



Constructing the nation through negotiating: An outcome of using grounded theory



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ABSTRACT

This article presents representations of the nation by a group of at-risk youth residing in welfare homes. These co-constructions of what it means to live in Singapore and what it means to be a citizen in that country were part of a research project to answer the call by critical political observers in Singapore to expand the space for ideas and perspectives regarding Singapore other than those from the governing elite. Led by a critical culture sensibility for theorising from below, the author spoke with 25 teenagers from troubled backgrounds, and analysed and interpreted the conversations using constructivist grounded theory. Fourteen categories emerged from the corpus, with *negotiating* becoming the core category articulating all 14 categories, and accounting for the dialectical relations amongst the categories as well as the discontinuities between the categories and the dominant nation building narrative as embodied in the *Singapore Story*. The core category instantiates the discursive empowerment of the youth. The suggestion is to open up discursive spaces for marginalised voices. Public relations, in its capacity for listening and co-construction, can play a nation building role that goes beyond managing information campaigns.

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1. Introduction

This article examines the discourses of a group of at-risk youth living in the wealthy city-state of Singapore (Forbes, 2012, February 22) in relationship to the role of public relations in enabling their identification with the nation. The study comes as Singapore celebrates its 50th year of independence amidst a growing disparity in income, citizen dissatisfaction with the way the nation is governed while, at the same time, the government exhorts Singaporean citizens to continue in their nation building endeavour. In particular, the concern is with how young Singaporeans perceive the country and their present and future lives in Singapore (Singh, 2014, May 26; Toh, 2011, September 11).

I shall first describe the socio-political backdrop in which the study is situated, referring the study as a response to a call to garner ideas and viewpoints other than those belonging to the elite group of government officials, business leaders and the intelligentsia. After stating the problem as such, I share how I use one-on-one interviews and grounded theory for gathering and analysing my data. *Negotiating* surfaced as the core category from 14 categories that emerged from the analysis, articulating the lifeworld of 25 at-risk youth residing in two welfare homes at the time of the interviews. The youth aged 14–19 years old were interviewed after I had obtained first my university's ethics review board and the consent of youth and their parents. The caseworkers in the two welfare homes were the youth resided helped with recruiting and

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scheduling the interviewees. With the illustration of two categories, I show that the categories relate to one another and to the structures governing the everyday events of the respondents dialectically; and that nation building should allow for such dialectical interactions. Throughout the discussion, I posit that public relations' role in constructing the nation can be different from what we know it to be.

1.1. Socio-political background

I begin with a story oft heard by Singaporean schoolchildren. *The Singapore Story* as related by the Ministry of Education tells of Singapore's progress from colonial and military subjugation to Independence. From the harsh years of Japanese Occupation through the chaotic period of communist violence, racial riots and an unwelcome political secession in the 1950s and 1960s to its present success, Singapore, a tiny vulnerable state devoid of natural resources and surrounded by bigger nation states, has managed to become prosperous and vibrant thanks to a series of political, economic and social management strategies employed by the People's Action Party (PAP), its ruling party since self-government in 1959. PAP's keen interest since then has been in ensuring the nation's ability to thrive, particularly in adversity (Chua, 1995; Tan, 2012).

The PAP government, sociologists and political scientists note, had envisaged a Singaporean polity that was a non-liberal collective, wisely governed by honourable leaders (Chua, 1995; Mauzy & Milne, 2002). In this vision, economic issues took precedence over other needs, including building political infrastructure and savvy, and material improvements became the most tangible index of a responsible and responsive government doing good for its electorate (Chua, 1995). The outcome, however, is a political and constitutional entity reduced to an administrative state (Chan, 1975), run by an efficient if authoritarian government (Chua, 1995; Tan, 2008).

Stemming from the dominant interpretation of the past, the *Singapore Story* as the official national history is really a narrative of the present and the future. Its narrative tells of a fledging nation being scarred by racial disharmony and forever driven by fear of similar woeful fates happening again in future. The *Singapore Story* as a nation building narrative is used by its producers, the PAP government, to forge a national identity, unity, collective self-determination, racial harmony and communitarian values. In time, the Story grows into a metanarrative, subsuming all other stories from the people, including those from alternative voices on the political margins (Hong & Huang, 2008; Loh & Liew, 2010) and serving to legitimise the ruling party's ideologies of meritocracy and pragmatism (Chua, 1995; Tan, 2012).

In the past 15 years, however, a convergence of globalisation, neoliberal marketisation and proliferating Internet and mobile technologies and social media have weakened the hegemonic hold of the *Singapore Story* and altered state–society relations (Low & Vadaketh, 2014). Indeed, those forces have generated what may arguably the most boisterous public debates and calls for change since independence in 1965 (Liao, 2011; Low and Vadaketh, 2014). This discontent has manifested itself in the most recent general elections in May 2011 where the ruling political party suffered its sharpest fall in votes (a drop from 75.3 per cent of the vote in 2001 to 60.1 per cent) and lost by-elections in May 2012 and January 2013.

Amongst the issues discussed in post-election analyses was the question of how young people in the population perceive Singapore and their present and their own future in the nation (Singh, 2014; Toh, 2011). Vastly different from their parents and grandparents a little more than a generation ago, Singaporean young people [born in the 1990s], have always known Singapore as a developed country and a global city (Chong, 2010) and as the ruling political party, the People's Action Party (PAP) observed, less willing to make sacrifices for others in society. The younger generation of Singaporeans are more educated, more travelled, more cosmopolitan, more demanding for participation in political and civil decision-making, for pluralism and openness and for political liberalisation (Au, 2010; Chin, 2010; Chong, 2010; Low & Vadaketh, 2014). Unlike a generation ago, blind faith and a stellar track record alone will not win over the younger citizenry (Chong, 2010).

Attention has to be paid to the youth in the citizenry of any democratic society because, as the truism goes, they are its future electorate, "its leaders of tomorrow". Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, freshly bruised from the results of the General Elections in May 2011, vowed that he and his ruling government would work to engage young Singaporeans and try to convince this important public that it is "worth their while to work with the PAP for the good of Singapore" (Toh, 2011).

In this project, I attempt to respond to the concern about a possible disenfranchised segment of the citizenry by co-constructing the nation with 25 at-risk youth residing in two welfare homes. I turn to these youth because their voices are not often heard in public discourse. Indeed, their very presence might be seen to "vandalise the image of a safe, respectful, resilient, happy 'Asian' Singaporeans carefully cultivated by the government" (Tan, 2008, p. 22). I maintain that on the contrary, finding out how the *Singapore Story* is being lived out among these young persons who either have had brushes with the law or who have been abused or neglected by significant others, and generally, who come from complex and disadvantaged home environments, opens the path for change and offers an opportunity for public relations to contribute to nation building.

2. Grounded theory and PR in nation building

2.1. Building theory from the public's life-world

The purpose of this study to engender meanings directly with the target public makes grounded theory a sensible methodological choice. Grounded theory refers to a set of "flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct

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