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A different perspective: Feature interview with Professor David Chan

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A Different Perspective

Psychology professor David Chan advocates the importance of walking in the shoes of others to build and strengthen relationships across cultures.

BY LOW SHI PING

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Professor David Chan is no stranger to civic discourse. The social and behavioural scientist is known internationally for his research into personality and social attitudes.

Last year, the 52-year-old director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute and professor of psychology at the Singapore Management University became the world's first scientist to be made a fellow in all six international associations of psychology. This came on the back of 20 years as an academic.

Further back in his career, he was a police officer for nine years. He cites his experience dealing with people from diverse backgrounds as important to helping him see things from the perspectives of others. This was an important factor when he embarked on projects that could change people's lives and also on his public policy work.

For example, the Singapore Government has used his research to design and implement social safeguard policies that help problem gamblers and their families. Additionally, his national surveys, tracking social attitudes and intergroup relations, are critical to the Government when forming policies in areas such as immigration, social integration, terrorism and social inequalities.

On a global scale, Prof Chan believes that understanding cultural differences can promote harmony among people of different countries, while recognising that our commonalities foster respect for human dignity and social responsibility.

“To enhance ties between Singapore and the international community, we need to build trust and quality relationships with others, and the first step is to understand what others are thinking and to see things from their perspective.” Professor David Chan

1. How important is it for Singapore to build strong international relations with other countries?

As a small nation, there are two principles of pragmatism that are critical for Singapore to survive and thrive. One is upholding the international rule of law. The other is building strong international relations, trust and friendships at all levels and across all sectors. This cross-country and cross-cultural relationship building is not just between governments, but also among individuals, groups and organisations.

2. How do you think psychology contributes to building stronger ties with the global community?

Psychology is the science of how people think, feel and act in different situations and contexts, including individual, interpersonal, team and cultural settings. If we understand these differences and apply that in practice, we will function more effectively in our international interactions. This is especially important in trying to build trust and relationships when there are differences in goals, interests and even values.

3. Is the ability to embrace different perspectives fundamental to enhancing international ties?

To enhance ties, we need to build trust and quality relationships with others, and the first step is to understand what others are thinking and to see things from their perspective. But studies have shown that we tend to be very poor at perspective-taking. In fact, we don't even see things as they are; we see things as we are. We make interpretations of ourselves and others according to our beliefs and past experiences, and also in the context of the circumstances we live or find ourselves in.

We need to recognise that some of the differences in viewpoints between Singaporeans and foreigners are probably due in part to the differences in life experiences. We should take some time to put ourselves in their shoes before we advocate a position or react to differing views. It will increase the likelihood that we move forward constructively, even if disagreements still occur.

4. Given the current geo-political climate, why is it more important than ever to tread carefully in the areas of dispute resolution?

The current geo-political climate makes conflicts more complicated because we can no longer assume that all parties will always adhere to the international rule of law during the resolution process. It therefore becomes even more important to build relationships with trust, goodwill and reciprocity norms.

Upholding the international rule of law and building relationships are not mutually exclusive. Treading carefully means making clear where we stand on issues. Our positions must be principled ones. What we decide, and how we approach issues, must also be guided by situational awareness and practical intelligence, so that our proactive behaviours lead to positive outcomes.

5. What does global citizenship mean to you?

There are three equally important aspects to it. The first is about having basic knowledge or awareness of the developments outside one's country. As global citizens, we should be interested in and informed about regional and global issues. These could be specific issues such as denuclearisation in North Korea, territorial disputes concerning the South China Sea, and trade wars between countries. Or they could be larger questions about issues such as poverty and wealth disparity.

The second is to be culturally sensitive to the thoughts, feelings and actions of others who are different from us. It also involves being self-aware of our own cultural biases.

Cultural sensitivity is about understanding what the differences are, why they exist, and how to manage them in cross-cultural interaction. The differences can work to our advantage when diverse cultures complement one another. In this way, cultural sensitivity can help to prevent bad outcomes and promote good ones.

The third aspect is to go beyond differences to focus on commonalities. To be a global citizen is to be human – to recognise that amid cultural differences and diversity, we all belong to the same human race. This involves respecting human dignity and rights, as well as caring for and helping each other, regardless of geography, passport and skin colour. It also means recognising that we share the same planet that we inhabit, and with it the responsibility to do our part to protect the environment.

“The opportunity to interact naturally at school, work or in social settings is critical to building quality relationships and developing a climate of trust.” Professor David Chan

6. Why is it important for Singaporeans to have a more global outlook and engage with communities outside of the country?

Additionally, we need to maintain a strong Singapore society. Changes in population composition, technology and connectivity will only further increase global and cross-cultural interactions. It is important for Singaporeans to have the knowledge, skills, outlook and mind-set to engage effectively for these interactions to be positive.

But a global outlook does not imply sacrificing local perspectives. A strong Singapore society requires Singaporeans to think “glocally” – to be at the same time a global as well as a Singapore citizen, with a sense of commitment and belonging to the country.

7. How can Singaporeans reach out to the global community and make a positive impact?

Singaporeans can seek out information and opportunities from relevant volunteer and non-profit organisations such as the Singapore International Foundation.

At schools or work organisations in Singapore, there are many structured, international initiatives such as internships, community service activities and corporate social responsibility programmes. They provide excellent experiential opportunities for learning from and engaging with the global community to make a positive impact.

Singaporeans who have colleagues and friends of various nationalities can also make good use of their accessibility to global communities and networks to gain insights into other cultures. This is more easily achieved through daily interactions with each other.

8. What are the key misconceptions that international communities have of Singapore?

Some segments of international communities may still have the misconception that Singaporeans are all conscientious and rule-based conformists who are not courageous enough to think or speak critically. The truth is, Singaporeans are quite heterogeneous, and there are actually many who are able and willing to voice critical comments courageously on issues that matter to them.

But many Singaporeans also do it constructively, and this includes prioritising which issues to focus on, and contextualising the discussion with our values that sometimes may be weighted quite differently from those of other communities.

9. From your collaborations with the international community, how do you think their impressions of Singapore have changed?

One great change I’ve observed from their impressions of Singapore and Singaporeans is that we are not just a bunch of uncreative, obedient conformists. This change in perception often comes about when Singaporeans and foreigners find themselves facing similar problems or challenges in the same work environment. That is why having the opportunity to interact naturally at school, work or in social settings is critical to building quality relationships and developing a climate of trust.

10. How have your impressions of the international community changed through collaborating with them?

I now see that within-nationality differences are often larger, and matter more, than the between-nationality differences. I've learnt to view each foreigner as a unique individual, with his or her personal attributes. We need to focus on what the individual actually says and does, and not be too quick to draw conclusions based on the foreigner's nationality group or country of origin.

It is not easy to ignore stereotypes, and they often influence our attitudes and actions implicitly without our awareness. But if we can learn to perceive people as individuals, we will be more effective in our interactions, make better judgements, and produce better outcomes.