

# Psychology in Singapore

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When I was preparing to come to the National University of Singapore (NUS) for a one-year visiting appointment in 1991 (a stay which has now stretched to 17 years), many of my friends and colleagues in Texas, where I was teaching at the time, had little idea of where Singapore is. Some thought Singapore was a city in China. (One woman from an insurance company even had the idea that Singapore was somewhere in New Jersey!) For the record, Singapore is an independent city-state of more than four million located roughly 90 miles north of the equator at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, between Malaysia and Indonesia.

As a discipline, psychology is relatively new in Singapore. The NUS psychology program, until relatively recently Singapore's only psychology program, was established in 1986 in the Department of Social Work to create the Department of Social Work and Psychology. This arrangement lasted until July 2005 when the two disciplines were separated into their own departments.

Originally an undergraduate program, graduate degrees have been added over time, with the first master's degree in psychology given in 1993 and the first PhD conferred in 1999. Now the department has a full range of programs, with a three-year BA degree and a four-year Bachelors of Social Science (Honors) at the undergraduate level and at the graduate level, a Masters of Social Science and PhD degrees, both of which are research degrees. In addition, we have recently begun a clinical psychology training program leading to a Master of Psychology (Clinical) degree.

Despite its late start, psychology has always been popular with students, and in recent years NUS psychology has been joined by programs at Singapore's other two publicly funded universities, Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University, along with newly emerging programs at some of the polytechnics, which provide pre-university education in Singapore, as well as various privately run schools.

In addition to these new programs, the NUS program has been expanding rapidly. Since becoming an independent department in 2005 the Department of Psychology has grown from 13 to 25 full time PhD staff, with that growth likely to continue for the foreseeable future. In the next few years, we expect the number of full time PhD staff to grow to as many as 35 or more. At the same time, our student numbers have been increasing approximately 10 percent per year over the past several years. Currently we have upwards of 250 new majors each year, which represents roughly one sixth of the undergraduate enrollment in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

NUS is a research intensive university. Research here spans the range from basic to applied as well as across the various sub-areas including biological, cognitive, social, developmental, abnormal, health, and quantitative. By and large, the focus is not on cross-cultural or cultural psychology *per se* but rather on basic psychological processes with a particular emphasis on how those processes play out in the context of culture. Singapore is an ideal locale for doing that as the population is composed of three

main ethnic groups, Chinese, Malay, and Indian. While all three generally would be considered collectivistic, they are quite distinct culturally and have their own unique characteristics. This allows us to go beyond the broad distinctions, such as individualism/collectivism, which are currently very popular when comparing cultures in psychological research, to looking at some of the other important ways in which these groups differ. For example, some of my own work concerns ethnic differences in cardiovascular responses to emotion, particularly anger. In this work we've documented differences between ethnic groups in patterns of cardiovascular responses to anger that are consistent with the high rates of coronary heart disease found among South Asians world-wide, including in Singapore.

Other research in the department examines language development with a focus on some of the ways in which language learning differs between children learning such diverse languages as Chinese, English, and Malay. Singapore's ethnic mix as well as language policy makes such research both possible and critical. Although children from the different ethnic groups may primarily converse in their own group's language at home, the language of instruction in the Singapore school system is English with students simultaneously taking instruction in their "mother tongue," which for Chinese is Mandarin, for Malays is the Malay language, and for Indians is generally Tamil or sometimes Hindi. This provides particularly fertile ground for studying how each of these languages is learned as well as various aspects of bilingualism and even multilingualism.

Still other research in the department addresses issues such as interpersonal attraction, the social psychology and neuroscience of emotion, adaptation to trauma, adolescent development, and issues related to attention and perception along with other topics.

One of the most exciting things during my time in Singapore has been to see the development of an appreciation for what psychology is and can do. In the early years of the program the recognition of psychology and its possibilities were limited, but in the last few years this has changed dramatically. Early on in my stay in Singapore, collaborations between psychology staff and others outside of the discipline were relatively sparse and often required careful cultivation. Now, in my capacity as head of department, I receive frequent inquiries from various government agencies, both civilian and military, as well as private organizations and fellow academics for collaborations with psychologists in such diverse areas as education, health, military applications, social services and even robotics. Such interest in psychology and the emerging recognition of psychology's potential applications speak well of its current health and exciting possibilities for the future. ?