource-poor island nation is deeply embedded in transnational flows of capital and labor market deregulation that necessitate its transformation into a globally competitive, cosmopolitan city in terms of technology, infrastructure and character. Using this framework, the discussion returns to the question of marriage for love or convenience. The initial hypothesis for this study was that following global trends in companionate marriage (e.g. Hirsch and Wardlow 2006), love-based unions are a norm. While this is arguably a widely

espoused ideal, the actuality and indeed, the possibility of marrying purely "for love" may have been overstated because the interview data suggest that there are too many other constraints and considerations involved in the decision to marry to support the hypothesis in practice. The primary constraints are practical material concerns, namely money, and this constitutes another possible framing for future work in this area. Path analysis suggests that the lower levels of life satisfaction reported by Singaporeans compared to Americans bring about higher materialist tendencies and lower marital and fertility outcomes (Li et al. 2010). At the heart of this issue therefore lies another sociocultural and affective contradiction of capitalism, an existential conflict amplified by capitalist logic in its drive for efficiency and profit-maximization in the so-called private sphere of life (Illouz 1997).

5.2 Marriage for convenience or love, revisited

Heidi: Actually, I think like in the beginning you think that oh, you'll only marry the man you love.. but after awhile if you like consider other things, like career, like – I mean next time let's say the guy wants to go overseas, and then you dowan to go.. and then no matter how much you lurrve the guy, if you don't want to move there with him, you'll just break off lor.

Serene: Yah.

Heidi: So I think like, love will be the initial decision, but after that other factors come in.

Serene: Yah. But like, I know it's like if you really really love someone, but… I knew like… ok la, I know it's very shallow la, but if he doesn't make enough money [N: Yah.]… or… if I knew it yah… then I don't think…
Heidi: Yah… I don't know…

Khatijah: But if you really love someone, I think like, if that's the initial decision, and then it leads to other factors – you look at the money, you look at the housing, or whatever, and then it still comes back to whether you still love him that much? [Another participant: Mmmm (agreement)] Cos if you don't - then, look for another guy, but if you- if you think it's worth- it's worth marrying him for, even though like-

like, the other factors don't make up much, like he doesn't earn that much money, or anything, it's okay – it's- it still might work out.

[Agreement from other participants.]

In her analysis of romantic love in late capitalism, Eva Illouz (1997) examines the conjunctions of love, marriage and class to demonstrate "that romantic love is a collective arena within which the social divisions and the cultural contradictions of capitalism are played out" (2). This thesis considers the intersections of romance and the market in the Singaporean context and concludes, in line with Illouz, that marriage and intimate romantic relations in postindustrial Singapore are rife with tensions and competing demands or imperatives. Illouz suggests that the ideal of marriage based on "true" love that surpasses other factors (220) such as the socioeconomic status of one's partner is more probable for individuals who do not seek social mobility or see the need to choose a partner for reasons of social prestige, or to maintain one's position of privilege. It follows that such individuals are, or deem themselves sufficiently wealthy in the first place.

The excerpts below demonstrate what Illouz calls the rational logic of a market-driven approach to romance in a competitive society built on notions of meritocracy.

Aisha: I dunno, I remember something from Prof. [name suppressed]'s lecture, about.. about how… I- I can't remember the term. But I can help you.. find out when I go home. But it's more like.. how.. relationships are now like, uhhm… what you can give each other, instead of romance. [Slight agreement from one participant] So it's like, you can give me a house… or.. stability and all that stuff, so.. it's more of that instead of romance.. and feeling… and all that stuff.

Chloe: Yeah. I think especially in Singapore, cos everyone's just trying to get ahead.

[Soft agreement]

Chloe: Yah, like what she said, it's more of like, the benefits they get, and not-

Sheila: Whether you really love the person..

Chloe: Yah..

Sheila: I think there are more people who do, who marry [for practical reasons].

Chloe: But of course now, less than last time.

Moderator: Who marry like, for- for what reasons, like –

Sheila: I think for practical reasons.

Andrea: More and more.

Moderator: More and more?
Denise: More and more, for practical reasons. Like, to get the flat…

Aisha: Yaaaah…

[Squeals of laughter]

Moderator: So not so much- not so much because they're in love, but-

Chloe: But even-

Sheila: last time-

Chloe: Like, very old.. concept… now, I don't think women do that [marry in order to own property in the form of public housing], becos we can

Aisha: No, we can get a flat when we are… 35, I think. [Tammy: Yah] So – [Sheila: Before that you have to be married, to get HDB] when you're single until then, you can get a flat.

[Giggles, murmurs from participants.]
Aisha: So I'm waiting until I'm 35.

[Laughter from other participants]

Andrea: Useful information.

Sheila: But even if you talk about last time, like in 197- whatever, if you was match-made they also weren't in love what.

[Agreement]

Aisha: They say that love can be cultivated what, so I dunno how true is that, but- they have survived until- like, to have us, and all that stuff.

Sheila: Maybe that one is also cos they *bo pian*[46].

Chloe: Yaaaaaaaah!

Tammy: It might be a- a combination of both? Like, they like each other –

Aisha: Abit-abit

Tammy: Like, can tolerate you for the next fifty years okay- [gurgles]

[Laughter]

Chloe: And at the same time they give you-

[Participants all agreeing/talking at the same time]

Chloe: advantages

Andrea agrees.
Moderator: So it's a mixture-

Chloe: Yaah..

Tammy: Yeah it's a mixture.

Moderator: ..so it's not very clear- it's not-

Tammy: It's not- yah…

While they all believed in marrying "for love" and deplored conjugal unions formed for reasons other than mutual romantic attraction and love, participants came

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[46] Singlish term of Hokkien origin meaning "to have no choice".

collectively to the tentative conclusion that even if such a basis is the socially ideal norm, whether it is indeed a key factor in the motivation to marry is compromised from the outset. Because of the impetus for upward social mobility and the ingrained importance of financial security and its correlation in SES and social prestige – and even if one is affluent or comfortably middle-class, as many Singaporeans are, other social/legal constraints, such as the state's "nuptialist" policy (Teo 2007) stipulating that only married couples can apply for public housing before the age of 35, and the endless need to advance in the socioeconomic hierarchy or at least be financially stable underpins more pragmatic considerations with respect to when and who one marries.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

Besides exploring change and continuity in youth attitudes towards relationships and marriage in Singapore, and partially replicating Williams and Guest's 2005 study on urban middle class attitudes towards marriage in the neighboring countries of Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines, this research sought to understand gendered norms and ideals in the context of romantic and marital relations. It was hypothesized that the aspiration for upward socioeconomic mobility, or at least the preservation of one's social status through financial stability, configure (and sometimes stretch in opposite directions) young Singaporeans' attitudes towards dating, gender and marriage. These aspirations and pathways are variously conditioned by cultural globalization, economic development, state-stimulated consumption, national discourses and policies such as the ideologies of meritocratic competition and Asian family values), and Singapore's historical and geographical particularities.

I found that romantic love as a basis for marriage did not seem in any way to exist above the logic of the market, despite or precisely because of the consumer cult of romance that perpetuates its idealization (Illouz 1997). Indeed, the traits of pragmatism, materialism, conformity and even *kiasuism*[47] attributed to Singaporeans in popular discourse seem to lie at the heart of decisions of when, who and whether to marry. While participants vociferously upheld the tenet of romantic love as a purely

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[47] From the Singlish (Hokkien-derived) adjective *kiasu*, referring to the fear of failing, losing out or missing out on something.

affective foundation for marriage untouched by cost-benefit calculations, they later conceded that this was not often the case, as practical considerations and other social, even geographic factors complicated the picture. Such factors include the government's nuptialist housing policies that cater to married couples and make it easier for them to own public housing property, and the ageist and sexist double standards that put older and unmarried women at a social disadvantage. Having the financial means to consume and embody successful romance, marriage and family is a central concern in love, kinship and parenthood in Singapore.

6.1 Summary of key findings

While the extremely limited sample size and skewed educational background composition of the focus groups allow only speculative claims to be made, the following themes and patterns emerged from the data. First, that dating was a nebulous term whose referents ranged from casual outings with a member of the opposite sex, to spending time together with an official relationship partner. Next, marriage is still largely seen as an important state in life and at the very least a social norm sanctioned in a formal ceremony, if not to satisfy a girlhood fantasy of wedded bridal bliss, then to uphold 'tradition' and please one's parents, or in the Malay community, to publicly announce and therefore legitimate one's union. Participants felt that good communication, mutual understanding, loyalty, compromise and financial wellbeing characterized a successful marriage. Because relationships are seen as precursors to marriage, successful relationships are similarly characterized. They are differentiated, if at all, in the strength and permanence of commitment and fidelity.

Female participants also underscored the importance of romance, typified by acts of consideration and thoughtfulness often symbolized in gifts or some form of emotional labor, in relationships and marriage. On the other hand, the majority of the male participants scoffed at the idea of romance, complaining that women had been influenced by western media productions that cathected the performance of romantic love to exhausting, epic levels they lacked the money or spirit to sustain. At the same time, Singaporean women seemed less disposed to view their male counterparts favorably, believing themselves to be better, as pointed out in Chapter 2 by Dr. Eileen Aw, than the men are eligible. This, however, does not mitigate the patriarchal norms and expectations that were actively voiced in the male focus groups, for example in their agreement that the fewer men women date before they marry, the better for their future husbands. Patriarchal values were also tacitly accepted and expressed in the female focus groups, when one of the participants put forth that the role of a wife was to "make the husband feel good" when he returned from work; another wishes to be a full-time stay-at-home wife/mother[48].

Finally, and somewhat unexpectedly, it emerged on several occasions that there was nothing for dating couples to do in Singapore; participants expressed boredom at the lack of options other than shopping, eating together and watching a movie. Male participants blamed the landscape and the country's lack of interesting

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[48] Giddens highlights the break between "love as a formula for marriage and the demands of getting by" (1992:46) He submits that while the sexual division of labor keeps a marriage afloat, the position of women as wives at home tied female sexuality to marriage and respectability, since it aligned romantic and sexual bonds under the auspices of marriage. This, he argues, has the effect of setting men in the public realm of work, away from true dyadic intimacy where the potential for gender equality exists, and reproducing marriage as the central desire and goal of women.

places where they could go on dates for their poor performance in the realm of romance.

This study makes a tentative closing argument that the interests of the elite ruling PAP in maintaining the endless material, technological and media consumption of Singapore's middle class and in promoting marriage, family and childbearing through the local version of the American Dream with its emphasis on meritocratic excellence, have effectively inculcated the pressing need for financial security and concerns about social status, identity and "face" among Singaporeans. These in turn configure a political and moral economy of love that shape attitudes and personal choices. Because of Singapore's unusual history, cultural heterogeneity, cosmopolitanism[49] and its rapid and ongoing transition from a young postcolonial nation to a postindustrial society amidst 21st-century global flows and social forces, no clear pattern or singular feature characterizes the local youth attitudes towards dating, marriage and romance in the limited number of focus groups that were conducted.

6.2 Limitations and policy implications

This study suffers from several limitations, specifically, the low sample size, the occasional non-neutral conduct of male focus group moderators and the lack of quantitative data, all of which were addressed in the methods section. Due to these limitations, policy implications to be drawn from its findings lack a strong basis. It is difficult in any case to pinpoint a surefire policy solution.

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[49] Singapore is ranked within the top ten in Foreign Policy's 2010 Global Cities Index.

While the institution of marriage in the developed European countries, Japan and the US is weakening (e.g. Retherford, Ogawa & Rikiya 2001; Gubernskaya 2010), the focus group results of this study do not reveal marriage to be in as dire a state in Singapore even as it is increasingly delayed. This is in line with data adduced from the Singapore component of the World Values Survey, which show that Singaporeans value marriage, family and children (Pereira 2006: 78). Both Pereira and McDonald (2006a; 2008) note that problems of low marriage and fertility in Singapore and Japan respectively are not located in individuals but in the values and organization of the societies in which they live. The desires to enjoy a high standard of living and to find a partner who thinks you can provide them with it, or at least finds you adequate, and to have children together are often at odds with each other.

To address the manifold factors[50] paving the way to demographic disaster for the nation, the government has stepped up its efforts to boost marriage and fertility rates in 2013 with a multipronged approach targeting working couples, those with children but not their own homes, and those trying to conceive. These measures are designed to improve housing availability, defray medical costs of fertility treatment and delivery frees, increase baby bonuses and health care, foster work-life balance and extend paternity leave (The Straits Times, January 22, 2013). The aim of this enhanced Marriage and Parenthood package is to raise the current total fertility rate of 1.2 to 1.4 or 1.5. This attempt to boost marriage and fertility is the latest of many initiatives, drives and campaigns since the 1980s to curb decreasing birth rates, a landmark year being 1987 when the government replaced its "Stop at Two" family

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[50] "Too tired. No time. No flat. No helper…" Some of the reasons Singaporeans gave for not reproducing. (The Straits Times, 26 January 2013).

planning line in effect since 1972 with "Have Three Or More, If You Can Afford It" (Yap 2003: 643). It remains to see how successful this recent effort will be, especially in light of the PAP's controversial February 2013 White Paper on Population which set a 2030 target total population of 6.5 – 6.9 million in an already crowded territory, amidst serious public concern about immigration, employment opportunities and quality of life.

My research has focused primarily on the early stages of family formation in its attention to dating, courtship and marriage. The resulting policy implications are therefore oriented towards relationships and marriage rather than fertility, parenthood and population. Given that Singapore's highly-educated and middle-class populace are likely to resent state[51] inference in their private lives (Pereira 2006: 84), the government might do well to subtly promote an ideology of love and marriage that does not demand excessive cost or perfection, one that lowers the expectations of young Singaporeans and somehow attaches some form of social or cultural cachet to a dating, marital or family life that is no-frills, easygoing or not predicated on material markers of prestige or success – to the extent that this is possible without sacrificing quality of life. Its efforts must not be seen as heavy-handed interventions or even paternalistic nudges, like their smarmy 1988 'Singapore Family Life' poster (reproduced on page 23). Once the long arm of the PAP is obvious, such endeavors inevitably become an object of local and global ridicule (cf. Jones 2012: 91), losing all

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[51] The concept of "the state" as a unitary entity has been problematized (e.g. Abrams 1988, Mitchell 1991, Sharma & Gupta 2006) but here I retain this understanding to reflect the way it remains popularly perceived as a powerful social actor informally referred to as "Gahmen" – Singlish for "the government".

credibility among the well-educated young Singaporeans it "merito-genetically" (Sun 2012: 135) targets to reproduce the nation. Any explicit dating campaigns or initiatives launched by the government will not be well received. And until there is a fundamental change in dating attitudes, expectations and societal values, the "checklist syndrome" will remain a powerful rubric in choosing a relationship partner.

If it is the case that the Singaporean state or PAP apparatus in times of crisis is adept at "rebound[ing] with further strategies and new technologies to expand its political arsenal, and thus extend – and perfect – its media, cultural and technological reach and capabilities" (Lee 2010: 151), this would be the ultimate domain for it to do so, blending biopolitics and media governmentality (Lee 2010) to socially engineer the affective-romantic dispositions of its citizens[52]. Combined with policy approaches advocating comprehensive measures that incentivize marriage and childbearing across the board by providing substantial tax rebates, childcare subsidies, family-friendly workplaces, extended paid maternity and paternity leaves with safeguards for job

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[52] This does not reflect my own views, but if I were a public policymaker it is the recommendation I would make. In January 2013, the National Family Council launched "Project Superglue", a funding scheme providing grants for youth projects that promote family bonding. One of their funded projects, "The Singaporean Fairytale" attempts the engage 21-30 year old Singaporeans through local takes on common western fairytales and nursery rhymes which will be distributed in leaflet and postcard from in Singaporean universities in order to raise awareness about fertility. Says one of the creators of "The Singaporean Fairytale", "[f]ertility is a hard fact, but fairytales act as a softer approach to attract viewers" (The Straits Times, Feb 14 2013). Faced with the failures of its many campaigns and initiatives to increase marriage and fertility, the government is clearly trying to tap into the creativity and insider knowledge of young people to devise fertility schemes for themselves. These re-interpreted fairytales target women, replicating the logic of blame and responsibility for sexual and domestic reproduction, the brunt of which falls on women. For example, The Golden Goose is depicted as no longer being able to lay any more golden eggs because "her egg-making device was rusty and old", and the pop-up text bubble ominously informs viewers that "1 out of 3 women above 35 will have problems conceiving. 2 out of 3 women over the edge of 40 will not be able to conceive at all" (http://www.thesingaporeanfairytale.com/index.html?tale=06). In another tale, "Fairy Godmother" makes fun of the "maiden aunt" who has forgone marriage and substitutes "Pradas, Vuittons and Tiffany" for children, "dearly call[ing] them 'my babies'" – another instance reflecting the gendered construction of Singaporean women as selfish, materialistic consumers (cf. Tan 2009: 45).

security, this may mitigate the societally created obstacles to marriage and parenting and help reverse current demographic trends.

6.3 Future directions

As suggested in the methods section, a large-scale survey conducted by professional enumerators and complemented by more focus group data may give a better picture of general attitudes. In such a study using survey and focus group methods, differences in attitudes towards love and marriage between ethnic, class and religious groups may be detected, but whether these prove to be statistically significant is another question. For many young, heterosexual people, their modern, secular and national identity as assimilated[53] Singaporean citizens may be the one that is most crucial in defining their attitudes to relationships and marriage, although this is an ethnic majority view that can well be challenged and problematized. To address longitudinal change, a comparative study twenty or thirty years down the line may yield interesting findings and insights on the future of marriage as Singapore's populations expands and becomes ever-increasingly connected on a global scale.

In addition, more research on men and masculinities in Singapore may provide a deeper understanding of the apparent gulf between the genders and address the vexed issues surrounding gendered expectations in dating and romance, notably encapsulated in the "checklist syndrome". Critical work on the gendered dimensions

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[53] For non-Chinese minorities, this is by no means a benign process (e.g. Chua 2003; Barr & Low 2005); also see Ramdas (2012) for an account of how unmarried Singaporean-Indian women negotiate the hegemonic life course stages of singlehood, marriage and childbearing.

of education in Singapore, along with its socializing effects on creativity and conformity will also be highly illuminating.

Participant Profiles

Name[54]	Gender	Age[55]	Ethnicity	Major	Year Interviewed
Aisha	Female	24	Malay	Sociology	2010 June
Adam	Male	27	Malay	Sociology	2010 June
Andrea	Female	20	Chinese	Sociology	2010 June
Brian	Male	21	Chinese	Political Science	2009 July
Chloe	Female	19	Chinese	Sociology	2010 June
Daniel	Male	24	Chinese	Sociology	2009 July
David	Male	22	Chinese	Sociology	2010 June
Denise	Female	22	Chinese	Sociology	2010 June
Donald	Male	22	Chinese	Sociology	2009 July
Gerald	Male	23	Chinese	Sociology	2010 June
Heidi	Female	19	Chinese	Sociology	2009 July
Khatijah	Female	20	Malay	Media Studies	2009 July
Serene	Female	22	Chinese	Media Studies	2009 July
Suresh	Male	23	Indian	Sociology	2009 July
Sheila	Female	20	Indian/ Chinese	Business	2010 June
Tanya	Female	25	Chinese	Southeast Asian Studies	2010 June
Tat Meng	Male	22	Chinese	Aeronautical Engineering	2010 June

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[54] Pseudonym
[55] At time of interview

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