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Growing up in an unequal society

Abstract

Children from low-income households face many challenges. They struggle with school, are more likely to end up in low-wage jobs, and sometimes become young parents. How are we to make sense of the challenges they face, and how are we to think of solutions?

As a society, we regularly refer to kids from low-income homes as individual "delinquents" or from "dysfunctional families." There is a great deal of focus on "at risk" kids, on changing their "mindsets," or "empowering" them. We have not paid sufficient attention to the larger social conditions that shape their experiences of and options in society.

In my presentation, I discuss the importance of situating the experiences of kids and their families in the broader social context. This is a context in which inequality is intense—where children from different class backgrounds face unequal conditions as they make their ways in the world. Drawing from my book, *This is What Inequality Looks Like*, I discuss key inequalities in areas of education and family life. It is this unequal context that we must pay attention to and aim interventions at.

I. A moment of possibility

A very good morning to all. Thank you to the Singapore Children's Society for inviting me to speak. And many thanks to everyone who's taken the time this Saturday morning to be here.

So, you may have heard, I wrote a book. In writing this talk, I had to make sure that someone who hasn't read the book could still get something out of it. There is quite a lot in what I'll say today that will be familiar to those of you who have read it. Those of you who have not read it, I hope you will still do so after today. There is a lot I cover in the book that is difficult to convey in a lecture.

Last year, when I was writing this book, I basically lived inside it. I would occasionally come out to carry out other responsibilities in life, but for most of last year, I was entirely immersed in writing. By the end of 2017, when the manuscript was going into production, I was pretty exhausted. And I thought, in 2018, I'm going to relax a little, catch my breath, catch up on sleep, start paying attention to my family and my friends again.

My plan for resting in 2018 has not so far worked out. This book has taken on a life of its own. And I've spent a lot of the past eight months giving talks, meeting with people, writing further commentaries, reflecting on the various responses to the book.

I mention this because the response to the book strikes me as evidence that we are in a moment of possibility. I've been tremendously encouraged over the past months to see that there is such great concern for the issues of poverty and inequality. And I have also been very impressed and heartened, judging both from what people write to me and also what they ask me at talks, that there is much desire to want to do something to reduce both poverty and inequality. I wrote the book because I had a vague hunch that these things are true, but the reach of this book, and the significant responses it has provoked, has exceeded my expectations. I am glad, ultimately, that my plans for rest this year have not worked out.

I start by making this point—that we are in a moment of possibility—because I think it is important to recognize.

It is important to recognize for two reasons: first, as individuals, we live in our own lives, and it is not always obvious that there is a collective that shares some of our values and some of our aspirations. I have made this argument in my work over many years—that our lives are very individualized. As Singaporeans, we hold this stereotype of ourselves as apathetic and disengaged. And this can feel very lonely. I think that loneliness, that lack of sense of solidarity with others, that sense that other people don't care, can be very disempowering. And it can lead us to be static, to feel unable to ourselves take initiative and act.

So I start with the responses I've received about my book with you to highlight that a lot of Singaporeans do in fact care. Of course, it is not everyone, nor a majority, but it is nonetheless significant and meaningful. And I think all of us should recognize and be encouraged by this.

Second, it is important to recognize this as a moment of possibility because a moment of possibility is just that—moment, possibility. It may be fleeting, it is potential not yet translated into reality, and what happens in the next years depends on what we all do with it. I do not take for granted that this moment will lead to real reduction in poverty, real changes to how our opportunity structures work, real improvements in redistributing our country's ample resources, and real improvement in our society's inequality problems. What happens to this potential depends on what we do in the next 5, 10, 20 years.

I expect that many of you are here because you have in one way or another also been on this journey, paying attention to or participating in discussions about poverty and inequality in Singapore in recent years. I think the book has gotten the reception it has because the issues I speak of in the book have been on many of our minds over the last few years. Perhaps you have read the book and shared it with others. Or others have shared it with you. Given the size of this audience, I must presume you come from quite a wide variety of fields. It will be impossible to speak directly to solutions that fit perfectly your needs. I hope what you get out of today are questions to think about as well as principles to think with. And I hope you will be able to adapt and apply them to the situations you face and are trying to work through.

I will return to the question of possibilities, and to limitations, at the end of my lecture. But now, let me turn more directly to the subject of today's talk—growing up in an unequal society.

II. Ethnography: childhood and education—my findings found me

My book is based on three years of ethnographic research. I wanted, broadly speaking, to study the everyday lives of people in Singapore who live with low income. I focused my work mostly on families with children, living in HDB rental flats.

One principle underlying ethnographic research is that there has to be a certain openness when you approach the topic of study. You approach in an open-ended way, spending time in a place, having many informal conversations, without very rigid survey or interview questions. Through this approach, you can learn things you did not know to ask about. You can gather data that disturbs preexisting notions and biases, that expands the view of what's relevant in a context.

The framing of questions can already limit what you can and cannot see. This is especially so on a topic on which limited work has been done, and on a population which is marginalized and stigmatized in some way. The ethnographic approach that I took allowed me to see, hear, and learn many things I could not have thought to ask before I began the work. It was a research strategy that ultimately allowed a glimpse of the complexity of people's lives.

The first thing to note about my research findings is that I ended up finding out a lot about family lives and family dynamics because this is what people talked about, because this is what preoccupies them. But an important specificity to add to that is that family lives are bound up with other aspects of life, and in particular with work, employment. So I spend significant time in my book discussing the links between family life and employment.

A further thing to add is that family life, in households where there are young people, revolves around and centers on children's needs.

I was not specifically looking to study education or childhood issues in my research. The difficulties with education and the difficulties parents face in raising youth—these topics found me. I did not go in search of them. They emerged naturally in conversation, and they emerged repeatedly in conversation. They were a source of much concern and great anxiety for parents.

That I didn't go chasing after these issues, and that they emerged, is itself a finding. It reveals the centrality of kids in parents' lives, and it reveals the place formal education plays as a key source of anxiety.

III. **Growing up unequal: context matters**

Two essays in my book deal particularly with the lives and wellbeing of children. One zooms in on the question of schooling and education, while the other looks more broadly at youth.

In both, this is the main point I'd like you to keep in mind: context matters. I'll explain as I go along what I mean by that, and why it's crucial.

IV. **Education/schooling: "I want my children better than me"**

In my conversations with parents, education came up repeatedly as a major source of anxiety. Low-income parents— and especially mothers—told me that an important reason why they quit their jobs or cut back on wage work is because their kids were struggling in school. They talked about children failing weekly spelling tests or teachers calling them up regularly to speak to them about their kids' problems with school work.

Many of the kids fall behind almost immediately as they enter the first year of compulsory schooling. They are less advanced than kids from wealthier families, who can read and write by the day they enter Primary 1. Very quickly, many barely pass or completely fail English and Mathematics. They usually still do reasonably well in Mother Tongue, which many use at home, signaling that the kids generally do have the capacity to learn when there is sufficient exposure to a subject. In Primary 1 and 2, many of the kids from the low-income families are identified as having problems and pulled out of class for extra coaching. While this can help, it is not easy for the kids to catch up, since the more advanced kids continue to move forward at a fast pace. By

Primary 3, many kids from low-income families are tracked and banded into lower-performing classes. Although schools vary in how obvious the banding is at Primary 3 and 4, kids themselves are well aware of where they stand vis-à-vis others. By Primary 5 and 6, many of the kids do so poorly that they have to switch to what is known as 'Foundation' level for some or all of their subjects. While most parents I spoke with reported their kids still going to school regularly, it is apparent that many develop a sense of themselves as inferior to others and start to feel quite demoralized. In some cases, kids begin to resist going to school. If conditions are unstable at home, parents also find it difficult to manage their children's school schedules. If they do indeed stop going to school regularly, their social connections at school will suffer. When they return, the absence of friends, teasing or bullying from schoolmates, can make staying the course difficult.

How should we interpret all this? As I've said, context matters.

Both children and their parents face many difficulties due to complex home situations that have little to do with schools, but the schooling experience itself is crucial for understanding their relative lack of educational success. This becomes especially clear when speaking with parents who are, despite all their challenges, getting their kids to go to school every day.

The Singapore education system is one that demands precocity. This means that it demands children to be able to display their skills at early ages, and displaying certain qualities in reading and mathematics early brings rewards. How does the demand for precocity play out in generating and perpetuating inequalities?

People who work with kids will know that students are sensitive about how they compare to their peers. A teacher I spoke with told me that students who are in lower bands say things like "I stupid lah" or "I lazy what." They do not try because they do not believe they can possibly succeed. Teachers working with kids in low tracks have to spend time and energy on behavioral issues linked to low self-esteem and lack of motivation. They are more disruptive in classrooms and more likely to skip school or neglect homework. This phenomenon is not something limited to Singapore nor unknown to pedagogical researchers. Jeannie Oakes, in a classic study on tracking, shows that one of the detrimental effects of tracking students according to narrow criteria of academic abilities is that students in low tracks often think of themselves as poor learners and thus do not try as hard as students in high tracks who think of themselves as capable. In other words, 'low motivation,' a reason cited by educators who work with kids from low-income

families, is something reproduced *within* the school context. Specifically, the sorting and labeling of kids is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy that shapes learning behaviors.

There are some positive things to an education system that has multiple tracks. Kids are not completely thrown out—there are still tracks open to them, which prevent them from dropping out of school altogether. At the same time, however, there also appears an irrational outcome: most of these kids appear to be of regular intelligence and do not have learning disabilities, but they are labeled 'slow' from a young age. In speaking to an Allied Educator whose job it is to work with kids with learning disabilities, I learnt that it takes some time for her to figure out which kids have disabilities. Why? Because most of the kids who come to her attention are 'behind' simply because they have not had as much exposure to school materials and not because they are unable to learn in neuro-typical ways. In other words, given time and exposure, they are no less capable of learning than most other children. They lack exposure for a variety of reasons: they have less preschool education; their parents do not speak English (or the type of English required in schools); there is limited reading at home; and they do not have extra coaching by tuition teachers. In other words, the main reason they 'fall behind' can be traced to their relative class disadvantages.

Turn our view around and we see that, given the ubiquity of enrichment centers and tutors, some kids—because of class advantages—are advantaged in a system where early exposure and precocity are rewarded. The kids who are able to run forward the moment the gates are open are neither more 'meritorious' nor more deserving.

Why do I call this an irrational outcome? If we think of schools as places of learning, if 'equality of opportunity' is upheld as our education system's mantra, and if the purpose of mass education is to train as many capable individuals as we can who will grow up to be contributing members of our society, then kids who have insufficient exposure outside of school should have sufficient exposure within it and sufficient *time* to even out the advantages/disadvantages resulting from class differences. They should not be punished for having insufficient exposure outside of it. In rewarding precocity—expecting kids to be able to read and write when they begin Primary 1, for example— we are rewarding qualities that are acquired outside of school, and in the process losing valuable potential of talents and strengths in kids who need time and exposure.

The effects of early sorting and labeling are profound for parents as well as kids. Parents with more money also tend to be parents who have the confidence to say: my kid is not stupid, he/she just needs more help. How our kids are branded by schools, the information parents get from

schools about how they compare vis-à-vis other children—these shape our ideas about our own children and what they are capable of. If I believe my child is fundamentally, even with bad grades, capable, then my solution is to find help, especially if I have money to pay for this help. If, in contrast, over time, I am told repeatedly by teachers that my child is very weak or unmotivated, my sense of my kid is that she/he is like me, not so good in school, not likely to do well. If I have do not have money for tutors anyway, then my aspirations for my child too will be adjusted accordingly.

Parents' opinions and actions feed into a child's sense of themselves and their potential. Many of the parents I meet have high hopes that their children will do better than them, that they won't end up with such hard lives, but they parent in a context where their children are already branded as weaker, as lesser, as not as smart, as not as capable. It is incredibly difficult to transcend that and to see their kids as still having talents and value. I see many low-income parents trying to do this, but like many of us who try our best to form independent opinions, we are not immune to the voices of others. We parent in specific social contexts and those contexts shape our hopes, our aspirations, and our actions. We depend strongly on teachers' assessments and understandings of our children. We evaluate our children according to what seems 'normal' in our society.

For many low-income parents I speak with, a sense of resignation sets in. An acceptance of a child's poor results and lacks come to define the dynamic within the family. In many of the stories families tell themselves about themselves, children are good at soccer, or dancing, or cooking, or helping with housework and care, but hopeless at Mathematics and English. Once solidified into common sense, both parents and children have a hard time coming out from under these labels.

The home environment of low-income kids is indeed not always conducive to studying. Spaces are small, family relationships are sometimes tensed, material hardships are persistent. But this could be said to be the case for many Singaporean adults who now find themselves middle-class in contemporary Singapore. Many of my peers grew up in exactly these 'not conducive' environments. This perhaps explains higher-income Singaporeans' reluctance to interrogate systemic inequality and an attendant rush to judge the low-income: if I could overcome hardship, why can't they?

To understand the persistence of low educational achievement and what appears to be the reproduction of class inequalities among the low-income today, we must look beyond individual families' practices. We have to examine the broader social context and important developments

in the education system's criteria, dynamics, and principles. Importantly, although counter-intuitive, we have to look at wider social practices of parents across class lines. In the 1980s, when I was in primary school, I did not have tuition, and none of my friends did. My parents spent approximately zero hours a week helping me with my homework—roughly the same amount of time my classmates' parents spent on theirs. It is very important, when those who are now wealthier than they were growing up declare that they were able to overcome, to remember that we are not living in 1970s or 1980s Singapore anymore.

So what is today's context? Across class lines, I am struck by the amount of time and energy parents today—regardless of income and profession—put into keeping an eye on their children's progress in school. The difficulty of the curriculum, the understanding that exams have high-stake consequences for their kids' futures, and the difficulty of teaching one's own children, have fueled the growth of the tuition industry. Parents with ample means use these to help their children from the get-go (in some cases as young as preschool) and on a regular basis (i.e. throughout the school years). Parents with moderate means forgo other household needs and hire tutors in crucial exam years and/or on subjects especially tough for their kids. Tuition has become a billion-dollar industry, with parents spending significant proportions of household income on it.

Quite apart from tuition for academic subjects, an industry also exists for 'enrichment' programs. Some of these are meant to further hone skills that contribute to academic performance in schools. Others are essentially insurance policies—ways for kids to develop other types of 'talents' that can also open doors to 'good schools' or higher tracks in case their academic results fall short. That these exist also tell us an additional thing: some parents are diligently learning about how the system works and are active campaigners on behalf of their children.

I do not fault parents for wanting the best for their children, but we must acknowledge that this type of campaigning is not class-neutral: it comes more easily to people who have themselves succeeded in the system and understand its logic, who feel a sense of entitlement in their interactions with teachers, who have time to devote to this labor, and who have budgets that allow for various aspects of this—including for buying books, hiring tutors, cutting back on fulltime employment.

Worries about inequalities in the education system often center on the 'low-performing' and focus on 'leveling up.' Kids from low-income families are often the target group. The presence of numerous programs, personnel, and public expenditure intended to level up these kids,

combined with the persistence of low performance among them, leads to the perception that kids from low-income families are less motivated or lack the right home environment for studying. More generally, many Singaporeans take for granted that the system is merit-based and there are ample opportunities for everyone regardless of their family backgrounds.

These perspectives are not wrong per se, but they are insufficiently precise. In their imprecision, they slip into faulting low-income parents for the poor academic performance of their kids. The logic goes that if our systems are fair, then surely, they fail because parents are not doing what they should be doing.

To understand why kids from low-income households do poorly in school, we *would* do well to understand what their lives at home are like. But we must *also* step back and situate their lives within the broader social context. This includes trying to understand what material conditions are like for parents, what school experiences are like for kids, and finally and least often done, what higher-income families are doing for *their* kids. It is when we do all this that we can have a more complete and accurate understanding of how kids from low-income families, within this system, are compelled to play a game they cannot win because someone else is setting the rules."

There is a lot, and increasing, attention on the educational opportunities of kids from lower-income families. This is important. But if attention is only focused on this, in ten years, we will find ourselves standing more or less in the same spot.

We must frame the challenge differently—not as one where the problem is with the kids from low-income families, but where the problem is about our system of rewards as well as what parents from higher-income families are doing in response to this system of rewards. I know this is a very uncomfortable way of approaching the problem because it requires those of us who tend to be the ones talking about the problem to admit to our own complicity. But I think it is crucial if we are serious about this problem. We cannot keep doing the same things and expect outcomes to be different.

V. **Youth: Growing Up Without Class Protections**

Let me turn now to another set of findings—that of parenting youth. The essay from which this is drawn is titled Growing Up Without Class Protections.

It took me some time to see the form of this essay. This is because it took me a while to fully recognize that maintaining family relationships and maintaining authority over teenage kids is something that requires economic and social resources.

We often refer to family life as priceless, or something we cannot put a price on. We imply that this is an area of life that cannot be bought, that somehow transcends money. I would like to highlight that while it is true that family life cannot be bought per se, that certain material preconditions are nonetheless important. These preconditions do require money and what money is able to purchase.

Parenting is hard. And it is hard at multiple stages of life. It is hard in good circumstances, but harder yet when one has limited money, time, and social standing.

When I speak to parents with teenage kids, these are the worries I hear of: kids who spend long hours away from home, hanging out with friends; kids who are unsure of their future vocations and who are struggling in school or dropping out; kids at risk of unplanned pregnancies; kids who have material needs that are not easily fulfilled; kids getting into trouble with the police for things like underage smoking, drugs, and theft.

We often refer to 'at-risk youth' or 'juvenile delinquents' as if they automatically arise from 'bad neighborhoods' or 'dysfunctional families.' The unspoken presumption is that youth 'go astray' because parents are neglectful.

In the neighborhoods where I did my research, it was often parents themselves who were expressing worries about their kids. I saw parents stressed out at their relationships with their teenage children, anxious about the fact that their kids were not listening to them, not coming home, not heeding their advice to take their parents' lives as cautionary tales. Clearly, the full story goes beyond one of parental neglect. After hearing parents express their worries and anxieties about kids, of observing youths who hang out in low-income neighborhoods, and from talking to social workers who work with young people, it strikes me that we don't adequately acknowledge the complex care needs (and care gaps) of youth. For our constant talk about family as the central unit of Singapore society, we pay very little attention to the everyday contours of family life.

When we begin to think about what youths need, we start to realize that parents in low-income households have a far more difficult time maintaining parental authority and that kids in low-

income households do not have some of the protections that kids in higher-income households have.

When it comes to raising older kids, all parents struggle with maintaining some sphere of influence and authority. These are difficult because older kids are not like younger ones: they are able to go about their own everyday lives more independently than young children, and they are more aware of the world beyond their families. These two things are exactly the reasons low-income parents struggle more than their higher-income counterparts.

In the essay, I describe the relevance of things we do not often talk about, and which turn out are important for parenting youth: space, activities, and pocket money; time, leisure, and memories; the social standing of parents. In the interest of time, I'll just elaborate on the first today.

The reality of living in a low-income household is that there is little space for privacy. Even parents do not usually have a bedroom to themselves, so children certainly do not have much private space. When I visited homes, I saw people creatively use bedsheets and furniture to create partitions for some semblance of privacy for teenage children, especially girls. Still, the limitations of small flats mean that teenagers often find it more pleasant to spend time out of the home with friends than to be at home. In cases where relationships are fraught, as they often are between parents and teenage children regardless of class circumstances, this tendency to stay away naturally intensifies. When parents speak about wishing they could have bigger flats, one of the reasons they mention is that their kids can then have their own private space and perhaps even bring friends home to do homework, study, socialize, without being disturbed by younger siblings and other family members.

Unlike kids whose parents have money for enrichment and/or leisure activities, kids from low-income families have more hours in the day when they are unoccupied and away from adults. Compared to kids who are more financially dependent on their parents and therefore perhaps compelled to be more pliant, teenagers from low-income households more often earn their own pocket money through part-time work. In certain ways, they are more mature, independent, and autonomous than their middle-class counterparts. They also tend to have peers who are similarly independent and therefore available to hang out with. As a result of this confluence of factors, parents are more likely to have limited influence over their kids. Kids sometimes stop going to school, stay out late, or stay away from home altogether. To put this plainly, middle-class parents hold sway over their teenage children partly through circumstance. Their financial dependence

on parents, their use of personal spaces in their homes, their scheduled activities are all conditions that grant parents continued access to influence over their everyday lives. Absent of these conditions, authority is tough to maintain for low-income parents.

VI. **Context matters: we make meaning, decisions, practices in specific social conditions**

Parenting is a socially embedded activity. By this, I mean two things. First, it is linked to other elements of everyday life—employment, leisure, schooling. Second, it is shaped by and rooted in the broader expectations, demands, and habits of society. No one, in other words, is 'just' a parent, and no one parents in isolation. While we are parents, we are also simultaneously employees, co-workers, spouses, siblings, daughters/sons, neighbors, friends. We figure out how to be parents partly from how teachers relate to us, what extended family members ask of us, what friends and acquaintances advise us, what 'professionals'—doctors, counsellors, social workers—tell us. Many of us like to imagine we are independent—people often declare "I just do what I want to do and I don't care what other people say"?—but the reality is that what makes for a 'good' or 'bad' parent is shaped by circumstances and informed by criteria beyond any given individual's control.

Parenting under poor conditions involves high pressures from lack of money and lack of control over time. These lead to care gaps not only for very young children but also for older ones. They make building family lives—including happy memories of play and leisure, and everyday life-activities of communication and relationship-building—tremendously difficult.

VII. **This is what ~~poverty~~ INEQUALITY looks like**

I have been saying for a few years now that the poverty story is the story people don't mind hearing, but the inequality lens is the one we actually need in order to better see what is going on.

What I suggest in my book, and today, is that we have tended to look at the challenges faced by kids from low-income households as if they are separate from the lives of kids from higher-income households. We have also tended to overlook the importance of social context in building family lives and in parental authority, and how, in raising youth, parents of different means are harnessing very different resources. Moreover, their practices and their strengths tend not to be recognized and rewarded in our society.

If we are serious about improving the lives of people such that everyone living in this society can meet their needs, we must look at the ways in which unequal conditions lead to unequal outcomes. The conditions must be where we place our attention to effect change, not the persons who are now in low-income circumstances.

I spend a lot of time in my book discussing the practices and norms among higher-income persons. And I spend a lot of time in the book discussing how access to various needs—housing and care support, for example—are deeply dependent on wage income, and how wage inequalities map onto people's access to public goods.

Hearing responses to my book over the past eight months, I know it continues to be hard to look inequality in the eye. It is more bearable to sidestep the question of inequality—which is essentially about the uneven and unfair distribution of resources—and go straight to the issue of what can be done to "help the poor."

I have, in the past months, met many people and groups who are doing good work, who are very committed to helping the low-income, who would like me to say to them that investing in early childhood education is the solution. We go around in circles in our conversations—them wanting to hear what I cannot say because I do not believe it to be true.

I of course do not have monopoly over truth. I can only say what I know from the data I have. From my research, I see that the barriers that kids from low-income families face have to do with broader reward systems we all live in and the ways in which our system rewards some qualities and not others. These qualities can and are bought by money. The barriers kids face also have to do with their limited access to family lives, and that in turn has to do with the poor job conditions and low wages their parents face, and the consequences this has on families meeting all kinds of needs.

Focusing on inequality is uncomfortable because if the problem is the unequal distribution of things, then the solution has to be more equal distribution of things. And this requires a great deal of undoing of our common sense about what it is our system now rewards and values, and a great deal of undoing what our society takes for granted about people's worth and deservedness.

Returning to the issue of children, these are the three things I think need to change:

First, our education system has to stop insisting on precocity and instead give children more time to learn and develop their varied strengths at a reasonable pace. This would benefit everyone—students, teachers, parents across class lines. Our education infrastructure is good—well-trained teachers, ample resource materials and buildings—it is possible for these to be widely enjoyed. Time must be the gift we grant kids to learn and teachers to teach.

Second, the wellbeing of kids and their parents are deeply intertwined. The wages of adults, their work conditions, the access adults have to healthcare, to childcare support, to housing—these shape the everyday lives of families. Children make for good targets for interventions because of people's positive prejudices regarding their innocence, but they live in families, and the conditions faced by adults in the family matter greatly. We cannot separate thinking about the wellbeing of children from those of their caregivers. Adults' needs for better wages, better work conditions where they have better control over their schedules, access to public goods that does not replicate market inequalities—these are crucial rather than secondary.

Third, when thinking about interventions and "helping," we must think in terms of creating conditions that allow people mastery over their lives, that allow them to make the best decisions for their families. Interventions that are aimed at forcing people into a certain mold rather than giving people room to exercise agency will not meet needs.

VIII. **A moment of possibility**

I opened my talk with the claim that this is a moment of possibility. Now I'd like to close with returning to this.

As I mentioned, I have been very encouraged that people want to read and engage with my work. I am also noticing, however, some patterns in the many reactions to it that I think are constraints, road blocks.

The first is a fear of disagreement and conflict, as well as limited space for genuine debate. No piece of work enters a vacuum—my book is born into a space that is not especially comfortable with disagreements nor especially comfortable with analyzing evidence of the sort I have used in my book. I see people trying to have conversations, and I see challenges to these attempts. And I encounter the difficulty we have talking to one another, trying to comprehend each other using disparate mental frameworks and vocabularies. So, within this moment of possibility, the challenge around having conversations is two-fold: we have to keep trying to understand the

issues better, but we also have to keep struggling to make space to talk about those issues in a civil way that allows for disagreement and understanding.

Over the past months, I also sense impatience. I recently realized that because this book is fairly easy to read that both readers and myself as a writer can forget that a lot of academic work went into it. I spent many years thinking about some key puzzles, trying to answer them in different ways, before I wrote this book. I am saying this because I think it's not obvious—that research takes times and is sometimes meandering, and that its purposes of resolving puzzles are not always solutions-oriented in the same ways that organizations are. I want to say this explicitly because I think we live in a world somewhat impatient for solutions. Our attentions are scattered, rarely sustained, we don't like to read long things and want things to be summarized. I am also a member of this impatient world, so I too am sometimes impatient for solutions. Because of this book, I have been asked a lot how we can come up with solutions, and I feel a certain urgency to respond to this call. But as a scholar, a major responsibility I have is to scrutinize, analyze, contemplate. And as a sociologist, in particular, I am always trying to turn things on their head, to get people to look at things using different lenses. With this work on poverty and inequality, I can see that as a society we have very deep prejudices, very deep instincts, that are not easily overturned. I can see people responding positively to my book in one moment, and then in the next going back to habits, to old frameworks, to common sense ways of thinking that are exactly the problems I've pointed to. So my role, as I see it, is often to say, hey let's slow down and ask what are we assuming about how individuals function here, what are we assuming about how power works, and how changes come about. Can we think about the problem differently before we construct solutions? I do this because I think that if we frame questions in wrong ways, if we don't spend time thinking about how those questions should be answered, if we don't take the time to go deeply into explanations that are nuanced and sometimes contradictory, if we don't do the hard work of examining and being willing to scrutinize our policies at the level of principles rather than at the level of delivery, our solutions will not solve. And if we keep doing essentially the same things, we should not be surprised when things turn out essentially the same.

This does not mean we just sit on our hands and not talk about solutions. I am very interested in having conversations with people in different fields and sectors, with experience and knowledge that I do not have, so that we can talk about how as a society we can do better than we have. I think part of what my academic approach implies is that in these conversations, I would also highlight the importance of continually moving back and forth—back and forth to talk about short-term goals and long-term hopes; back and forth between scales—what is possible for individuals and small groups of people to do, and what it is that has to be done on a societal scale.

Moving back and forth is important because sometimes there are actions that may move at cross purposes—what we do in the short term may harm what we want to achieve in the long term; what we do on a small scale may short-circuit what we want done on a large scale. These two principles for imagining solutions—first, paying attention to how problems are framed before jumping into solutions; second, moving back and forth between long and short-term and between small-scale and large-scale—I hope this will be useful to some of you in your work.

Finally, in this moment of possibility, I see a certain kind of pessimism and cynicism. I wrote about this in the Preface of my book, and I have encountered it repeatedly over the past months. People keep telling me: systems are too hard to change, let's focus on what community can do, and what we as individuals can do, how charities and groups can step up, let's not look to the government. On this, I find myself in the rather odd position, given my critiques of the state, of insisting that we do not become cynical about our public systems. Policies, regulations, laws—they shape our lives deeply and profoundly. Most of the conditions in which we as individuals make our decisions and live our lives are shaped through public policy. Without attention to these, no matter how much money we pour into other kinds of solutions, we will not be able to shift things in meaningful ways. When we look at the international research on inequality, we know that public policy is absolutely crucial for mitigating it.

I do think this is a moment of possibility. But in it there are constraints and challenges. For it to be more than a moment of possibility, there is a great deal of work to do. I hope many of us will have the resolve, the commitment, and the energy to work together in the years ahead.

Thank you again to the Singapore Children's Society for this opportunity to speak today. And thank you all for showing up. Please continue to show up, in the years to come, to do the important work of dealing with the problem of inequality.