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Oral History Interview with David Chan: Growing SMU

David Chan

Singapore Management University, davidchan@smu.edu.sg

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Singapore Management University

Li Ka Shing Library

Growing SMU

Interviewee: David Chan

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 24th May 2016

Location: Singapore Management University, Li Ka Shing Library Recording Studio

Note to Reader:

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Patricia Meyer:	This is Pat Meyer. Today is Tuesday, 24 th of May, 2016. Today, I will be speaking with Professor David Chan. This interview is part of the Conceptualizing SMU Oral History Project. We are meeting in the recording studio of the Li Ka Shing Library at Singapore Management University. And the subject of today recording is your recollection and perspective from the early days of the School of Social Sciences until now, and your role as the Director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute. Let's begin by stepping back to time before SMU. Can you tell us about your career before you came here?
David Chan :	Yes, sure. Before SMU, that was before 2005, depends on how far we go back, well if I could, let's go back to the days before I entered academia. I actually joined as a police officer in the Singapore Police force at 18 years old for quite some time, then did my undergraduate studies at NUS [National University of Singapore]. And somewhere in the early 90s, that's when I began to get interested in Psychology, which is the field that I am trained in now. And I decided to leave the police to go to academia, where I got a scholarship from NUS, National University of Singapore. And that comes together with a bond, where they paid for my PhD education in the United States, came back and I served as an Assistant and then Associate Professor with them for a couple of years. And how I came to SMU was actually, somewhere around 2003 or 2004, Professor Tan Chin Tiong, who was then the Provost of SMU, read about me in one of the alumni magazines that NUS produces and he thought that "Hey, that's a Singaporean guy there doing Psychology" and I only knew later that he said he felt that we need him to come and start some psychology programme and so on. He contacted me, asked me out for lunch, and I said yes, and then the semi-offer was kind of made over lunch. At that time, I didn't say yes, I didn't say no either. I was saying let me think about it. To be very honest, I went back to my office, went back to normal and didn't think much about it for one year. Why? Because I was actually on the tail end of completing a longitudinal study at NUS then, trying to look at the effectiveness of a scholars' program. Obviously, it would be unethical to leave when you are still in the middle of study. So it didn't occur to my mind that I should leave then. When the study was over and it was time to think about my next phase; that was when I had the connection again with Chin Tiong, with SMU. That was a year later after that lunch. And then I got bit interested to be part of something new, then came for the job interview, that was at the old campus at Bukit Timah, somewhere around early 2005 I think. I got the job offer and started with SMU in 2005, July, which was exactly the same time that the Bras Basah campus started functioning.
Patricia Meyer:	Can you tell us more about that first day where you joined the university? What was it like?
David Chan :	Well, the first day was quite interesting. Because I am not the new person, right, because the campus is new, so everybody, even if they have been with SMU for a number of years, are stepping into a campus new. And therefore, they are new in a different sense. So no attention was focused on me, which was great. And I can be as confused and blur like everybody else, as we would say in Singaporean English, "blur", like confused. So it does allow every one of us to ask each other what about this, what about that, and point to the same thing and said, "look at that, how interesting", or "look at that construction piece, I can't believe it's still there". And that gives you a kind of common bond, if you like, something common to speak about. And I think from a psychological perspective, we are in need together to try to make sense, so the sense-making process was not lonely. It was everybody trying to make sense together. So that was what I remembered about it, not so

	<p>much about the first day in class and things like that. Of course, subsequently, when you start teaching, then you began to see the differences between the students in NUS and SMU, the nature of the pedagogy and so on.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Can you tell us more about that? What was the teaching experience like?</p>
<p>David Chan :</p>	<p>Well, I had taught couple of classes, but the experience was new in a sense that Social Sciences was a very new curriculum at that time. So every course that I teach would have no precedence in SMU. I started the Research Methods in Social Sciences, which is an unusual course in Singapore because in Singapore, research methods tend to be tied to a particular discipline. So Psychology will teach its research methods, and if you are from Management, you will teach management's research methods and so on. But this is Research Methods in Social Sciences, so what that means is that students who are majoring in Psychology, Sociology, or Political science, or people who have not decided what to major would be in that class. It's really interesting because it challenges you to make sure that the examples you give would not be so specific to one particular discipline. It forces you to give examples across disciplines or transcend disciplines, which fortunately is what I really believe in, in terms of problem-based solving since the world is not compartmentalized into disciplines. So that was a good experience, but I must say it was not easy, because research methods is not always something easy to teach, but I really enjoyed it and would like to think that the students enjoyed and benefited from it. So that was just one of the many different courses that I experienced with, but of course the main difference with NUS was the huge lecture style where you stand in front of the lecture hall, speaking to 100-300 students, whereas here, the maximum you get at that time was 45 students and sometimes, if your class is small, it can be 20 students or even 15 students. Most of my classes were between 20, 25 to 45 students. It allows participation, or maybe we should say initially it forces participation from the students and that was actually great because in social sciences, you really need to interact with the students.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Did you find the difference in the students as well?</p>
<p>David Chan :</p>	<p>Yes, to be very honest, there are differences. I don't think people have framed it in the way that I am going to frame it. I think in a large university, and it's statistical, in a large university, the students are actually quite heterogeneous, because if you have hundreds and hundreds of students in your discipline, you will get all kinds of students isn't it, you get the whole range. But statistically, whenever you have smaller a class size, then the students are more homogenous because there would be less chance for them to differ. It's just a matter of statistics. Now but statistics aside, again maybe because I teach research methods, we interviewed each and every student before they come into the school, before they join the university. Now what does that mean? I am not saying this is bias, but it means that you tend to focus on certain skills. Now if you come to an interview and you keep quiet, no matter how intelligent you are, it's going to reduce your chances of getting selected. So you end up with students, right in the beginning, that we selected, of people who are composed, people who are able to operate under stress, able to think on their feet, and able to talk articulately, and probably present themselves quite well even just physically, not in looks, but in the way they dress, the way they sit, the way they carry themselves. So you already started off with a group of students you selected, who are quite homogenous, but not in the bad sense, in a</p>

	<p>good sense that they probably fit today's economy and the future economy. So I think that is the difference, and I am not saying whether that means SMU students are better or worse than NUS, but they are just different - both by our selection methods, and of course, subsequently our training. Because the way we train them, we make sure that they get involved in team projects, so they need to learn team skills, and we also make sure that they speak in class, and because the class is small, it does force or allow them to speak so then you hone your interactive skill and so on. And all these of course does not replace but they are over and above what you expect of having a breadth and depth of academic knowledge, technical skills and so on.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Shortly after you joined, you were appointed Associate Dean of Social Sciences and Humanities. Can you tell us about your responsibility for that role?</p>
<p>David Chan :</p>	<p>Well, when I first joined, it wasn't a School of Social Sciences. It was School of Economics and Social Sciences. And actually it was predominantly economics, the faculty were like, I think, there were like 30 over, maybe 40 over economists and like two or three social scientists. Well, economics is part of social sciences in the broader sense of the word. But the way we use it here was that social sciences is, whatever in social sciences that is not economics, and the university at that time, before I came, had already decided to develop majors in psychology, sociology and political science. So at that time, social sciences composed of these three disciplines, and economics was separate. It was very obvious at that time, the Dean was Bobby Mariano, of course Chin Tiong was the Provost and I did realize after I said yes to come to SMU was that their plan was for me to come and help set up the social science aspect of it. At that time, of course I believe the understanding was still within the school, with a possibility that if things work out, it might become two schools and so on. Nothing was said to me at that time but very soon after I started, Bobby, the dean actually asked me, and said "Could you be the associate dean?" At first I said no, and the reason was that, well, I wouldn't want to join the school on the first day and become the associate dean, because being the associate dean is not about your academic knowledge but about the understanding of the administration and so on. And there are senior people around and I believe the school can definitely function without an associate dean in social sciences for one term at least. So I said no at least for the first term and I think it was only in the second term and maybe even towards the end of the first year, that I agreed to take up the job because it becomes quite obvious that at that time, my inputs were being sought and I needed to give inputs and having the associate dean, or agreeing to do the associate dean, was actually helpful because you can actually be in a legitimate position to get certain things going. So then I became their associate dean that lasted for a year, and for various reasons, the SMU leadership decided to form two schools out of the one school and so then we had School of Economics and School of Social Sciences and naturally I was then the associate dean and so I became the interim dean of the school of social sciences for a year, and subsequently we did an international search and had a new dean from overseas came and took over and I went on to become the vice provost in the university and headed the office of research and also took care of the post-graduate research programmes for about a year or so, maybe a year or two, and then I became the Deputy Provost also a year later.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Just to ask about the time you were interim Dean, you had responsibility for curriculum, hiring, establishing the PhD programme. Can you tell us about those very early days?</p>

David Chan :	<p>Yes. If you recall, the decision to join SMU was exciting, not to take risk, but to be part of something new and that was really what it was, because I had to start a new school. The decision to have two schools was made in as far as we can tell, in a relatively short time. So once the decision was made and announced, basically the school will be on your own and you had to get things going. It was interesting. There were two things. One, you want to make sure that the existing students are taken care of, that the transition is smooth. At the same time, the school is attractive enough for people to want to join you, both the faculty members, as well as the students. So first, you need to make sure that you're building the house in place, get your pillars, you know, okay. And that wasn't too difficult for me, fortunately, because of my work experience, both in NUS and in the police. It was not too difficult to know what needs to be done. It was hard work but it wasn't like, okay, I have a problem, how do I actually solve this new problem. So like any startup of a new university, it was not difficult but it was hard work. What was interesting was to make sure you balance the socio-political aspects of starting a new school because we are still in the same building with the School of Economics, they at the 5th floor and we were at the 4th floor, then questions will naturally arrive about the sharing of facilities, and things like that. Fortunately, the SMU leadership was very supportive of the new school. We had very good, a small but very good administrative staff to help me and together we basically put together schemes, school policies, handbooks, recruitment. I still remember that within the year that I was the interim dean, I attended each and every job talk of a faculty member, and we hired 12 members, 12 new faculty members within a year, which was kind of record breaking. But before we hired each, for each one we hired, we had at least four to five people that we interview, so you can imagine the number of job talks that we were all enjoying sitting through them.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	<p>Around that same time, in 2007, the institutional review board was established in SMU. Can you tell us about your role in setting that up, and why is this important? Why an IRB is important?</p>

David Chan :	<p>Yes. That's true, I was the one who set it up so I was the so-called founding chairperson of the IRB institutional review board, which really means the ethics board for looking at research involving human participants. For people in psychology it's a no-brainer, it is something that you need to do because in all research, you need to protect the welfare of the human participants. In fact, in most journals in psychology, they would want to make sure that you declare that you have cleared your ethics board, or the IRB, before you do your data collection. So for psychology it's a must, for psychologist it's a must, and behavioural scientists in general. And in the case of in NUS, I was from the department of psychology, obviously, we had our own ethics board and we were doing that. So when I came to SMU and not only me doing research, and my psychologists were all doing work, and then I looked around and I realized that there is no institutional review board. Now you can't blame the university, there were basically no senior social scientist to ensure that that gets done. Immediately, it's obvious that you need to get that moving as fast as possible. So when I was tasked with heading the Office of Research, that was probably one of the, in fact it may have been the earliest initiative, that I said we need to do this. So I went ahead and set it up, according to certain international rules and guidelines on how you compose the board, so that all research involving data collection where human subjects are providing data, will have to go through the ethics board. Fortunately, the university is small, not every research involved human participants, we did not have tons of applications. So we were able, the new members, who were not as familiar, were able to learn along the way and we were able to do the turnaround very fast. So when somebody submitted an application, literally within days we were able to get back with decisions to revise and resubmit or the approval of the project. In most universities, you take up to months doing that. So faculty researchers took relatively short time to get used to it, and did not see it as an obstacle to research but as a necessary thing to do to protect human participants, as well as actually protect the faculty, the researcher. Why? Because when there's a question about the ethics, proprietary and the adequateness of the procedure, and if you follow what the approved procedures, the university is able to stand behind you and back you up on the research.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	<p>You looked at many social issues in Singapore society. We want to step back to 2007, then you were appointed co-chair of the National Council of problem gambling and the chair of the research subcommittee. Can you tell us some of the issues that were addressed by the council and maybe about some of the research that you were a part of?</p>
David Chan :	<p>Well, I was appointed as a member of the National Council on Problem Gambling. And as a member, I chair a subcommittee on research. But at the same time, I was actually co-chairing the international advisory panel, that advises both the Cas well as another initiative which is the National Addiction Management Service that belongs to the health area where of course gambling is one of the several other addiction possibilities such as alcohol or substance abuse. Our Council has statutory powers; it is part of the Casino Regulatory Act. So we started before the government decided to have the casino and as we all know at that time, when the casino started, it was a big social issue. There were debates about it, the</p>

	<p>population was split sort of in the middle of for and against having casinos in Singapore. Of course, it's done deal now, and it has been for several years, and our primary aim at that time was to ensure that, to address not gambling per se but issues of problem gambling. And we were amoral about the issue of gambling, so we do not say that gambling is good or bad, but we say that gambling can lead to problem gambling and you need to address problem gambling. Now how does that relate to research at SMU? At that time, the Council we have about 18-20 people, I was the only academic on it, and research was very important when we first started. It's still important now because you need to know what's going on in the Singapore context. There were not much, in fact, there may not be any systematic research on problem gambling in Singapore. And gambling behaviours are affected by of course your social cultural context. So research was very important and again immediately, as I said earlier, that you're able to apply your technical knowledge and research skills into the real world. It becomes very real. That was something quite separate from the university and we did not actually work together. I was doing it in my individual capacity as a professional, so called "national service". But several years ago, there was already when I was doing problem gambling for some time, the MSF, Ministry of Social and Family Development, actually approached me as the Director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute to ask whether our institute could do a piece of research with the ministry on problem gambling. And we talked, I talked to the President about it, we decided yes, and so we then worked on a few years long programme of research on gambling. And so we got actually, I have actually seven researchers, seven faculty members working with me on that.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>That leads into my next question, in December, 2009, the Behavioural Sciences Institute was announced and you were named the director. What was the motivation to start the institute?</p>
<p>David Chan :</p>	<p>Well, I actually approach the President, Woody Hunter, at that time, and of course I talked to the Provost, and I said I would like to set up this institute and then I decided that its named should be called Behavioural Sciences Institute for various reasons. And because I think it is a science that we need to understand and it is important that I emphasize on behavioural sciences, and not behavioural science. That's because it's multi-disciplinary and as the word "sciences" suggests, it's really bringing disciplines, different disciplines, not only psychology, together to try to solve a real world problem. So the focus was on translational research. And we don't just organize conferences or seminars. We do that but we want to focus on how to do research that can solve real world problems, which again goes back to my life-long belief of a scientist-practitioner model, whether it's teaching or research. The president Woody Hunter, was very very supportive, he said yes, and so we started it. We were given some temporary office space, more or less that this is your space, and you can start recruiting. And very soon, a few months, somehow the Public Service got to hear about this, and people from the Civil Service College approached me to try to find out more and maybe partly because of the work I've done with them, immediately in the first meeting they said, well we would like to fund you, is that okay? And I said, well, sure, why not? And then it started off and we actually got some good seed funding from the Civil Service College for three years. It was around 4.5 million dollars, which was certainly a lot for a startup research institute. That allowed us to hire staff, allowed us to run conferences and so on.</p>

Patricia Meyer:	If you were just to talk about the work with the research be assigned to us, and you were just to explain to a regular person on the street. What would be some examples that you can say that institute does its research in? what examples of areas that the institute do its research?
David Chan :	Well behavioral sciences, as the word suggests, is to approach from a scientific perspective to understand how people think, how people feel and how people act, or behave. How people think is about cognition, and there's a science of thinking. And how people feel is about emotion, and there's a science of emotion. And of course how people act is a science of behaviour. So you look at A, B, C, Affect for emotions, B for behaviour, C for cognition. And together then we are asking the question that, at different levels of analysis, whether it's an individual, a team, and organization or even a society at large, and for different stakeholders, whether you are members of public or policymakers, a leader or a follower, if you do not understand how people think, feel and behave in these various contexts, you are not going to achieve whatever aim or a task that you're doing. If you're going to have a policy, and if your policy does not understand how the public perceive things, how they feel, then no matter how great your policy content is, you will fail in your policy implementation. So if you're a leader of an organization, you again need to know how to function, right? So those are the abstract principles that you first need to understand, then you apply it in the real world context. As to the substantive areas, then you can think about the actual areas you apply. So if you look at health for example, if you're trying to get people to stop smoking, or we're trying to deal with the problem of obesity or we're trying to look at health, we want people to exercise and be more healthy, it is not just going to tell people the good things about why you should do it, and the bad things, or the consequences if you don't. There're issues about messaging, about lifestyle, about choices. So you need to understand people's judgment and decision-making processes and how you frame things. So whether you're changing health behaviours, whether you're looking at public hygiene, trying to control the spread of diseases, or make people return their trays at the hawker center or pick up litter. These behavioural changes actually require us to understand people's thought processes and emotions and the context in which they operate. So you can, this may sound a bit ambitious, really in any domain, you could apply behavioural sciences and Singapore has come far in the last few years, the government, the public among academics, even the private sector business leaders have all realized the importance of behavioural sciences and that has factored into how people evaluate even research grants on technical issues, such as urban planning and also into how people make decisions, how government do policies for example. And that's very good news for SMU because the social sciences or behavioural sciences used in the broader sense of the word applies to all the six schools.
Patricia Meyer:	About an example of research findings from this collaboration, between Behavioural Sciences Institute and A*Star, the Center for Technology and Social Behavioural Insights?

David Chan :	<p>Well, our projects are quite long-term and programmatic. I can give you examples of the work that we're working on. One of the areas that we, I can give two quick examples, one of the areas is obviously social media, as I mentioned. And the notion, that for example, if we put up images, pictures, as opposed to words, saying the same thing, what happens? Would that actually affect the flow of the postings and conversation that proceeds? Now that sounds like something just interesting to do, but it is extremely important, because it means that you can look at the spread of behaviours, how people start and look at collective movements being formed, and you can look at how rumours spread and also how truth propagates. So the idea then is that when certain people say something, could you make a prediction of how the thread is going to move in one direction or the other. It also tells you and tells the agencies and maybe other stakeholders, that say if you want to put up a message, you may be technically correct in what you say, but how you frame it will matter and affect the conversation that follows. And this is not a political manipulation. This is about understanding and predicting behaviour in order to achieve a positive assumed desirable aim. So those are very important issues to understand behaviours in social media. And how does the technology come in? Because now you're dealing not with traditional data. You're dealing with data that are constantly evolving, they are high velocity, they move very fast in time, they're full of variety and they're voluminous, so the 3 Vs if you like, variety, velocity and volume. And that defines big data and the question then your traditional statistical methods, where you can sit back and then look at the data, analyze, then tomorrow come back and analyze again, completely will not work. So you will need to be able to have the research method skills, the content knowledge and understand how technology works to bring them together, and that's why we needed the expertise from these two institutes, A*Star and BSI, and fortunately, I know something about both areas, and that was the main reason why I agreed to do it, so that we can bring the interface together. This again is translation but now it's translational across disciplines, so that disciplines don't just operate within their own boundaries and think that only your discipline can solve the world's problems, which you obviously will be wrong to think that.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	<p>In 2011, you started writing columns, the By-Invitation series in The Straits Times. Can you tell us about how it got started?</p>

David Chan :	<p>Sure. We didn't start off as writing a column under the By-Invitation series. It actually started when I was at a conference. Well, back track a bit, I think it started when I was looking at issues of fairness, both at the workplace, as part of my research where fairness is multi-dimensional, that the outcome might be fair, but if the process is not fair, it matters and vice versa. And then it dawns upon me that many people, both in leadership and as followers, live everyday with these different dimensions of fairness but actually do not distinguish them. And when you confuse the various dimensions of fairness, you may have many missed potentials, and you've had many unintended and unnecessary problems. And I began to feel that this is something where the science needs to inform the public, so that whether you're dealing with personnel selection or you're implementing a policy, understanding different aspects of fairness is important. I then wrote an article on fairness, which goes something like the outcome is important but so is the process. And that was the first article I think that was published in 2011. So it was not invited by The Straits Times, I just submitted the article and I said, well whether you want to publish this. So I was proactive in that sense, and they read it, they liked it and they published it and it received lots of attention from many people, both public and private sectors. That motivated me immediately to say that, actually as scientists, you really can say something that not only the so-called intellectuals will respond but just members at large and the challenge is to continue to have enough people to do that translation from science to practice. Then I attended a conference by the Institute of Policy Studies that NUS organized on population matters, where I really got interested in looking at issues on immigration and so on. And this is quite noteworthy. After that conference, I felt there were so many issues on social integration, especially with relationship between locals and foreigners in Singapore that have not received the attention that it deserves in terms of translating science into practice. I then wrote a very, very long article to The Straits Times, again unsolicited, on local-foreigner relations. It was so long but the editor liked it and the editor told me that we are going to do this for the first time. We are going to break your article into two articles and we will publish it on a Saturday, I think, on one particular day and Part Two we'll publish immediately the next day which has sort of never been done before. And that got published about 1000 plus words each and it drew lots of attention and up to today, I understand from the SMU library, it has the most downloads among all the Straits Times articles that I've written because it talks about the challenges of cohesion, and the ways to deal with integration issues. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, then, at that time on the day that they were published, read the articles and thought it was interesting and relevant and he posted it on his Facebook with a long paragraph commenting that these are the relevant issues with some potential, sensible solutions. Of course that probably helped the downloads and many people then went and also read the article and so on. So it's not every day that you get the attention of the Prime Minister, and that then tells me that again, it's important to write your articles in a way where the public can understand. That then started a series of articles, and of course not long after a few articles, The Straits Times invited me to be part of this column where Professor Tommy Koh, Professor Kishore [Kishore Mahbubani], Professor Chan Heng Chee and others take turns together with myself to write articles once every, about 2 months or so.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	Can you tell us about some of the reaction? What do you hear back after you published the articles?
David Chan :	Now, in the beginning I don't track them at all. After an article is published, of course many of my friends will either send me a text message or an email and to say why they like it. There will be a couple who say they don't agree with what I say, at least some parts of it, never with

the whole article, but maybe a sentence or so about a point. And I really value that because it will be terrible if everybody agrees, it either means that you have found the real truth and everybody understood, which can't be the case, or that you're only mixing with people who share your same views. So what was important is that, for most of the time, I will have people saying nice things, agreeing and how it has helped their work and affected their lives, have a few who say, well, David, with this point, do you really mean that, or this point I actually disagree with you. That is helpful. Sometimes it allows me to realize that I was not, maybe as clear as I could have been, allows me to think about the issue, and maybe after I explain, then the person actually agree with me after all, or maybe they misunderstood my point. But sometimes, I would actually realize that, oh indeed the way I frame it, I may not change my mind now, because I think I would have still said the same thing but could have framed it in a different way, or there's another perspective that I had not thought of. So those reactions were very helpful, they were constructive. I've never received a disruptive comment, what was interesting is that I do look at social media every day, and I don't recall a situation where the article gets posted up, and you know you get the hate, being bashed by social media. There was once, an article on trust, and the tittle was "Trust is a many splendored thing" and I talked about trust having the dimensions of not just integrity but also trust in competence and benevolence that got picked up quite a bit by lots of people and in fact, as a result of that article, I also went on television in a forum where Mr Gerard Ee and I spent half an hour or so on TV live, talking about public trust. And that happens to be at a time around the 2011, post-2011 election, where the issue of trust in government and public servants was an issue. So those reactions, it has been always positive, it has been good. I need to tell you this story. The typical reactions that come to me are from civil servants, private sectors, I would say so-called the people who read The Straits Times, and you would think that they are your middle class, English speaking, maybe dominated over-represented by intellectual people, and that indeed you would expect the readership of The Straits Times to be. And one day, I went to the Ministry of Education, and as usual, before you go up to certain floors, you have to exchange your identity card at the security counter. I exchanged mine, I gave my identity card to get the visitors' pass. The security guard looked at my IC, and it says of course David Chan and he looked at me and he said "You are the one who wrote in The Straits Times, those articles, I have read it," and then he started talking about the articles. I have to say the joy and the satisfaction I got from that episode was more than the Prime Minister praising the article. Because ultimately, you're not writing for the Prime Minister to see because you can access the Prime Minister through other projects, you are writing for the general public. And this is not to make any discrimination, but for someone who is a security guard, who saw your IC and read your Strait Times article, I think most Strait Times columnists will not be targeting them as the reader. But actually if you ask yourself, those are the people that should be of ultimate concern of what you write. And I thought that was a very good and humbling experience. That actually changed me a little bit and after that day, which was relatively recent, I decided that, moving forward, my articles should be even simpler then the way that it has appeared because I want to reach a wider audience.

Patricia Meyer:	There's another series you were featured in the Social Experiment television series and what motivated that series and why did you decide to use experiment to illustrate your point?
David Chan :	That was very interesting. Channel News Asia came to me one day, of course they happened to know my work, they know about the Behavioural Sciences Institute, maybe not much, and they say that well they want to put together a five-part programme series, and

	<p>they asked me if I could be their consultant to basically not only advise them on certain things as a typical consultant of a series would be, but to actually be also featured in the programme. So they have five parts, five episodes. But more important to actually help them to design the entire study on the experiment, collect the data, analyze the data and work with them closely to see how to deliver that to the members of public. What we decided to do, we did experiment because we felt that Singapore and the public at large, even policy makers are familiar with survey methods. They tend to think about social sciences in terms of just surveys, oh you go and just ask people questions, or you do an interview and a focus group. But what they probably have neglected is that a large part of social sciences involves experimental methods, where you can actually, what we use the word, be a nice sense of “manipulating”, where you put people in to different circumstances, or we call them “conditions”, and then you are able to see what happen to the differences among them in some variables of interests. And then you know for sure, because of your design that the difference is due to the things that you sort of manipulated. So it’s a very good method to try to find out what can cause certain behaviours or certain attitudes and emotions, in a way that surveys are limited to do. So we decided to do that, and what we wanted to do was to replicate very well established phenomena in social psychology. Of course then they needed an expert, and they came to me and these are very basic phenomenon, well established, but may not have actually been replicated in Singapore. So it’s still something new to test out whether it will work out in Singapore. So together with Channel News Asia, we sat down and I shared with them, and we picked the well-established phenomenon that we want to replicate. And we did it but in our way and our methods. So it actually produces new knowledge such as looking at stereotype of male vs female drivers, for example, which has never been looked at before, so we replicate a phenomenon called stereotypical threat behaviour and how that actually affects somebody’s behaviour when we activate the stereotype. Very interesting. We collected the data, analyzed the data, it was very taxing. Again it’s one of those things where now you literally bring the phenomenon from the laboratory to out there in the real world to address a current issue that people find interesting. And that gets spoken about. Sometimes when I was having lunch and all, I noticed that I get people pointing at me and then when I look over and I kept quiet, continued eating, I do hear the word David Chan, and then followed by “social experiment”. So people apparently do watch those programmes and maybe, hopefully learn something from it</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Recently, Singapore established the Social Science Research Council. The SMU Provost and you are both on it as members of the council. What was the impetus to set up the council and what does it do?</p>
<p>David Chan</p>	<p>Well, in quite a number of developed countries, you have a social sciences research council or its equivalent by whatever name you call it, where they specifically not only do funding of research grants, giving out research grants, but chart the directions of areas where the nations should invest their resources in. Social research and social sciences research is very broad, they would include your political science, sociology, psychology and so on. As way back as about 15-20 years ago, when I first came back, soon after I came back from my PhD, I came back in 1998 with my PhD, I felt it was very important for us to set up a social sciences research council. I am very sure I was not the only one who thought that. But it</p>

	<p>dawned upon me the importance of it, especially many things about social behavioural, and we need to complement the STEM, the Science, the Technology, the Engineering, and Mathematics part of it, we use STEM for short. And so there was a situation where I, after I joined SMU, that's more than 10 years ago right, there was, if you recall an Economics Strategy Committee, chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Tharman, [Tharman Shanmugaratnam], and they did organize a session, where they invited the representatives from then the three universities to share their views about economic strategies of the nation. And in the audience were of course senior civil servants, but there were about half the cabinet ministers, half the ministers in the cabinet were there, including the DPM himself. And I happen to represent SMU to convey our report. Among the many things that we said, there was one bullet point which I smuggled in, and say that we must set up a social sciences research council, so at least for sure we know that that got some attention, because the civil servants did feedback to me to say that, yes there was a possibility that they were looking at it. But I am sure many people would have given the government that idea, and I am not the only one and probably not the first one. And then there was IAAP [International Academic Advisory Panel], the universities are being advised by the International Academic Advisory Panel, and we understood from the media that several years ago, when they came, the government and the panel also discussed a possibility of setting up the council. Then the ideas at least went public and said that it seems like a good idea, we should set it up. From that announcement, which was about probably two, three years ago, until recently, about half a year ago, the decision was made then to set up the council. I'm fortunate, together with Lily Kong, our provost, to be part of this 15-18 members of the council.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>One of the points that you've raised in your writings is as Singapore thinks about going ahead, going forward, is resilience and cohesion in Singapore. Could you just comment on what may be lacking and what would you want to study? How would you like to develop this area?</p>
<p>David Chan</p>	<p>I think if you look at cohesion in a very large board sense, you need to first understand differences. Cohesion comes about or the necessity for cohesion comes about only because of differences. In other words, because there are differences, then there is a need for cohesion, if everybody thinks the same, act the same, has the same view point, cohesion is not relevant. Because we have differences and together with differences, there would be disagreements. The issue then becomes how do we manage those. And traditionally, we think in terms of race and religion in Singapore, and the government is very careful because of our history of racial riots, to make sure that the races and religion respect each other, that no one should dominate, and that is a secular state, and that when things happen, the state will step in and try to arbitrate and make sure that everything sort of goes well. That has been the model, and it has worked very very well if you compare our country's social and religious harmony with everybody else in the world. However, there are new emergent group differences, such as differences between people having very different strong beliefs, say there will be a group that is for capital punishment and another group that is against. Of course your traditional ones, which is not really an issue in Singapore, but people who so call believe that abortion is okay and others who believe that abortion is not okay. Those words are extremely loaded isn't it? I mean, pro-life and pro-choice. I mean how can you not be pro-choice and how can you not be pro-life. And the problem with such dichotomies is that it tells us, they suggest to us that they're opposites and you can never maximize their</p>

respective goals together, which is something that I do not believe in. I believe that life is not a balance, it's not that when one view goes up, the other view must go down. In other words, it calls for a compromise all the time. I think that many differences are due to either misunderstanding, or the failure to realize that there are also other important issues that we both care about and agree on. And so my approach to this is that cohesion need to understand that differences are not bad things. If we don't have differences, as one of my article goes, titled "we are in trouble", it means we all think alike and we could all be happily wrong together. So you need to allow to have differences, the question then is how to manage them, and also how to look at the differences, from which you emerge something that is better than each of the respective views. And that gives an example of LGBT versus certain religious conservative views, that LGBT is just morally wrong. Now those are differences which are going to clash inherently because they are moral views, and you don't expect one side to change the other side. What do you do? Now in those instances, do you fight? Do you go all the way and try to stop the others from their beliefs and activities? Now if you do that, we will all be sort of in trouble together. My approach is for people who are advocating LGBT and people who are advocating against it, to ask yourself, are there something else about our identities beyond our sexual orientations or our sexual orientation beliefs, and the question has to be yes. If for example, you and I are Singaporeans, it doesn't matter whether one is gay and the other is not or one advocates and one is anti. The question is that surely we can function harmoniously, solve problems together, despite this particular difference that we cannot work about. And that's where psychology and social science research comes in. We realize that we all have different social identities, could you activate certain identities such as citizenship, such as respect for human dignity, respect for social harmony, that these beliefs can be activated in addition to your moral beliefs about LGBT whether you're for or against. I think that's where science can help and that's where SMU and other institutions try to promote or enhance diversity, especially when it enters into so-called morality issues like LGBT, one needs to be a bit careful. The question is not should you talk or not talk about LGBT. My position is a bit different from the government. The government's position is that we do not rock the boat in some sense because we go along with what the social values think about. My position is that at some point, you do need to talk. When do you talk and not talk about an issue, be it LGBT or otherwise, it should be guided by our beliefs in certain common values. If we believe in social harmony and respect for human dignity, and we probably do, why can't we let these two values guide us when to talk and not to talk? When it becomes very clear that the debate is threatening our social harmony, perhaps it's time to take a pause. But when it becomes clear that one particular groups' dignity is being threatened, being discriminated, our value for respect for human dignity needs to come to the fore and therefore we need to talk, such as meritocracy or fairness being threatened, we need to talk because those are our core values. And so my position is not, not to talk, but when to talk.

Patricia Meyer:	I want to look back over your 10 years or so, 10 or 11 years at SMU and just ask you to reflect on how your research has changed over the time here in your interest, research interest has changed?
David Chan	Well, my research interest is pretty broad. I am an organizational psychologist, but I also do research methods, statistics and psychometrics. To put it simply, it's applying the rigour of research design and data analysis into addressing social and behavioural issues. So that kind of permeates all my consulting work, my advisory work and my research work. But in terms of substantive area, it doesn't actually change, or didn't change, but what changes is

	<p>the additional areas, each month or each year goes by that those gets applied onto. So for example, I do work on adaptability, I've written quite a bit on it, I developed measures, I've constructed framework and edited a book, worked with award-winning authors on adaptability. But in recent years, I'm beginning to try to apply that notion into our context as we move forward where there're going to be new jobs, and notion of skills future, what does that mean? Trying to combine this to the notion of adaptability. So that's a new application while the substantive area remained the same. Another quick area to share with you is on well-being, when we look at what I call subjective well-being, the idea of what make a person satisfied, at the same time make a person happy. And those things have been well-researched, how it applies to organization, peoples' lives and policies. But in the case of Singapore, I'm beginning on some new research to look at the distinction between satisfaction and happiness. That you can be satisfied but not necessarily happy, and you can be happy but not necessarily satisfied because your satisfaction is quite a cognitive component that I want certain things, and did I get those things. That's about satisfaction. And then happiness is more about emotions, a presence of positive emotions and the absence of negative emotions, the two are correlated, satisfaction and happiness but they don't always go together. This is quite important as a cultural element because people in Asia including Singapore, maybe not score very high on happiness if we give them a scale to rate how positive your emotions are. So we end up with very bad findings and bad interpretations to say that Singapore is the most unhappy country in the world, which is complete rubbish. I've written a Straits Times article to falsify that, that the data was interpreted wrongly, and soon enough from the same database, Gallup, the agency itself came out to say that, yes we are now the top, in the one third in the entire world. Now you can't move from 160th position to the top one third, it was a methodological flaw in interpreting the data where Singapore was presented as the most unhappy country in the entire world. It's just can't be true. And the data showed itself.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>What advices would you give to young faculty starting off in social sciences?</p>
<p>David Chan</p>	<p>I wouldn't say advice, but because we've all been there, I'll be able to share some of the experiences and very often, no matter who we are, we will always look back and we will think counterfactually. Counterfactually meaning that it could have been otherwise, if only I had done that or if only I had not done that. Don't worry, we all will learn from the mistakes and if we think counterfactually and you say, oh if only I'd have done that and you then start complaining, regretting, it's not going to help. We should think counterfactually, and say if only I've done that, so it means that moving forward, I learn a lesson from it. And I think as faculty members, because some faculty members, and I say this not in a derogatory sense, come fresh from school, they haven't worked before, it's really not easy to do translational work, which I think is the way to go because you were a student and then you become a professor, so to speak, and you haven't actually had the transition, that some of us have, where you have been in the real world working. And that is, I would say a limitation. If you're into research areas that actually require you to talk a lot about the real world, which I believe is every discipline. And so that's something which is all faculty, not only in this university but everywhere in the world would need to deal with. And the way to go is not asking you to resign, and go and work outside for a period of time, but in your work, just like students do internship, you need to get involved into national service, national service in a sense of working with agencies to contribute your time, volunteer work, do consulting work whether paid or unpaid. And then you begin to experience the world, and experience the joy and</p>

	<p>possibility of translating your knowledge to solve a problem, and allow the real-world to provide you real problems that is worthy of academic research. And I think that is important and I think young faculty needs to do that, to be very honest, it is going to be difficult because you have tenure pressures, because you do if you are on tenure track, you need to get tenured. Even if you're not on tenure track or term track, meaning you can get renewed, you need to ensure that you have decent research, and you need to teach well and so you have competing demands on your time. But I would say that I would like to think that most of the time, we hire the right people, who if you have good strategies, and you're persistent and work hard, you can do it. And once you look back and say that, "You know, if you spend the next six years doing that, six years later you cannot get your six years back. What do you really want to do that is meaningful. It will involve some risk taking, some discipline and allocation of time, but we should ask ourselves and not say because I have tenure pressures, I'm just going to do research and have good decent teaching and forget about the real world. I will deal with the real world after I get tenure. Unfortunately, most people think like that practically, but I think it will be a mistake to think like that. You need to start working with the real-world, even as you proceed. But it requires probably good mentorship.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Looking from the viewpoint of the university, looking university, what you see is some of the challenges facing SMU?</p>
<p>David Chan</p>	<p>Well, SMU started very different from all the other autonomous universities in Singapore. In fact, when we started, the other universities, NUS, NTU they were not autonomous. They were corporatized so to speak, and then they became autonomous, when the government saw that you know it can actually work. So we were like a little experiment or guinea pig for them, which is fine, it seems to work well. But what that means a challenge for SMU is that many good things that we were doing now, you may not be unique anymore, that they're also being done by the other universities. Now you can say that well, we're small, we're nimble, we can move faster than the big universities, which is true, but don't forget that they have economies of scale. And also, because we're small, when we do something so-called wrong, the criticality of the consequence of the error is much greater. Now in a larger university when one area gets messed up, the university will usually still be okay. It is the same argument that when United States messed up in a particular state or area, it's not a problem for United States. But in Singapore, we have always been told that you're vulnerable, you can't mess up. If you believe in the narrative, SMU will need to believe in the same analogical narrative there're many things that we cannot afford to mess up. So having good leadership is critical. Having good people, both in faculty and admin staff is critical. And continuing having good students is critical. So I think the people are critical, the issues I don't think is about money or physical resources because those, if you're doing the right thing, you're able to get those. It's about putting the right people in the right place. And I think that would continue to be critical and the ability for the university to work together as a team is critical, and by that I mean a faculty and admin staff working together, I also mean locals and foreigners working together. And having a leadership that is both local and global, and I call it "glocal". The ability to see global, and the ability to function and understand the local regardless of your nationality. I think that is important.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Just to finally close and ask, what advice would you give to SMU students, current students or graduate?</p>

David Chan	<p>Well, now we hear from the government specifically the Minister Ye Kung [Ong Ye Kung] education minister in charge of higher education, that talks about interest and passion, about the importance of not looking at just academic grades. You also hear that from the other Minister of Education that looks at schools. And everybody is saying that actually even parents also say that. They don't want their child to be just focused on academic grades and all but the system seems to suggest in Singapore system about the importance of it and why, that's because the structure is still, there seems to be a unidimensional definition of success, which is oh you need to have either money or be smart intellectually with a paper degree. I think moving forward, that will change. It's not whether it should change but I think it will change because skills of all sorts, and other than paper qualifications become very important. And I would hope that all SMU students, in fact students of all universities in Singapore really realize that much earlier. And not only when they enter into the real world and realize that oh actually these are the skillsets that are required and the universities didn't teach me that. I think students should not wait for the universities to teach you those so-called work-relevant skills. If there are opportunities there, but the students must take the initiative, and ask ourselves, and say well grades are important but it's not the only important thing and may not be the most important thing. SMU provide the opportunity to do many non-academic stuff, right from day one, and I think when students in SMU are in that environment, you really need to make full use of it.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	<p>Finally, what have you learnt from the students?</p>
David Chan	<p>Well, I've learnt many things from the students. When I teach first year students, in their first few weeks, they actually don't speak a lot, whatever we said about selecting people from interviews who speak because you're in the presence of strangers and you're still in the presence of the professor, who is an authoritative figure. But after a while, when you give the opportunities where you so called initially perhaps force them to speak up, and when they speak up, initially it maybe because of embarrassment of not speaking up, the threat of your grade of class participation. But after a while, you internalize and you begin to speak. And then when people begin to realize that there's no such thing as a stupid comment or a stupid question, and I've always said, the most stupid comment is the one that you did not articulate, you know when you will forever be wrong because you don't know. Once you articulated it, you can share and you can improve on it and so on. I think what I learnt from students is that once you overcome that initial reservation of fear, you are able to express your views freely. Of course students are more sheltered than us, who in the working world, and they tend to be able to say whatever things that come to their mind. I think what I learnt from students is precisely that, the ability to be able to say, not just anything that comes to your mind, but the ability to express what you truly believe in, talk about it within the constrain of the possibility that you might actually be wrong, and be proven wrong. And I think sometime the older we get, the smarter we think we get, we tend to have a stronger confirmatory bias that oh we know it all, therefore, the question is how to select the evidence to support my point, how to convince you that I am right. I think what we learnt from the students is the ability to speak up and then the ability to test their own assumptions and the ability to change their view in the light of new information. I think that is something that all adults need to learn from students. I think they're better at that than we adults are.</p>

Patricia
Meyer:

Thank you very much.

Acronyms List

Acronym	Definition
BCA	Building & Construction Authority
CCL	Centre for Creative Leadership
CFA	Chartered Financial Analyst
Chicago	The University of Chicago Booth School of Business
CPS	Centre for Professional Studies
DBS	Development Bank of Singapore
Duke CE	Duke Corporate Education
EDB	Economic Development Board
IE	International Enterprise Singapore
ITC	International Trading Concentration
ITC	International Trading Institute
LKCSB	Lee Kong Chian School of Business
MAF	Master's in Applied Finance
MAS	Monetary Authority of Singapore
MEC	Maritime Economics Concentration
MPA	Maritime Port Authority
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
NYU	New York University
PGPP	Postgraduate Professional Programs
RFP	Request for Proposal
SIM	Singapore Institute of Management
SingHealth	Singapore Health Services
SME	Small-Medium Enterprise
SMU	Singapore Management University
Stern	NYU Stern School of Business
Wharton	The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania
WMI	Wealth Management Institute