CHAPTER 1

Ordinary People Dream

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What do ordinary people want from life?

Over the years, this question has weaved its way into my research projects. In some, I explicitly posed it in some form to respondents and addressed it directly in the process of data collection and report writing.[1] In others, I did not consciously and directly raise the issue, but it emerged anyway.[2] This simple question is the pulsating heart at the centre of conversations about work, marriage, parenting, family, children.

The question has a subtle presence in other aspects of my professional life as well. I hear it in students' comments and questions when I teach, notice its shadow when I am asked for advice about navigating academia, and encounter it when I discuss my research with a variety of audiences outside the university.

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[1] See, for example, Ng *et al.* (2019); Ng *et al.* (2021); Teo (2011).

[2] See, for example, Teo (2018a); Teo (2022).

To say that this question emerges in these multiple sites is not to say that there is a singular or straightforward answer. Instead, it is to register that people from different backgrounds and at various points in the life course have hopes, aspirations, dreams. Precisely because of the diversity of our society, the shape and colour of 'hopes, aspirations, dreams' varies. Some people boldly list their wishes as timelines and goals — like coins to be picked up on a path; others pepper talk of ideals with constant loops back to realities — dreams tethered by a rope to a pole; yet others wonder if they are allowed to dream in daylight at all. Some think primarily in terms of individual goals; others speak mostly of what they wish for their children; and yet others think about friends, communities, society at large. To present this as different groups having different orientations is also not entirely precise because what emerges also depends on context: one-on-one conversations compel people to speak in individualistic terms but invitations to reflect broadly or conversations that happen in groups open up ruminations about Singapore society. Context matters in another, more profound way: what people want, how they think and talk about what they want, is also deeply shaped by how they relate to others, what they imagine as reasonable, realistic, or good to want given what society looks like and where they place within it. In other words, hopes, aspirations, dreams are not made up entirely in individual minds — their shapes and possibilities and boundaries are socially constructed and shared.

The editors of this book, Kanwaljit Soin and Margaret Thomas, invite us, writers and readers both, to contemplate an ideal society of the future. In imagining any ideal world — and let us use the word 'utopian' — the question must be asked: what do ordinary people want from life? If the imagined world is meant to house the same diverse population that exists in actuality, then it is crucial for us to also ask: *whose* ideal, *whose* utopia? In a context in which a

single political party, the People's Action Party, has had monopoly in shaping answers to the question of what kind of society Singapore should be, it is especially urgent to consider these questions autonomously.

The notion of 'ordinary people' carries with it precisely some inclusion of both views as they differ and views where they coalesce, as well as the potential for imagining ourselves independent of how the state imagines us. Starting from this question in the imagination of a utopia is also important if we are interested in what Erik Olin Wright (2010) referred to as *real* utopias, ideals grounded by possibility:

> The idea of 'real utopias' embraces this tension between dreams and practice. It is grounded in the belief that what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions. …Nurturing clear-sighted understandings of what it would take to create social institutions free of oppression is part of creating a political will for radical social changes to reduce oppression. A vital belief in a utopian ideal may be necessary to motivate people to set off on the journey from the status quo in the first place, even though the actual destination may fall short of the utopian ideal. …What we need, then, is "real utopias": utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change (6).

To bring about improvements to society, to bring about a better world, requires an understanding of existing realities, and then using those to stretch our imaginations to bring about better alternatives.

In this essay, I hope to show that it is precisely through listening to, making sense of, and taking seriously what ordinary people want that we can gain deeper understandings of the limitations and possibilities that structure our lives. And it is from there that we can consider alternative social arrangements wherein ideals — utopias — may serve the aspirations of a broad and diverse collective.

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Over the past two decades, I have interviewed people who together make up the diversity of Singapore society: I met them at various points in the life course; they embody various ethnic or religious cultures; there are women and men, who relate to gender and sexuality in varied ways; they are single/married/widowed/divorced; they have had different experiences with education and hold a range of credentials; they have a variety of occupations, work different types of hours and make varying amounts of money; they live in different types of housing, within households of different configurations. Each research project had its specific goals and hence its unique questions, but I have had a longstanding interest in talking to people about everyday living — what time do you wake up, tell me about what a typical weekday is like? How did you decide where to buy your flat? What jobs have you worked in, and what was each one like? How are your co-workers and boss? How do you get from work to home? How often do you eat out? In your family, who cooks? When you say you must be home to supervise your children, what do you mean? What do your kids like to do, what are their personalities like, what do you hope for them when they grow up? When you stop working, how will you spend your time?

The responses and stories pile up. Pictures form of ordinary people going about their lives: the daily hum of work, sleep, eat, scroll, laugh, shout, chatter, quarrel; breakfast at the downstairs

kopitiam and tonight whose turn to tabao dinner; the mundane packing of schoolbags bumping up against the conversation-hogging "PSLE Year"; peaceful me-time on the MRT pierced by frantic shower-dinner-nag-homework-pack (again with the schoolbag) bedtime routines; WhatsApp messages between mothers, teachers, grandparents, domestic workers forming webs of care that hold children's schedules together. In these daily acts of living, if you look closely, you see people seeking out meaning, making sense of who they are and who they want to be, thinking of themselves and contemplating loved ones, experiencing fear, frustration, and trepidation, feeling hope and wistfulness.

I won't lie — it is not always easy to spot the similarities. Every person's story can come to sound unique. But a job is a job and mine is to figure out patterns. Describing some of these patterns will help get to what I think we should know about what ordinary people are challenged by. This in turn can help us see what they want in life.

Patterns: Challenges
Quests for work-life balance

Parenting is busy. For those who work 'office hours', mornings are about getting everyone in the household ready for and travelling to school and work. Most of the day is spent at work, sometimes squeezing in an errand or a call home to check on the kids. Evenings are spent on household chores, supervising children with homework, bedtime routines.

The 'second shift' that sociologist Arlie Hochschild wrote about in 1989 remains relevant — it is still women more so than men who come home from jobs to this labour. In Singapore, for some middle- and upper-middle class households, some of this is transferred to migrant domestic workers, entrenching the tasks themselves as

women's work. On the other hand, fatherhood deepens men's sense of duty and responsibility to be wage earners — upping the pressure to hold onto jobs, move up career ladders, or find additional sources of income through side hustles.

Weekends too are busy, particular for those with limited access to paid help — house cleaning and laundry, shopping for groceries and household items, visits with parents or other family members, bringing children to enrichment classes and tuition. Outings to parks and malls are squeezed into this schedule, but for many families, time for play and leisure is limited and unscheduled downtime rare.

With few exceptions, across class and ethnic lines, parents speak about this time in life — when jobs are demanding and children are young — as hectic and stressful. Time constraints, money pressures, having to be accountable to multiple parties, are each daily experiences. There is often a sense of life slightly off-kilter. Mothers in particular talk about profound feelings of guilt as they see themselves falling short both at work and at home.

Education as uneasy care labour

Paying attention to the norms around childhood and education in Singapore today, we can further specify the challenges of work-life balance as well as the gendered nature of care labour.

Significant chunks of parents' time are spent on education-related issues. I use 'issues' here purposefully. It is not just that parents spend time teaching children how to read or calculate, but that they engage in a whole host of other tasks — surf online forums to find out which primary schools they have good odds of getting into and how to improve those odds; tap on networks to figure out suitable tuition centres or tuition teachers; coordinate with teachers and tutors the tasks and strategies for improving children's performance; bring children to and from classes and wait while they are in them;

re-learn how to do mathematics homework from parent chatgroups or school-run workshops; sit with, check, nag, scold, coax, threaten, bribe children.

Most of these, in most households and within the larger culture, is gendered labour — marked as women's domain. Even for those with the means to pay for help, or in households where fathers are involved in caregiving, some tasks seem tethered to motherhood. Mothers are the ones re-arranging work schedules and career goals, often realigning their identities and self-worth in the process. They are the ones forming information networks and running parent volunteer groups. Mothers are whom teachers and tutors call when children act up. Mothers are even the ones using their "own money" to pay for tuition or enrichment in cases where fathers "do not believe in tuition". Built into ideals of contemporary Singaporean motherhood is the duty of supporting children in their schooling. Are women bringing this on themselves? Sometimes their husbands say so and sometimes they themselves think so. An image of water flowing is useful here. These are beliefs, practices, habits, common sense that flow through society in complex ways — repeatedly enacted by women, men, teachers, grandparents, co-workers, children; sometimes informal and uncoordinated, other times guided by procedures, policies, rules; not without resistance or contradiction but nonetheless ending up affirming, like so many grooves deep and shallow, narrow and wide, mothers' work in children's education. Regardless of what individual women want, motherhood in Singapore today entails, as an interviewee told me when explaining what she is suspending her aspirations for: "be decent mother, go through PSLE".

There are few things a social scientist can say so unequivocally: no parent enjoys these tasks. They take up time and sap energy, generate parent-child or marital tension and conflict, cost money,

and leave parents feeling uneasy. The texture of the unease is instructive: on a regular basis, parents talk about children's educational progress as problems requiring dutiful intervention. A child is not reading and writing yet; they are not keeping up in maths; they regularly forget to do their homework; their Mother Tongue is very weak; they are already in Primary 5 but not studying hard enough, et cetera. Children are regularly framed — through parent-teacher conferences, chat groups and online forums, marking rubrics and grading curves, numerous conversations comparing results — as lacking, problematic, always with room for improvement. Parents are compelled to view their kids through this 'problem' lens. Missing or difficult to sustain is a sense of awe at children's growth, a sense of joy around learning, and a feeling of security that one expects *should* accompany handing over one's child to a 'world-class education system'.

Contrary to popular discourses around *kiasu* parents or Tiger mums, the driving forces fuelling parental anxiety and intervention, for most parents, have to do with fears of being left out or behind rather than drive and ambition for getting ahead. The aspirations are not centred on cultivating great talents but on 'average is good enough'. It is a 'how to avoid…' orientation and not a 'how to become…' sensibility. This is substantively different from the stereotype of parents as competitive, ambitious, striving for upward mobility. It is a negative rather than an upbeat posture, with emotional registers hovering at angst, frustration, or resignation. In interview after interview, parents lamented and sighed: childhood should not be like this. They "feel sorry" for their kids; they worry about the pressures and stresses children today face and the mental health problems that seem common; they are not convinced this is the right way to push their children but do it because "no choice". Parents hope their children can make it

through — somehow "find their passion" and eventually have "good jobs" that allow them to be "independent". Despite all the time spent in schools — every one ostensibly a good one — they do not seem to have much faith that schools will guide students toward these goals, only that credentials are a precondition to these ends. Some parents, indeed, go a step further and wonder aloud if the focus on tests and exams are preparing children appropriately for a rapidly changing world.

In Singapore today, parents see the steering of children through a tough education journey as their major duty. I have been astonished to hear the many stories of their investment in and commitment to the process. I am struck to see that it is an uneasy existence: leisure sacrificed, money spent, emotions and relationships characterised by contradictions and tensions, ambivalence and fear.

Matthias Doepke and Fabrizio Zilibotti (2019), in a study investigating the links between economic conditions and parenting practices, found that societies with higher levels of income and wealth inequality also tend to be societies where parents put a great deal of private investment into education. When people experience high costs of living and when they see unequal lives resulting from different educational trajectories and credentials, these shape their parenting decisions. Viewing Singaporean parents and their education practices through this lens, we are compelled to look to forces that shape individual behaviours from the outside in.

Basic needs through the life course

The unease I have just described can be de-particularised — that is, separated from the specific experiences of mothers/parents and considered instead from the perspective of other ordinary Singaporeans and across the life course. This helps us see more clearly what we overlook if we narrowly prejudge that the problem

is to do with "parents' mindsets". What *are* parents so concerned about that drives them to spend money, time, and energy on children's education? That their children can live good lives — where they can meet their needs, have some semblance of security, be fulfilled, contribute to society. This aspiration is not limited to parents, nor only on behalf of children. At multiple points in the life course, people aspire to these for themselves and their loved ones.

According to a wide range of people across the life course, these are basic needs: housing, food, clothing; opportunities to education, employment, work-life balance, healthcare; a sense of belonging, respect, security, and independence; choices to participate in social activities, and the freedom to engage in one's cultural and religious practices.[3] At different times in life, priorities shift: older persons are slightly more concerned than younger ones about healthcare and slightly less preoccupied about work-life balance, for example. How needs are met also vary. Young children may attend birthday parties and working adults go out to meals with friends, and both these activities meet their needs for social belonging. Across variations of age, occupation, education level, gender, ethnicity and religion, the entire list of needs matter for living a life of dignity. Everyone wants to live a life of dignity.

Talking and listening to people about their lives over the years, I hear worries about rising living costs, job insecurities and the attendant risks of insufficient income for meeting these needs. Ordinary people recognise that Singaporeans live in a relatively wealthy and peaceful country and some talk about feeling lucky and grateful for this. Nonetheless, they are also deeply aware that things are expensive and that there are challenges to meeting needs. This is a sentiment that looks different from different perspectives: older

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[3] For how we ascertained basic needs through focus group discussions, see Ng *et al.* (2019).

people worry about falling sick and burdening their children with healthcare costs. Working adults worry about not making enough to support dependent children/parents and save for their own retirements. Younger adults wonder if they will be able to live independently, including whether they can afford HDB flats of their own. Everyone but the wealthiest understands that they must work consistently and over many years to meet their needs; no one thinks there is anywhere a free lunch.

Understandably, ordinary people are most aware of and concerned about their own circumstances — their idiosyncratic pains and struggles, the well-being of their own families. But it is worth pointing out that there is also significant awareness and concern about inequalities in society more broadly. People recognise that the challenges of everyday living are not experienced evenly across society. They care that people have unequal access to things. While talking to a group of young people about basic needs, for example, my research collaborators and I listened to them articulate the importance of university degrees for securing good jobs. They insisted that we should include the cost of university in basic needs budgets while also pointing out that not all young people can qualify for university because of earlier inequalities in access to tuition and other resources. They expressed these views not with jadedness or cynicism but with a sense that things *should* be fairer. Including university fees in basic needs budgets are a way of redressing unfairness — for these youth, no one who qualifies for university should be deprived of that opportunity due to inability to pay.

In sum, the broader expressions of need and anxieties I have heard over the years suggest that here is an uneasiness that is not limited to people who are parents. In addition, the unease is both narrow and wide: fear for the self, certainly, but also uneasiness about where society is.

Patterns: Human needs

What do ordinary people want from life? Having seen some common challenges, let's circle back to this question.

In a diverse society, there are varying tastes and preferences, disparate belief systems and practices. Different objects, relationships, and activities hold meaning for people. As I have also indicated, each of us morphs as we move through the life course. To think 'what ordinary people want', as I said I would at the beginning of the essay, and to do this while respecting diverse aspirations and orientations, we must contemplate things at a general level. That is, we should consider the broad principles and values anchoring most people's relationship to needs; to think, in other words, expansively and broadly about what people want, without falling into traps of narrow prescription or social engineering.

Three interlocking principles illustrate what I have learnt from ordinary people about human needs. The three pinciples are social belonging and respect; choice and autonomy; ethical agency.

People want to belong and to be respected. Belonging comes from being able to partake in social life. This encompasses a wide range of human activities and social spaces: the workplace and the labour market, community activities, family and friendship networks, schooling and education, religious and cultural gatherings, virtual spaces of public and political discourse, et cetera. Most people are embedded in some groups and networks, and they care to be in step with the norms of the social groups they are a part of. Indeed, one's place in social groups is continuously enacted and negotiated through shared practices and beliefs with others in that group. Belonging, in other words, is not a static state but a continuous work-in-progress, with the risk of exclusion always built in. Children's embeddedness in relationships with their classmates, for example, is daily enacted

by their sharing of experiences and knowledge of certain toys, games, TV shows, Tik Tok phenomena, et cetera, as well as their participation in activities considered 'normal' in a given time and place — tuition, enrichment activities, school trips, hanging out after school. Exclusion happens when, in a sustained manner — over time and across situations — a kid is unable to partake in what their peers generally do.

Respect is a crucial component of one's membership in a social world. Belonging is genuinely achieved when one is respected by others in one's circles. This is predicated on entering into relationships as an equal; more precisely, in fact, respect is given and received when people abide by the many unspoken rules of social contracts. Most relationships are guided by relational roles such as student-teacher, parent-child, and senior-junior. To maintain these ties, different things are expected of people in different positions. For example, an older member of a family would not be expected to give a very large *ang bao* at a wedding but their standing in the community would be affected if they showed up empty-handed. Respect, then, has to be continuously forged. This is not to indicate that it is quid pro quo or difficult strategic work — most of what we do in social life is habitual and effortless and certainly human relations are not all instrumental. But 'give and take' — that easygoing phrase we use to describe relationships — is exactly that: give *and* take, not give and give or take and take.

The importance of social belonging and respect, and the conditions and continuous work necessary for securing them, is especially salient when people experience being on the edge of attaining belonging and respect. One interesting and perhaps unobvious example comes from women who quit their jobs to take care of children. Women as mothers often pay attention to how their children

are keeping in step with peers, sometimes putting aside their own dreams to make sure children do not fall too out of step where education is concerned. In the process, their own needs of belonging and respect may fray. Despite the backdrop of social scripts about 'motherly love' or 'sacrifice' or essentialist beliefs about women's nature as caregivers, it turns out quitting wage work to care for children is not an easy transition. It is not social esteem that awaits. Women's access to belonging and respect come under challenge. My interviewees described losing common ground with co-workers and other employed friends, going through periods of loneliness, and feeling out of step with society. They lament no longer being able to talk to ex-colleagues and knowing only things like "Daiso which product is good to wash toilets". This is not simply one set of knowledge swapped out for another, but the loss of belonging and respect that accompanies losing more highly valued knowledge. Although most women who make decisions to cut back on wage work to care for children make peace with their decisions, this takes time, effort to build up alternative social communities (of other full-time mothers). The loss of social standing from the loss of income never goes away entirely.

Paying closer attention to money and its meaning, we see also that what's at stake are people's needs for choice and autonomy. What are choice and autonomy and how can they be thought of as general needs (i.e. shared by all humans)? These are needs to make decisions, to exercise one's will, to have some control over what one wants to do and how one wants to live. It is rarely unlimited; indeed, people do not demand unfettered choice. Instead, when ordinary people express this need, they refer to wanting *some* degree of autonomy and independence, *some* degree of being able to choose from *some* options. What is the relationship between money and choice? Not having access to money can limit one's choices: about clothing, food

and nutrition, exercise and healthcare, social activities, and education. Some of these can seem trivial and inconsequential, and yet have long-term consequences on well-being. Having insufficient money to accept one invitation to eat out with friends may not seem like a big deal, but persistent inability to 'choose' to participate can mean being left out of future invitations and activities. Not having enough money to 'choose' to give children tuition and enrichment, over the long run, may result in narrowing their future prospects relative to their peers.

What is the relationship between money, choice, and gender? Looking closely at women who have no independent income, we see that money shapes relationships. Women speak of the discomfort of having to ask husbands for money, of 'choosing' to cut down on their own needs when they no longer have income. Conversely, women who have independent earnings speak of being able to 'choose' to spend more on children's activities or things, of being able to treat friends to meals, of being able to more freely give their parents money or contribute to their religious groups — *without having to ask for permission*. Having these options, and the capacity to exercise them, brings a sense of worth and dignity. In general, relationships in which all parties have choice are relationships that are voluntary and free, rather than obligatory and captive.[4] When people articulate needs for choice and autonomy, they mean this in a wide range of areas — material objects, practices and life paths, relationships.

Finally, it is worth drawing attention to the notion of *ethical* agency. Being able to do the 'right' thing matters to ordinary people. 'Choices' are of course often about pedantic things that hold little moral weight — choosing what clothes to wear or what to eat for lunch on an ordinary day, for example, do not usually mean very

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[4] For a thought-provoking and insightful account of this, see Partanen (2017).

much. There are many human actions, however, that people feel *should* be guided by values — some judgement about what is right or wrong, good or bad. When talking about parenting, for example, people invoked "values" — the importance of having values; values they want to teach their kids; and the "good persons" with "right values" they hope their children will become. Wanting to do what is right, to show and teach their children the 'right' values, is something parents want to be able to do — the kind of ethical agency they need and want.

Ethical agency is not easy to exercise. Take enrichment and tuition as a ubiquitous part of parental decisions and practice in Singapore today. This is an interesting example because it is a site of ethical tension — where parents feel that what they are doing is not exactly right from a certain perspective, and yet a duty from another angle. They feel they should be supervising homework, nagging at their kids, putting them in tuition, but they also feel that doing these things takes away the joy of learning, stress their children out, and undermine other values they want their kids to learn. The unease I refer to earlier stems from the troubling of one's ethical agency. Embedded in this is the lack of agency to do something according to one's sense of right and wrong.

Ethical agency should not be thought of as merely an individual capacity or quality. It is something one truly has only when one's choices and values, when exercised, are also *legible* to others in the larger social context. That is, it is not good enough to say that people can do whatever they want, can go ahead and exercise their own values even if against the grain ("no one is stopping you", "it's up to the individual"). True ethical agency is possible only when those choices, those values, that life, have a dignified space to exist — acknowledged with respect if not empathy — within a society. What is legibility? It is the acknowledgement or recognition by others. It is

about one's life having a place in the stories told about a society; it is living a life imaginable to others; it is being a social actor worthy and comprehensible within the vocabularies and frames that contain imagined communities of 'nation', or 'country', or 'city', or 'we the citizens'. It is, as the philosopher Judith Butler put it, to be 'grievable' — considered worth defending and potentially worth grieving over if lost (Butler 2020, 2009).

Butler's account of 'precarity' typically draws our attention to those who are cast completely outside of 'grievability' — the queer subject, the transient migrant subject, the refugee, the racialised other. These are persons, or rather categories, stripped of personhood — with incomprehensible 'lifestyles' or 'cultures'; with no standing in history or stories told in half-truths; lives unvalued in profound material ways as witnessed when lives lost go ungrieved. If we suspend our belief that these are 'minority issues', there is a larger lesson we can draw about the social schema we all reside in: in which life is organised around hierarchies in human worth; in which there are systematic mechanisms marking some people for exclusion. Butler reminds us that legibility — the acknowledgement or recognition by others — is central to our capacity to live as humans with agency.

Ethical agency, then, is the ability to exercise some will, make some choices, have some degree of control over one's life, while *also* socially belonging. It entails being regarded with respect as a human equal by others in society, to have one's moral choices be recognised as legitimate and worthy.

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How can people live the lives they want? Now that I have laid claims about what people want from life, another, more precise, way to ask the question is this: what conditions enable people to

encounter social belonging and respect, to have capacities to exercise choice, autonomy, and ethical agency?

Enabling conditions: Principles

Let us consider the mothers I interviewed.

First, we must acknowledge and embrace that women do not all have the same preferences. This is the case even when we narrow our focus to mothers. That is the point of thinking in terms of *choices*, *autonomy*, *ethical agency*, instead of specific arrangements of work and care. Some mothers prefer to take time off when their children are born and then return to work when babies are old enough to be cared for by others. Some would like to spend more years primarily caring for young children. Some women value what they do at work and prefer not to give it up after children. At present, many mothers have limited options — they continue to work because they would otherwise have no income for their families; they quit their jobs because their children have no other caregivers; they fold down their own aspirations because there is otherwise insufficient time to supervise their children. They do all this in response to some combination of policies, familial constraints, and social norms. To exercise choice and agency, women need real options that span a range of possibilities, which allow for more alignment between preferences and practices. We can call these *options* only if they are *all* rewarded with dignity and meeting of material needs, and insofar as opportunity costs — particularly regarding security, social belonging, and respect — of some were not much more than others.

It is important to underscore that although choices appear to be taken in singular instances of time, the need for choice and agency in life is a continuous one. Options have to be regarded for their long-term consequences, including how they affect choice and agency

later on. Again, this is not to suggest that people should have endless open doors available to them throughout life; no reasonable person expects this. Instead, it is to highlight that many women are offered 'choices' that may look alright at one point but are actually problematic over the long term. The 'choice' of quitting one's job at age 29 has to be considered not just for what it does at that point — for example, free up one's time to care for a baby; instead, we must also recognise that this looks like a quite different sort of choice if at age 36, this same person — still relatively young — encounters difficulties getting a job, pursuing a career, attaining financial independence and security.

In principle, then, social conditions can be said to be enabling if they have these qualities: some range of options that speak to variant preferences and needs; these options are each valued, recognised, and rewarded; they cannot be punishing either in the short- or long-term.

To this list, I will also add that options must be accessible to everyone, not only women, not just the university-educated, and not just the high-income. The current situation of inequality — where some women's choices are valorised and valued while other women's choices are judged and frowned upon; where men have one set of choices and women have another[5] — must be disrupted through breaking the connection between class background and gender on the one hand and options on the other. If, as I have argued, the true realisation of ethical agency depends on social recognition, this can only come about when all choices are respected *and* when *everyone's* choices are respected.

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[5] For detailed descriptions, see "Work-life balance should not be class privilege" and "I want my children better than me" in *This is What Inequality Looks Like* (Teo 2018), and Teo (2018b, 2016, 2013b).

How will a range of options be made accessible to all mothers, in ways that do not simply mean the displacement of care labour from some women (with more money and power) to other women (with less)? Care labour must be valued differently than it currently is. We have to re-draw the balance sheet between wage work/income on the one side and the tasks associated with the care of children (or the elderly and disabled) on the other. To consider how, it is worthwhile reiterating a point feminist scholars have been making for a long time. Labour designated only to women tends to be undervalued labour — dismissed as unskilled, trivial, inconsequential. On the other hand, labour monopolised by men tends to be valorised as more difficult, serious, consequential. For care to be valued differently in society, the tethering of care labour to women and the gendering of care as 'feminine' need to be disrupted. The juxtaposition of care as secondary or inferior to employment/money/career — where these are to an extent gendered 'masculine' — has to be dislodged as well. Put more concretely, both men and women must be able to freely partake in both care labour and wage work. The right to work and the right to care should not be limited to one group or the other. That is the only way to de-gender both — to bring into being and hence into imaginations that these are human activities and everyone can do both or either. Simultaneously, precisely because the current organisation of care labour today is essentially a gendered displacement — from mothers to female domestic workers, female childcare teachers, female nannies — that also builds upon and extends class inequalities, we cannot neglect attending to how paid care work is recognised and caregivers compensated for their labour. For care work to be valued differently, it also must be paid for differently — not merely with 'appreciation' and 'gratitude' but also with fair wages and work conditions.

These are not issues that can be resolved at the individual level. Individuals cannot alter the conditions that reproduce gender or class inequalities and dynamics. Absent of a range of options, individuals take the ones typically accessible to their gender and class. Doing so tends to reify existing gendered and classed patterns. This occurs even though many women today want to have wage work while raising children and some men want to be more present as caregivers than their own fathers were.

Enabling conditions: Principles X policies

Policies can pave the way for shifting conditions to better match various aspirations and needs. We know this from a large body of international research, from which we can distill some ideas of best practices.[6] What sorts of policies enable the combination of work and care for parents? What kinds of policies can shift care labour away from being only women's work? What types of policies are necessary to enable parents across class backgrounds to combine employment and parental duties?

First, policies must address both work conditions and care infrastructure. These include, for example, parental leave throughout childhood; wage replacement (i.e. leave has to be paid) for all types of workers (full- or part-time; permanent or contract); protection of workers against excessive work hours, irregular schedules, and unfair dismissal; high quality care institutions and affordable paid care services accessible to all children throughout the childhood years.

Second, policies must pay special attention to addressing gender and class inequalities and not presume that these will magically resolve on their own. Paternity and maternity leaves need to be

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[6] See, for example, Ochiai (2009); Gornick and Meyers (2009); Saraceno (2011); Keck and Saraceno (2013); Le Bihan, Knijn, and Martin (2014); Peng (2018).

relatively balanced so that parents, particularly at the beginning of parenthood and early in their careers, do not get entrenched in gendered patterns of care and gendered patterns of employment. Anti-discrimination measures need to be in place to ensure that women and/or low-wage workers who are parents are not discriminated against at the workplace. Regulations around paid time-off, maximum work hours, living wages and benefits, and rights to negotiation over work schedules are especially important for ensuring that the job conditions of part-time and contract workers, including low-wage workers, enable people to both maintain employment and have family lives. The improvement of work-life harmony for parents should not be subsidised by paid caregivers. Given the expansion of this sector, not just for care of the young but also the elderly, attention must be given to improving wages and work conditions here.

One can look at policies in Singapore today and claim they check all the boxes. But form is not content and the proof of a pudding is in the eating. We know box-checking is inadequate because we see these interconnected empirical realities. There is the persistence of gender and class patterns and inequalities in the workplace and the home; the spectacular failure of four decades of pro-natalist policies to reverse low fertility trends; and, as I have described in my work over the years and in this essay, the unease and frustrations experienced by ordinary people as they live their lives.

Perhaps we need to look at the policy approaches I described above from a different angle. Without implying that specifics are unimportant, the puzzle of why a case can check all boxes and yet not actually be effective in meeting its goals (I'm assuming the goals of pro-natalist policies is to increase fertility) may be better answered by a think on fundamental values. The policy approaches listed above, which exist to different degrees in different places and is

nowhere perfect, rests on a few key principles. First, rights — people have them, states have obligations to respect them, and dignified lives depend on having a confluence of rights. For example, people have parental rights to care (and children have rights to be cared for) as well as worker rights to decent work. Second, inequalities are not natural phenomena. Mitigating inequalities requires understanding sites and mechanisms of unequal treatment and access, and then targeted solutions to redress past and present injustices, including those that have become systematised in institutional practices. Third, how care needs are resolved have consequences for societal well-being — how well or poorly children, the elderly, and the disabled are cared for, how caregivers carry out their care duties, have effects on economy, society, polity. Care is an important social function and affects everyone at some point in their life course, but it has limited commercial value. It therefore requires public investment and coordination and must be conceived as a public good. Finally, running through these three principles is the belief regarding what members of society owe each other — a sense that society is held together by ties of mutual obligations.[7]

Contrast the list to the principles that the Singapore Government has been articulating explicitly and embedding in its approach to social policies for several decades: self-reliance; family as the first line of support; many helping hands.[8] It is in many ways directly oppositional. No one has a 'right' to anything — you have something if you or your family can acquire it through your own participation in the market. Inequalities are natural outcomes (of unequal capacities/talents/hard work, or more vaguely, 'globalisation') and

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[7] Numerous thinkers, across disciplines, help us think about how people can live well together in society and the value of mutual obligations. See, for example, Ackerman, Alstott, and Van Parijs (2006); Somers (2008); Low and Yeoh (2014); Ferguson (2015); Banerjee and Duflo (2019); George (2020); Sandel (2020); Shafik (2021).

[8] For an articulation and defense of this approach, see Lim (2007).

are problems for society only at its extremes. Then, the 'many helping hands' of 'community' (i.e. non-profits/charities) step in before the state intervenes as a last resort. In this schema, there is little room for recognising interdependencies and contemplating shared fates (of childhood, old age, illness) among the people who inhabit a society, no sense that pooled resources can serve the collective well-being and benefit people at different points in their life course. In fact, what is implied is that tapping on public resources is parasitical, damaging behaviour that should be avoided as well as discouraged. 'Personal responsibility' trumps 'mutual obligations'.

Although we usually see the principles as applying to 'welfare' narrowly conceived (i.e. poverty relief), the Singapore state has been faithful to them more generally, and certainly on issues of care. Foreign domestic workers were the initial policy solution, put forth in the late 1970s, and for a long time the main answer the state had to offer to meet care needs. This set the tone for relegating care problems to individual women, as well as naturalising in care relations and arrangements, intersecting gender, class, and racial hierarchies and inequalities.[9] A 'market' and demand-supply dynamics of a specific sort were set up through regulations: on the supply side, the workers must be women, only from certain countries and hence ethno-national backgrounds; the workers are permanently transient — with no rights to citizenship or family unification; they are required to reside at their workplace and with limited protections on job scope and work hours. On the demand side, the 'market' was also deeply managed in ways that perpetuate different options along gender and class lines: only households above certain income levels can hire domestic workers; women are the default employers; costs are differentially state-supported through taxes/reliefs depending on

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[9] See Teo and Piper (2009); Teo (2013a); Tan (2023).

alignment with the state's vision of ideal family structure. To understand how all this could have solidified patterns, we should also note what did *not* happen. Between the 1970s and through the 2000s, even as the care gap problem grew in intensity as more women entered the workforce, the Singapore state was slow to invest in care institutions and reticent in regulating work to respond to the changing profile and needs of the workforce. This was a length of time sufficient to entrench beliefs and habits around domestic and care labour. The result is unsurprising: housework and care labour are, in practice and therefore also in people's minds, low-status, feminine labour. Men have not stepped up in the domestic sphere in the ways women have stepped up in the earning sphere. Women, including those who can afford paid care, remain responsible for resolving care needs, and this impedes their workplace advancements. Importantly, the issue of reconciling work and care, although widely shared and a consequence of significant social transformations, is a private problem to be sorted out by individual families and usually by 'the woman'. If this was not enough to entrench care labour as women's work, the significant expansion of maternity leave in tandem with the snail's pace movement on paternity leave over these same decades sealed the gap between mothers' and fathers' abilities to care as well as their capacities to pursue wage work.[10]

What do ordinary people want? Choice and autonomy, belonging and respect, ethical agency. The current policy regime does not

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[10] The Singapore state made a major turn toward pro-natalist policies in 2004. Among other schemes, paid maternity leave of 12 weeks was introduced (this increased to 16 weeks in 2008). Paternity leave was not mandated and three days was a recommendation. It took nine more years, in 2013, for a one-week paid paternity leave to be introduced and another four years, in 2017, for it to be increased to two weeks. A full decade after paternity leave was first mandated, in 2023, the government announced that paternity leave would be increased to four weeks beginning in 2024, but the additional two weeks are voluntary rather than mandated (for employers) in the immediate term. This summary does not capture the state's very specific views of who should be having children, how many, and when. To see the full genesis of turns from anti-natalism to pro-natalism, and the state's attempts at implementing its imaginations of gender, class, and race as it relates to the population, see Chapter 3 of Teo (2011).

adequately enable these. Above all, the discussion in this section suggests that enabling conditions cannot be created merely by tinkering on the edges of programmes and schemes. What we need is reorientation of the principles embedded in policies — away from an individualistic and market-focused ethos and toward values of equality and mutual care.

Where is 'there' and how will we travel?

The well-being of specific groups, such as mothers or parents, is not separate from the well-being of others in society. Moreover, social groups have porous boundaries because each human has multiple social roles that evolve over time — no one is *just* a parent, or *just* an employer, or *just* someone's child. We should not accept wholesale the rhetoric that we are fighting over a finite pie, or that one group's well-being must come at cost to another's.

As Nancy Folbre and Paula England (1999) have argued, children should be conceived as public goods. Their wellbeing or lack thereof — as educated persons, persons who contribute to society in social, economic, political ways — affects everyone. When we take collective responsibility for children, we invest in our shared futures. The principles we enact through public policy — universal childcare and public education, for example — have the potential for building a civic-political culture in which children understand that they benefit from public resources and are obliged to contribute as they become adults. This is less likely when the upbringing of children is primarily constructed and experienced as individual family investments and private hustles in service of individual success.

Each of us are multifaceted social actors — with the potential to contribute to society in various ways over the life course. To the extent that some of us take on caregiving roles during certain times in life, this does not negate other roles we can play before, during, or after this period. Mothers or parents or caregivers more generally, when adequately supported and enabled, can continue to be workers and colleagues, volunteers and neighbours, artists and creatives, civic actors. A society needs to have people doing things — building community ties, generating ideas for problems, innovating and creating things — in order to deal with the many challenges of our times and to thrive. Enabling everyone access to choice and agency, preventing people from getting trapped in narrow duties and stuck on pathways, is crucial for drawing out the full potential of our population and in turn building a vibrant and dynamic economy, polity, society.

The needs for care are universal to the human condition. Even if some do not ever have people they need to care for (highly unlikely), most eventually need care. Even if some do not have children, every adult today was once a child who was cared for. The devaluing of care, seen from this perspective, diminishes us as humans. It is, or can be, affirming to recognise this fundamental interdependence that exists between humans.

The expansion of options, widely accessible, can enable everyone to live flourishing lives, in which we can exercise choice, ethical agency, while counting on social belonging and respect. To bring about such a society, we must imagine it is possible to expand rather than contract the space of flourishing lives for everyone. We should nurture shared norms and habits for recognising and valorising interdependencies and mutual obligations. This will of course not

be easy. Conflicts in a diverse society are inevitable, and not every interest can be served in every instance. Moreover, no society gets to begin with a clean slate and ours already has deep grooves of inequalities. Hence, apart from imagining 'where' we hope to go — what ideals are worth having — we must also consider how we will travel toward there.

Social policies and institutions can ossify over time. The ones we have in Singapore today come from a strong-handed state, composed by a relatively narrow elite, with firm beliefs about what family, society, polity, and citizenry, should look like and how each should behave. It is a state that has historically had a monopoly on decision-making and resource allocation, with great capacity for delivering its vision with efficiency, and deep commitment to a handful of principles. In insisting on narrow definitions of gender and family, and offering narrow parameters for work and care, these increasingly do not serve the diverse range of ordinary people's hopes and dreams. Citizens have a right and duty to participate in the process of pushing for policies and institutions that better serve our evolving needs.

How people will come together to speak to one another and forge new ideas and consensus, without the heavy hand of state coordination or constraint, is a major challenge to overcome.

Artists, journalists, activists, teachers, social workers, academics can make ourselves useful and worthy of our titles/vocations. Creating spaces for diverse voices and dialogue and critical thinking, in the context of this strong-state environment, is a contribution, even if it does not immediately change policies or norms. It is key to think of this process in expansive and creative ways. Work that happens in different spaces, engages the participation of a variety of persons and groups, occurs in different physical or virtual

mediums and across languages, and embraces a range of foci and agendas.

The significance of people coming together goes beyond generating ideas or knowledge — it also involves cultivating relational ties, the building of trust and solidarity, the development of strategies and practices to bring about change. For ordinary people to meaningfully partake in social reform, we need to build some collective voices and some mechanisms for them to be heard. Spaces, dialogues, gatherings matter then in at least two ways: first, until we have regular reminders and vocabularies for perceiving that we each are part of a larger reality, that we exist alongside others both similar and different from us, we are stuck thinking of ourselves as individuals and acting as such. Continual and regular processes of forging consensus on difficult issues is necessary for bringing into being, not just as concept but as ontological reality, 'ordinary people', 'social body', 'society'. Second, to be heard by social actors whose decisions have strong and durable effects — politicians, policy makers, corporate leaders, stewards of institutions — this social body must have ways to communicate its positions. It is ultimately through collective action and amplified voices that people can move decision-makers to see problems differently and make different decisions.

What do ordinary people want? This is a question that deserves continuous contemplation, by everyone who lives in Singapore today, on many different occasions. Over the years, in interview encounters and focus group discussions and meetings and Q&As, this is to me a question that reveals what already is and what still could be. To ask and attempt to answer this question is, I believe, how we can bring into existence an ideal Singapore that serves many different needs and the needs of many.

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