



The Strange Start of
Psychology at the
National University of Singapore

John Michael Elliott
(with assistance from Sim Tick Ngee)

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Acknowledgements

I joined NUS Psychology six weeks after its inception in the Department of Social Work, and have numerous memories of the entire period and indeed, of many years before, from time spent as the psychologist in what used to be called the Ministry of Social Affairs. It was tempting to rely on my extensive memories of my affiliation with NUS Psychology, and I have often done so. But as a psychologist, I am only too well aware of the fallibility of human memory, and I have attempted to test my memories against those of others, and against my own hoard of departmental paperwork and that available in departmental or university offices or from colleagues, wherever possible. A great many colleagues have contributed to this attempt at a history, greatly lightening the work, and it is a pleasure to thank them here.

The idea of this book was originally suggested by Sim Tick Ngee, who at the time of writing these acknowledgements is Head of Department in his seventh and last year, and he has supported it in every way possible, for which I am really most grateful. Derek Blackman, John Frisby, Winston Goh, Nicholas Hon, Fred Long, Mariam Aljunied, Sim Tick Ngee, Chris Spencer, Eddie Tong and John van Wyhe all read one or more chapters in draft and made useful comments. Winston Goh also provided very interesting photographs, documents and much insight into student life in the early days of the Department of Social Work and Psychology. Various past and present senior colleagues, and in particular George Bishop, David Chan, Chua Fook Kee and Sim Tick Ngee provided much useful information from their own extensive institutional memories. Numerous other colleagues—

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I am really very grateful to my wife Myra for allowing me to neglect family duties and to be generally unavailable and preoccupied while trying to write this book. No one who has not actually tried to write a book of this nature, full of fiddling details that need to be accurate, can fully appreciate the time and effort involved, and the toll it can take on family life accordingly.

I have written almost entirely in the third person throughout, but as a matter of literary aesthetics and an unobtrusive profile, not in any effort to pretend a greater objectivity than there actually is. How far I have actually succeeded in creating a reasonably accurate and impartial account of events is for others to judge, but the friends and colleagues listed above saved me from a great many errors. I am of course to blame for all those that remain, and for any infelicities of style or omissions of content. I am also solely

responsible for all matters in the book reliant on my own understanding and perspective, and nothing written here should be construed as reflecting an official university or departmental position.

A Note on Names

The book reports names exactly as they would be used in ordinary circumstances in Singapore, and Singapore readers will have no difficulty with them. However, for the benefit of readers outside Singapore, it is appropriate to mention the conventions that govern names in Singapore.

Chinese names here are conventionally written with the surname (the family name) first, but when a western personal name has been adopted, the convention that it precedes the family name is observed in most situations. Thus, Sim Tick Ngee's family name is Sim. He has no western name on record. His contemporary in the first cohort of graduates, David Chan Chin Tuong, rarely uses his Chinese personal name, and is known as David Chan. Chan is his family name. Since it is generally easy to recognise western (or western style) personal names, this system is actually easy to use. Problems only occur with Chinese persons who prefer to reverse the order of their Chinese names; this is frequent with Chinese from the USA, and quite common in those from China, when communicating with Westerners. It avoids confusion in America but increases it in Singapore. Happily, there are no such cases in this book.

Malay Singaporeans follow a patronymic system. Readers (if any) familiar with Icelandic names will immediately recognise this system. My old colleague at Sheffield University, Margret Arnljotsdottir, then a postgraduate student, was greatly amused when I apologised to her that, while I remembered her patronym, Arnljotsdottir (Arnljot's daughter), I had forgotten her personal name, Margret. In exactly the same way, Malay names are personal, for example Mohamad Maliki (my Social Work colleague). His full name is Mohamad Maliki bin Osman, that is, son of Osman. His son is Adli Mifzal bin (son of) Mohamad Maliki, and his daughter, Lidia Syahindah binte (daughter of) Mohamad Maliki. Consequently, Malay names are indexed under personal names.

Indian names are more complicated. Tamil names, which are the most common, also follow a patronymic system. Thus, a former administrative officer in the Department is Manimegalai d/o (daughter of) Palanisamy, always known as 'Mani'. She is indexed as Manimegalai. But others in this tradition are indexed by the paternal name if that is the name under which

they publish. Yet other names are family names in the western sense. For example, my colleague Leher Singh is not a Sikh, all of whom are Singh (men) or Kaur (women); rather, she carries a family name, Singh, and publishes under that name.

John Elliott

November 2018

Foreword I

The Psychology Department is one of the largest departments in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Each year, it attracts huge numbers of students aspiring to be majors in the subject. Not many people today are aware or remember that it was only in 2005 that the Department of Psychology became an independent department at the university. They may also not be aware of the reasons why the psychology programme was for many years embedded in the Department of Social Work, despite attempts to push for the separation of the two disciplines. This makes *The Strange Start of Psychology at the National University of Singapore* such an illuminating piece of departmental history.

Written by John Michael Elliott, who joined the NUS psychology programme near its inception and with whom I had the pleasure of being a colleague for several decades, *The Strange Start of Psychology at the National University of Singapore* is truly a labour of love that involved hours of work ploughing through departmental paperwork, conducting oral interviews, and gathering materials. The result is an insightful and well-researched book that offers an interesting insider account of how the discipline and programme evolved over the years, and how this was shaped by political and historical developments in Singapore. First-hand accounts from individuals who were closely involved with the programme also make this a valuable preservation of collective and institutional memory.

Reading the pages of this book brought back memories of the exciting time when plans were pushed forth for the birth of Psychology as a department in its own right. I am glad to have played a part in this effort and feel gratified that the decision taken in 2005 has yielded such good outcomes. I am therefore grateful to Sim Tick Ngee for initiating (and completing) the writing of this history, and particularly to the late Dr John Elliott for his dedicated service to the discipline and department by bringing this meaningful project to its fruition. John advocated tirelessly and passionately for the recognition of psychology as a discipline in its own right, and I cannot think of a more fitting tribute to his memory than this book.

Tan Tai Yong (*Professor*)

President, Yale-NUS College

April 2021

(Dean of Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences from 2004 to 2009)

Foreword II

Reading this book brings back fond memories of the days when tutorial classes had only five to seven students, a significant luxury since class sizes today comprise 20 or more. Students these days will probably find it hard to believe that my honours cohort was made up of just 10 students, compared to the 250 or more we see today. In fact, the very idea that we actually had an honours room to hang out in and in which all of our seminars were held seems like something out of a fairy tale. Indeed, it was exciting to have had a front-row seat during the early days of the psychology programme.

Even though I remember many aspects of the department captured in this book—I was one of about 70 undergraduates who had enrolled as psychology majors during its second year in 1987—a lot of new information was unveiled when I read John Elliott’s in-depth account of the inception of NUS Psychology.

John was first my teacher, and later, I was privileged to be his colleague for nearly three decades. However, he never ceased to be a teacher to me. There is no one better to pen the history of this programme and offer insightful details of how the department came about. It is also fitting that Sim Tick Ngee, who was from the pioneer cohort of undergraduates, took up the challenge of completing this book after John’s untimely passing.

To all who have graduated with an undergraduate major or a postgraduate degree in Psychology from NUS, I would not hesitate to recommend this book as supplemental ... nay, essential reading. To those who have contributed in any way to the evolution of the department and programme, the story that

unfolds—as told in John’s inimitable style—about the strange start of our programme and department, will be an illuminating and fascinating read.

Winston D. Goh (*Associate Professor*)

Head, Department of Psychology

National University of Singapore

April 2021

Prologue

We are all but digits in a span of history. To many, history is nothing more than a record of the events that took place in a particular period. But to some like myself, that span of history is more personal—for we are the digits that shared in the events that took place, we can identify with the record, and we hold it dear that the history has been faithfully recorded. And to those who come after us, we hope the record serves a purpose of providing some guidance into the next span of history.

This book was conceived for two purposes. The first was to take pause to look back at how NUS Psychology came about and in so doing, appreciate what our “forebears” achieved. The second was to give voice to one who went through that span of history that is the development of the NUS psychology programme.

John Elliott touched many lives, and so this book is also a tribute to him and all his contributions to NUS Psychology. True to form, we pay tribute by asking the person we’re recognizing to do more work—and so as Head of the Department of Psychology then, I asked John to write this book. Thankfully, he agreed without hesitation.

John put a lot of effort into this book—speaking to many of the key actors in this history, scouring paper records, and so on. Alas, he would pass away without finishing the book. But the book meant a lot to him—even in his final days, he was still working on it.

As the one who entrusted the task of this book to him, it was also my responsibility to bring the book to the finishing line. And so here it is. I

dare say that the contents are all John's, and I only did some editing and reorganisation of materials, and wrote a small part of the final chapter. In adding my touch to John's work, however, I hope I have not misrepresented what he wanted to say in any way, and that the book thus faithfully records the strange start of NUS Psychology. And it remains my wish that the book does indeed pay tribute to John as it was originally intended.

Sim Tick Ngee (*Associate Professor*)
Department of Psychology
National University of Singapore
April 2021

Chapter 1 | The Hard Ground

In the opening week of the 1986/1987 academic year at the National University of Singapore (NUS), Godfrey Harrison, Senior Lecturer, delivered his first psychology lecture to an intake of 72 students. Thus commenced the NUS psychology degree programme, which has become one of the most popular and successful programmes in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS).

This commencement of the psychology programme—in 1986—marked the first key milestone in the strange start of psychology at NUS. At this start, the programme was twinned with the social work programme to form the Department of Social Work and Psychology. There would be a second key milestone—in 2005—when the programme separated from the social work programme to become the Department of Psychology.

The start of psychology at NUS can be considered strange in two ways. The first was the reaching of the first milestone, through which the psychology programme actually came into being. As the rest of this chapter details, the ground in Singapore was not conducive to such a programme being offered at any local university. The second was the fact that the programme started in the Department of Social Work, although it was then renamed the Department of Social Work and Psychology. Nowhere else in the world—as far as the present author is aware—has there been such a double-subject department. Over time, however, the inevitable and fundamental disciplinary differences, coupled with practical challenges such as resource prioritisation and staff morale, would lead to the second milestone of separation and the emergence of an independent department.

There are useful insights to be gained from the course of development of the NUS psychology programme. It is thus the purpose of this book to document these insights within a narrative of the history surrounding them as well as the rich happenings over this period.

A Step Back into the Past

To fully appreciate how the NUS psychology programme came into being and developed over the years, it is salutary to briefly visit the history of psychology as a discipline in Singapore. To be clear, it was not the case that psychology was an unknown discipline in the early days—indeed, there were sporadic efforts to engage interest in it even back then, although these unfortunately fell on stony ground. Rather, it is likely the confluence of three factors that resulted in the low standing of psychology and the hard ground that it had to start from.¹ The first factor related to the narrow view of psychology as a clinical discipline with limited capacities, the second had to do with the more pressing priorities of employment and manpower needs in an emerging independent island state, and the third—perhaps surprisingly—arose from the conflicting signals within psychology itself.

The Narrow View of Psychology

According to the American Psychological Association,

Psychology is the study of the mind and behavior. The discipline embraces all aspects of the human experience—from the functions of the brain to the actions of nations, from child development to care for the aged. In every conceivable setting from scientific research centers to mental healthcare services, “the understanding of behavior” is the enterprise of psychologists.²

Psychology is a very broad discipline. In the early days in Singapore, however, the understanding of psychology was much narrower, and more aligned with the origins of NUS. NUS is the culmination of a chain of tertiary educational initiatives that started in 1905 with the establishment of the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States Government Medical School (in 1913 renamed

¹ See Long (1987) and Tan and Goh (2002) for earlier histories, and Elliott (1999) and Singh and Kaur (2002) for earlier accounts of psychology at NUS.

² American Psychological Association, *About APA*, available at <https://www.apa.org/support/about-apa#:~:text=How%20does%20the%20APA%20define,to%20care%20for%20the%20aged> [accessed 22 Feb. 2021].

the King Edward VII Medical School), which later became the University of Malaya in Singapore and then the University of Singapore after 1962.³ The institution has a history of medical excellence, and such levels are indicated in present times through various health indices for the country, such as a low infant mortality rate and a high life expectancy for its citizens (among the world's lowest and highest, respectively). However, the medical origins of what is now NUS may have limited the early development of psychology in Singapore. This is because these origins meant that psychology was seen very much as a clinical or para-medical discipline. Indeed, psychologists were not seen as having much of a role outside of clinical settings until the emergence of psychology in the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) in the late 1960s. Even within this narrow clinical view of the discipline, however, psychology was seen as ancillary to psychiatry, which in turn meant that psychologists had little, if any, clinical independence.

This clinical view of psychology deserves some elaboration. The history of psychiatric provisions in Singapore started in 1841 with an institution named The Insane Hospital with 30 beds. This was renamed The Lunatic Asylum and moved to a new location with 100 beds in 1862. The New Lunatic Asylum with 300 beds was built in 1887, followed by a new Mental Hospital in 1928, which was renamed Woodbridge Hospital in 1951.⁴ Woodbridge Hospital was moved to Buangkok Green in April 1993 to be the inpatient facility of the new Institute of Mental Health (IMH).

During the period of the Straits Settlements and the Colonial Office administration,⁵ mental health was not a high priority and institutionalisation of the mentally ill was the treatment of choice. The early mental institutions were feared almost as much as their inmates—perhaps with good cause—given that psychological illnesses at that time were little understood and seemed intractable to intervention. Even with more enlightened and modern approaches to treatment in subsequent times, it is still difficult to overcome public prejudice and fear associated with such illnesses. Against this background, and given that the psychiatrist or medical practitioner

³ National University of Singapore, *Founded by the Community for the Community*, available at <https://www.nus.edu.sg/about/founded-by-the-community> [accessed 22 Feb. 2021].

⁴ Long (1987). See also Ng (2001) for a detailed account of the history of mental health services in Singapore.

⁵ The Straits Settlements were first administered through the East India Company, until its collapse in 1858. It was thereafter administered by the India Office. Singapore was finally made a Crown Colony in 1867, and continued as such until 1959 (excepting the Japanese Occupation of 1942 to 1945).

bore clinical responsibility for patients, the role of psychologists was greatly restricted and their clinical independence was virtually non-existent.⁶ By the 1960s, when calls to start psychology in the University of Singapore were first beginning to be heard, there were more psychiatrists than clinical psychologists in the country.

According to Long Foo Yee, former Head of Psychology at Woodbridge Hospital and later the IMH, the first government psychologist was V.W. Wilson, an Australian who was appointed in 1956 to build up a psychological service within the mental health programme.⁷ Wong Man Kee was the first clinically-qualified local psychologist to be appointed at Woodbridge Hospital. He assumed his post in 1959 after doing his pupillage under Wilson and later qualifying in clinical psychology from the Institute of Psychiatry in London, UK. In 1968, he was joined by Long, who qualified in Sydney, Australia. By 1972, while clinical psychological services had expanded, there were still only four psychologists in post against seven psychiatrists, far below the numbers that might have been expected, or needed.

Even with the establishment of posts for psychologists in the mental health services, there was no pressure for a supply of suitably qualified persons to fill such posts. The usual procedure was for an honours graduate who trained overseas to be recruited and posted to the service on a probationary basis, and start work under supervision. After a suitable period of apprenticeship, the graduate would be confirmed internally as a psychologist. It was never expected that such psychologists, despite working in clinical settings, would necessarily have or need to have clinical qualifications beyond the honours degree. Also, since the numbers were small, these posts could easily be filled by recruitment from those who returned from an education overseas. Thus, there was little need for a local programme in the university to provide

⁶ Long Foo Yee, a clinical psychologist in the early days, recalls an example illustrating this absence of clinical independence: "... mid-1968 [during] my first year of service at the Woodbridge Hospital after I took up my appointment in March, at the ward round, a case came up that would be suitable for behaviour therapy. The consultant psychiatrist agreed that behaviour therapy would be useful. I volunteered to take the case since behaviour therapy was part of my postgraduate clinical psychology training course at Sydney University. He did not want me to do it because psychologists in those days were deemed to be only mental testers with no therapeutic role. Instead, the psychiatrist assigned the case to two young medical officers who had never heard of behaviour therapy. They were instructed to find out about behaviour therapy and do the treatment". Personal communication, 13 June 2017.

⁷ Long (1972).

training or supply graduates, and much less to provide professional training beyond the honours degree.

The consequence of this was that even by 1972, the only psychologists in the Singapore government service were in MINDEF and the Ministry of Health (MOH). In that year, an additional post for a psychologist was created in the Ministry of Social Affairs, at the instigation of Yip Wing Kee, its Deputy Secretary, who himself had some training in psychology. This post was held for a year by Mary Bernstein, an Australian behavioural psychologist who made efforts to extend the introduction of token economies into social welfare homes, following a pioneering trial by Long.⁸ After she left, the post was filled by John Elliott (the present author), who served until 1976. But even by then, it was still the case that no other qualified psychologist was holding a government post as a psychologist outside of MINDEF and MOH. There was one qualified educational psychologist then—Louise Clarke—but she was in post in the Student Care Service, a voluntary welfare organisation. It was not until 1988 that educational psychological services were started in the Ministry of Education (MOE).⁹

The case of MINDEF is also informative of the narrow view of psychology. In 1968, Leong Choon Cheong (or C.C. Leong), a major by rank and a psychologist by training, was appointed to head the MINDEF Personnel Research and Education Department. He had built up a small cadre of psychologists who had been actively involved in studying Singaporeans in National Service since its inception in 1967. They investigated the characteristics of these National Servicemen, including the attitudes and realities behind them, and published their results in a book, *Youth in the Army*, a decade later.¹⁰ This book carried a foreword by Goh Keng Swee, Minister for Defence, in which he offered the somewhat qualified but favourable verdict that the book proved useful to the Ministry even though he could not judge the technical quality of the work. This was in fact the most valuable endorsement he could have given, for pragmatic benefits at that time were perceived as far more important in the wider context of managing economic development, or even survival, in the wake of the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965 and the later closure of the British Naval

⁸ Long, Phua and Tan (1973).

⁹ Weerasinghe, Ong and Cockburn (2002).

¹⁰ Leong (1978). Leong subsequently did his PhD in Australia, specialising in biofeedback under the guidance of Aubrey Yates. He then spent time in the Department of Philosophy at NUS, but felt unable in that environment to do the psychology for which he was trained. He subsequently left and joined the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Base in Singapore.¹¹ It is notable that the subsequent development and expansion of psychology in MINDEF—under Ong Kian Chye (or K.C. Ong), the next department head—took place not in the development of clinical or counselling services, but in the application of behavioural and organisational principles to various aspects of the military. Ong oversaw the steady growth of this unit and the unit currently runs under the banner of Defence Psychology.¹²

More Pressing Manpower Needs

In the years following independence in 1965, it was clear that policymakers were motivated to ensure that psychologists would be useful in the developing nation. To quote from Long,

Singapore ... has to set its own social and economic priorities. The present emphasis is on defence and industrialisation and the technological sciences are considered of greater importance than psychology ... The number of psychologists to be employed will be calculated on the basis of the urgency of certain social problems arisen from rapid industrialisation ... So, for the foreseeable future, Singapore's psychologists will continue to be trained overseas. The present 17 scholars studying psychology abroad under Government sponsorship will be considered as "adequate" to meet future needs.¹³

To the extent that psychologists were identified in the official mind with clinical services or with social problems, their utility was liable to be seen as correspondingly limited. Social welfare issues could be dealt with by social provisions and social workers, with legal aid if needed, and with greater provisions for the destitute. In that atmosphere, psychologists were considered rather a luxury. On the other hand, mental health issues could be dealt with by psychiatrists, with some psychologists to administer mental tests, but even then these were not a high priority.

¹¹ The British had a major military presence "East of Suez" that was terminated in 1971. All major facilities in Singapore, including the Naval Base, were handed over to the Singapore Government. According to Murfett, Miksic, Farrell and Chiang (2011), this posed a serious economic threat as over 20 percent of Singapore's income came from these facilities and their personnel.

¹² For further information on psychology in MINDEF, see Soh and Chan (2002).

¹³ Long (1972: 218). Thirteen years later, when submissions were made on the proposed NUS psychology programme, it was still the position of the Public Service Commission that the need for properly-qualified psychologists could be met in this way.

In the meantime, while there was interest in assessment in the education sector, it was a limited interest in or attention to special education, which was more or less left to the voluntary sector. Following independence, the key focus understandably was on expanding the provision of schools to provide a universal education system. After the publication of the Goh Keng Swee Report on the Ministry of Education in 1979, the emphasis shifted to improving the efficiency of schools.¹⁴ This shift, however, was again not seen as requiring extensive psychological expertise. By then, a few Singaporeans had obtained training in educational psychology. These were in MOE or private practice, but as with other psychology specialisations, there was a general sense that any future need for psychologists could be met by the occasional recruitment of psychology graduates who had been educated overseas—Long’s “17 scholars” approach. And while the Public Service Commission (PSC) was aware of the potential applications of industrial-organisational psychology,¹⁵ this too was not seen as grounds for starting a psychology programme in the university. Moreover, as it became clearer that professional psychology entailed postgraduate training, psychologists were seen as potentially expensive.

Conflicting Signals from Within Psychology

The fact that psychology had aspirations to professional status may also have worked against its claim for a programme or department in the university. This was because graduates from such a programme—even if not clinical— would be seen as actual or potential specialists, rather than as educated generalists with scope for employment in the many fields where a social science graduate might look for employment. That is, the potential professional slant of psychology may well have resulted in a psychology education being seen differently from other social science subjects in FASS—such as economics, geography or sociology—or even humanities subjects such as philosophy. The national demand for philosophers cannot ever have been high, but it was and is the discipline which above all others exemplifies the pursuit of reason, and so a philosophy department was in a way a badge of necessity for a university.¹⁶ At the same time, geographers and sociologists

¹⁴ Goh (1979).

¹⁵ When enquiring in the mid-1960s as to PhD specialisation, the present author was informed by the PSC that industrial-organisational psychology would be a good choice, as it was what Singapore would need.

¹⁶ All persons with a PhD (or a DPhil if Oxford-trained) bear the title of Doctor of Philosophy, whatever their actual discipline.

were not expected to have attained postgraduate qualifications or training before they could be usefully employed for practical challenges such as urban planning and the determination of social statistics. Thus, having departments of geography and sociology could readily be justified. Indeed, a stronger argument could be made for economics. Not only was Singapore an aspiring financial hub, but its post-independence economic future and industrialisation were effectively guided by Goh Keng Swee¹⁷ and advised by Albert Winsemius,¹⁸ both economists. Given such national aspirations, students literate in the fundamentals of economics would arguably be of more value in a host of positions and organisations.

Conversely, no such case could easily be made for psychology. It was probably not at that time seen as a good subject for a general education, and certainly not as a general foundation for a career.¹⁹ There was therefore no perceived need for large numbers of undergraduates studying psychology. While there was some awareness of a need for specialists, it was generally felt that these could be trained on the job or recruited from returning graduates as needed. There were actually overseas scholarship schemes for precisely the purpose of developing talent and filling manpower needs. However, the general view that psychologists are useful and fit for service only if professionally qualified with postgraduate degrees may have contributed to the view that it would be an expensive programme to establish, producing graduates with high salary expectations to boot.

In addition, there was a question of the public image of psychology and psychologists. Specifically, psychology was sometimes seen as something Western and alien. This was an explicit theme in an edited collection of papers published a year after the start of the NUS psychology programme

¹⁷ Goh obtained a PhD in economics from the London School of Economics in 1956.

¹⁸ Winsemius was a Dutch economist and advisor to the Singapore government from 1960. According to Drysdale (1984), he advised against removing the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles from outside the Victoria Theatre, to increase Western investor confidence in the new administration which had just been elected in 1959. When a student in the UK, the present author later heard Toh Chin Chye, Minister for Science and Technology, explain that Raffles was retained as a symbol of modern Singapore as this neutralised potentially divisive questions about who came first or had a main claim to indigenous status. These rationales reinforced each other nicely.

¹⁹ For over 40 years, the present author was frequently asked about opportunities for psychologists. Until quite recently, the people asking almost always assumed that a professional career was the natural destination for a psychology graduate. Many were surprised, and often disappointed, to discover that the undergraduate degree was not a practitioner qualification.

and dealing with the impact of psychology as a new discipline in Asian countries:

... it is obvious from the papers that the West and the USSR have approached all these [Asian/Oceanic] countries, with the exception of Japan, with a deliberate intent of promoting psychology amongst other systems of knowledge and technology. This has been done by various means, principally by direct intervention by the colonizing powers, by less direct transmission from a colonized country to its neighbours ... and by the neo-imperialist infiltration of international agencies and twentieth century powers.²⁰

In taking this position, the editors and some of their contributors were reflecting the views of those who questioned the universality of psychology and its focus on theories of general application. They preferred a more relativistic approach that highlighted cultural differences and the appeal of indigenous psychologies, a stance somewhat supported by Colleen Ward.²¹ To the extent that psychologists became activists or linked their work to an ideological and relativistic position, their discipline could be potentially characterised as unscientific or anti-scientific, or even subversive or revolutionary. It could also be seen as decadent, which would have met with greater resistance. Just as with the radical psychiatry movement in the traditions of Szasz and Laing,²² there was an element of counter-culture in psychology that was anti-science (and anti-behaviourist in particular), anti-establishment, and with at best an ambivalent attitude to what was seen in Singapore as subversive libertarian influences, such as claims on the liberating effects of hallucinogenic drugs. Older Singapore readers may recall that for many years post-independence, it was government policy that “Males with long hair will be attended to last” with specific details on what constituted long hair (e.g. hair covering the ears). Even though this policy was gradually relaxed in the 1980s and after a good deal of controversy, it succinctly captures the flavour of an official resistance to what were seen as decadent Western influences. To the extent that psychology was, or could be, seen as an inherent part of this perceived decadence, it would have damaged itself.

Exacerbating the problem was the prevalence of popular psychology, and the activities of “pop” psychologists. These often promoted panaceas

²⁰ Turtle (1987: 13).

²¹ See Ward (1987a).

²² Szasz (1962); Laing [1960], (1965).

and self-help programmes, or management psychology nostrums, which were only loosely connected to any kind of serious psychology. Such was the prevalence that a visit to any local bookshop in the 1970s or 1980s would find a set of shelves devoted to popular psychology and other self-help and self/organisational improvement books. In stark contrast, there would be only a relatively minute collection of serious or reputable psychology books, if any at all. Even as late as 1995, nine years after the NUS psychology programme was established, Lee Tiong Peng, a local psychologist and human resources manager, felt able to comment that “psychology is still seen as a cross between voodoo and medicine”.²³

Even to this day, a number of debatable methods and theories associated with psychology are still widely used and apparently well-received in the local context. For example, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) appears to be widely used in Singapore for organisational selections, but it is not based on or supported by psychological research, has little or no validation here or elsewhere, and was not developed by psychologists. Similarly, neurolinguistic programming (NLP) seems to have a substantial following, despite little scientific support or evidence for either its theories or effectiveness. Indeed, Ward explicitly cites the activities of “pop” psychologists (in Malaysia, in her case) as cause for concern when considering the impact and development of psychology.²⁴ It is difficult to tell how far such populism may have contributed to a general reluctance on the part of the government or even within the university to sanction the establishment of a psychology programme. On the other hand, it is also difficult to tell the extent to which such populism may have fuelled an interest in the subject (in whatever ways it was understood) on the part of the young people who were to form the intakes for the new programme.²⁵

²³ “Productivity push fuels demand for psychologists”, *The Straits Times*, 3 May 1995, p. 11.

²⁴ Ward (1987b).

²⁵ Chai Jingwen, an NUS Psychology honours graduate who assisted in preparing this book, comments: “I would also like to add informally that for many young people like myself, exposure to the MBTI and similar pop psychology materials was one of the reasons that piqued our interest in the subject. Many schools engaged external talks on such things to mould students to greater employability. Some schools, like my alma mater River Valley High School, even had these activities integrated into our yearly assessments which were reported in our Report Books. It was only some self-directed learning in pre-university and the Introductory Psychology programme that guided us to a more robust understanding of Psychology as a scientific discipline.”

Taken together, these signals may well have conveyed rather mixed messages as to the merits of psychology. They easily painted a picture of a discipline divided, with some definite anti-scientific elements or claims to be science but failing to meet scientific standards,²⁶ and with a certain “pop” salesmanship on the fringes. It would thus be easy to dismiss the discipline as essentially of questionable merit and likely to be foreign, unconventional and critical. As a prospect for a university degree, it must have seemed a distinctly undesirable option, even though discerning policymakers and professionals on the ground were well aware of the ways in which psychologists were actually contributing to society when opportunities allowed.

Nonetheless, there had in fact been a prior attempt at starting a psychology programme (with sociology) in what was then Nanyang University. In 1969, a general psychology course was offered to first-year students, and in 1970, social psychology and social statistics were added for second-year students. A further expansion was intended in 1976, since the initial courses had proved very popular. However, in 1980, Nanyang University was merged with the University of Singapore to form NUS, and the planned psychology degree was abandoned. Books on psychology at Nanyang University were transferred to the NUS library, where they still reside with their original Nanyang University library stamps. In fact, this attempt may have done more harm than good, since the principal person involved—one Leonard Cohen—became a public critic and would later be dismissed.²⁷ This episode must surely have reinforced resistance to the idea of starting a psychology programme in NUS.

The Confluence of Factors

The various factors and strands of discussion together show that the prospects for a psychology programme in the early 1980s were dim. Insofar as psychology was taken seriously, it was pretty much seen as an applied and primarily clinical discipline. On the clinical front, however, practitioners enjoyed little or no clinical independence, and were regarded as technicians or ancillaries rather than clinicians in their own right. The applications of

²⁶ An example here is the work of Frank Cioffi, who severely criticised Freudian theory for its pseudoscientific character (Cioffi 1998). Cioffi was for some years a staff member in the Department of Philosophy at NUS. Freudian psychoanalysis is not synonymous with psychology, but this distinction is not one—in the present author’s experience—that was widely appreciated at the time in question.

²⁷ More details of the Cohen affair can be found in Chapter 3.

psychology outside of clinical settings seemed appreciated only in MINDEF and the PSC, and to some extent in education as well. To be sure, Lee Kuan Yew, the Prime Minister of the day, was taking an increasing interest in the potential of psychology for personnel selection and particularly in the evaluation of top echelon candidates for ministerial office. However, his interest and these specific applications of psychology were not inconsistent with the pragmatic view that national manpower needs could be met by the recruitment of psychologists trained overseas. Further compacting an already hard ground were the association of psychology with undesirable elements and the prevalence of “pop” psychology that implied an alternative way to fill a need without recourse to a psychology programme in the university.

All in all, it was indeed hard ground for psychology in general and a psychology programme in particular.

Chapter 2 | First Shoots

Given the hard ground, how did the NUS psychology programme come about? Essentially, the answer is that a small but growing number of influential people had become aware of the need for it. In 1967, the PSC initiated a policy of increasing the numbers of psychologists through the provision of PSC scholarships, and such an expansion was encouraged by Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore from 1959 to 1990. Singapore faced existential uncertainty when it became independent in 1965, and a great many contemporary observers doubted its viability as a city state. The Prime Minister, however, was strongly of the view that a small number of outstanding people were the key to survival. He once famously remarked that “If all the 300 [top civil servants and political elite] were to crash in one jumbo jet, then Singapore will disintegrate”.¹ Moreover, he had long been convinced of the importance of intelligence and integrity in leadership. Long Foo Yee, the pioneering clinical psychologist in the Singapore setting, recalls being asked to carry out assessments on a number of potential political high-fliers, and the Prime Minister then compared these evaluations with independent assessments carried out in traditional ways. The correspondence was very close, and this convinced the Prime Minister that systematic psychological

¹ Lee Kuan Yew, “Politics, Economics, Security and Your Future”, Address at the Seminar on Communism and Democracy, 28 April 1971, p. 7, <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19710428.pdf> [accessed 22 Feb. 2021].

evaluation had much to offer. This also marked the start of psychological assessment in the PSC for candidate scholars.²

In his memoirs published in 2000, the Prime Minister recalled another aspect of the later impetus he gave to psychology. He wrote:

Professor H.J. Eysenck, a psychologist from London University who visited Singapore in 1987, reinforced my view that testing for IQ and personality and character traits was useful. He cited an American Oil MNC that employed 40 psychologists for the recruitment and promotion of 40,000 employees. We did not have enough trained psychologists to assess the candidates for important appointments. After a discussion with him, I got the NUS to train more behavioural psychologists to help in selecting people with the right attributes for various jobs.³

While undoubtedly helpful, the Prime Minister's intervention came after the psychology programme had already been set up. Nonetheless, according to Long, he had over previous years asked several times why there was no psychology department in Singapore. Long, Head of Psychology at Woodbridge Hospital at that time, was the person who introduced Eysenck to the Prime Minister in 1987. As part of his clinical training, Long had been a student of Eysenck's at the London Maudsley Hospital and the Institute of Psychiatry in the UK, and had kept in touch with his former mentor. Knowing that Eysenck planned to come through Singapore, Long sent Eysenck's extensive *Who's Who* listing to the Prime Minister's Office. Eysenck was duly invited to meet the Prime Minister, who entertained him to a barbecue dinner and had a discussion on psychology and the need for psychologists in Singapore.⁴

Eysenck also met with the Dean and Vice-Chancellor, and gave a public lecture on psychology in NUS, suitably entitled "Psychology in

² Long, in conversation with the present author, June 2016. Long stressed that Lee wanted to judge not just the ability, but also the character and integrity of people of prospective ministerial calibre, as he considered these things critical. He would thus ask for observations noted in the course of testing—or anything unusual—that might reveal something of such qualities.

³ Lee (2000: 740).

⁴ The present author vividly recalls the amazement with which Long told him about this invitation at the time. Not that there was anything surprising in the Prime Minister wishing to meet Eysenck, or that the dinner was served at table, but having worked for the Prime Minister, Long had a well-founded apprehension of his high expectations of his staff. Thus, something as potentially informal as a "barbecue dinner" sat at odds with this demanding image. Long still has the dinner invitation.

Hans Eysenck with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew at the Istana in 1987. Photo courtesy of Long Foo Yee.



Mrs Lee (1), Tony Tan (later President Tony Tan, 2), Hans Eysenck (3), Lee Kuan Yew (4), Goh Chok Tong (later Prime Minister in succession to Lee, 5)

a Technological Society”. The lecture was little reported in the English-medium newspapers, perhaps because Eysenck refused to provide a copy of his lecture to the reporters, telling them they were expected to listen and make their own notes.⁵ The Chinese-medium reporters, however, did report on this event, and Eysenck’s remarks were duly publicised in their newspapers.

Besides the PSC policy, there were other signs that policymakers were not oblivious to the potential and utility of psychology. In 1978, A.H. Brayfield, a visiting psychologist from Claremont Graduate School in California, USA, suggested that understanding psychology was actually important for economic productivity, and that it was therefore an important subject for developing economies. In response to his comments, *The Straits Times* reported emphatic calls “from teachers, social workers, a university lecturer, general practitioners and psychologists” to set up departments of psychological medicine and of psychology.⁶ Two years later, Tony Tan, Senior Minister of State for Education who later became President of the Republic of Singapore, suggested that MOE might employ educational psychologists to help pupils with emotional or psychological problems. His remarks prompted a vigorous response from Long, speaking in his capacity as President of the Singapore Psychological Society, which by then had 44 members, calling for the establishment of a psychology department.⁷ It would, however, take several more years before the psychology programme at NUS would start, with its launch announced in *The Straits Times* on 18 March 1986.

Germination

The NUS psychology programme commenced in July 1986 in the Department of Social Work. It was intended to complement the need that the PSC had identified, and provide a supply of local graduates. It was slowly becoming obvious, even before the Eysenck visit, that greater numbers of graduates were needed, and that relying only on the return of public or private scholars was not a substitute for a supply of local graduates. Moreover, it was increasingly understood that general degree holders were not a sufficient basis for such a

⁵ At the lecture, he appeared to speak extempore, and so may not have had anything to give them anyway.

⁶ “Call to set up psychology department at university”, *The Straits Times*, 15 July 1978, p. 10.

⁷ “Time is ripe to train more psychologists”, *The Straits Times*, 7 February 1980, p. 17.

Hans Eysenck with NUS Vice-Chancellor Lim Pin in 1987. Photo courtesy of Long Foo Yee.



John Elliott (1), Godfrey Harrison (2), Long Foo Yee (3), Lim Pin (4), Hans Eysenck (5), S. Vasoo (6)

supply, insofar as graduates might seek to assume work as psychologists in the public or private sector. Rather, an honours qualification was needed.

It was not, however, considered necessary at this stage to start postgraduate professional training in psychology. It would have been challenging to do so when the undergraduate programme was itself just starting, but in any case, the prevailing model for the recruitment of professional psychologists into public service posts was still one in which the to-be psychologist started professional life as a trainee rather than being already professionally qualified. This apprenticeship model did not start to disappear until a decade or so after the psychology programme started. It persists today in modified form in some organisations, but with changes such that trainees typically serve a period in post under supervision and then are sent for professional qualifications rather than simply being internally confirmed.

The decision to start the psychology programme in the Department of Social Work was an unconventional if not curious one. It was not, however, an uninformed decision. For one, there were already psychologists in the Department teaching the subject to social work students. At a deeper level, however, there was a strategic rationale: according to Edwin Thumboo, Dean of FASS at that time,⁸ the twinning of psychology with social work would help the development of the social work programme.⁹ The Dean was a far-sighted and influential advocate, who well realised that a viable psychology programme had to include the honours qualification, which the social work programme did not have at that time. In 1966, when the Department of Social Work and Social Administration was established, social work had been limited by Toh Chin Chye, Vice-Chancellor of the University, to offering a general degree, much to the annoyance and frustration of the social work staff and Jean Robertson, their Head of Department.¹⁰ Dean Thumboo must have foreseen that putting psychology with social work would make the case for an honours degree in social work irresistible, and so it proved. The honours degree in social work was approved by the University for the 1985 intake, and the first cohort of social work honours students graduated in 1989, one year before the first cohort of psychology honours students.

⁸ Thumboo, now Emeritus Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, was Dean from 1980 to 1991. He is pre-eminent among Singapore poets.

⁹ In conversation, September 2015, and also many years earlier, when the present author was newly recruited.

¹⁰ Wee (2012).

Edwin Thumboo in 2016 at Ann Wee's 90th birthday celebration. Photo courtesy of Sim Tick Ngee.



When the psychology programme started, Ann Wee was Head of the Department of Social Work but was due to retire that same year.¹¹ Wee—who at her passing was described by Ong Ye Kung, Minister of Education, as the “founding mother of social work”—had worked to thoroughly professionalise the discipline of social work and had been responsible for the development of the department for more than three decades. Replacing Wee as Head of Department in 1987 was S. Vasoo,¹² a psychiatric nurse and medical social worker by profession, and a Member of Parliament (MP) from the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) and Chairman of the Ang Mo Kio Town Council at that time. A safe pair of hands, it might be supposed, to steer the new double-subject department—now known as the Department of Social Work and Psychology.

¹¹ Wee headed the Department of Social Work from 1967 until her retirement in 1986. She remained active after retirement, retaining a post as Associate Professorial Fellow in the Department. She passed away on 11 December 2019 at the age of 93.

¹² Vasoo remains with the Department of Social Work, now as Emeritus Professor.

At its start, Godfrey Harrison was the sole member of staff teaching in the programme. With Colleen Ward, a psychologist already teaching in the Department of Social Work, Harrison had been instrumental in the preparatory work to set up the programme. He was also a psychologist, although teaching psycholinguistics in the Department of English Language and Literature. Ward, however, left NUS before the programme started.¹³ A second prospective staff member, John Elliott (the present author), had earlier been interviewed in Sheffield in the UK by Head Wee and Dean Thumboo. Harrison and Elliott actually already knew each other—they had both done their PhDs in the Department of Psychology at the University of Sheffield in the 1960s, and had a shared interest in old cars and post-colonial politics. Since Elliott had to serve the 6-month notice required by the University of Sheffield, he was unable to assume post in time for the start of the academic year, arriving only in September 1986. He was appointed as a Senior Teaching Fellow, since Dean Thumboo had suggested that such an appointment would not commit him to remaining in the programme until he was sure he wanted to leave Sheffield. Elliott, on the other hand, had long intended to join any such programme and converted to Senior Lecturer at the earliest opportunity.¹⁴

There were 72 students in the first cohort of the programme, of which 56 went on to take psychology as a major subject for their degree, and 11 did the honours programme in their fourth and final year. In the early years, there was an atmosphere of considerable uncertainty as to what exact future employment would be available to psychology graduates, especially for those with “only” a general degree. At that time, social work graduates went

¹³ Ward had originally been expected to transfer to the psychology programme and teach in it, but she decided to leave NUS for New Zealand at the end of the 1985/1986 academic year. She returned to NUS and the programme in 1993, and stayed until 2000 whereupon she again returned to New Zealand. She is now Professor at Victoria University of Wellington.

¹⁴ At that time, the UK system of academic ranks was used in Singapore. The Head of Department was *ipso facto* designated “Professor”, and this title was consequently a good guide as to who the Head was. Other professors, if any, would be personal chairs or emeritus professors, both being exceptional cases. Below the Head came Senior Lecturers, Lecturers and Junior Lecturers. Particularly outstanding researchers might alternatively be appointed to the prestigious post of Reader. None of these worthies, however, was addressed as “Professor”, until the system in NUS changed to the American system with the ranks of Professors, Associate Professors and Assistant Professors. This meant everyone was subsequently addressed as “Professor”, a rather unfamiliar and flattering change to the ears of those schooled in the British system.

into practitioner roles even with “just” a general degree, although this was soon to change. This lack of clear employment prospects, compounded by psychology’s twinning with the social work programme, may have led some actual or potential students to think that their careers would inevitably be in the social services sector, which may have deterred some from applying or from continuing in the programme once admitted.¹⁵ This line of thinking also yielded some pressure for useful practitioners and there was thus some practitioner competence expected, even by some staff within the Department. As a result, it became necessary to emphasise that even with honours, the psychology degree was to be considered not a professional qualification but an academic one, aimed at ensuring international standards of academic breadth and depth. There were optional courses—or modules as they are now called—with applied content, but the degree itself was not to be equated with a practitioner qualification.

John Elliott in 2016 with Ann Wee, the Head of Department who recruited him, at Wee’s 90th birthday celebration. Photo courtesy of Department of Social Work, National University of Singapore.



¹⁵ According to Mariam Aljunied, from the first cohort of students and now Principal Educational Psychologist at the Special Educational Needs Division, Psychological Services Branch, MOE. Personal communication, 28 January 2017.

Despite this academic foundation being implemented from the start of the programme, and informing its curriculum design by Harrison and others, the perception of psychology as a practitioner discipline was never far from consciousness. One reason for this was the persistence of openings for supervised practice under the apprenticeship model. On the other hand, any attempt to push for practitioner training met with the difficulty of ensuring the necessary practicums due to a lack of qualified supervisors. This was essentially a bootstrap problem: without qualified practitioners to supervise, it was impossible to start any training programme, but increasing the resource pool of qualified practitioners could not happen without a training programme. Not surprisingly, it would take many more years before a credible professional programme was established. A few attempts were made, including an applied master's degree programme offered from 1999 to 2007. Eventually, the bootstrap problem would be solved, in part by initiating a clinical psychology master's programme jointly with the University of Melbourne, which also birthed a local equivalent programme. The joint programme has since been discontinued, while the local programme has moved from strength to strength, seeing huge demand for its limited annual intake, and producing an average of 15 clinical psychologists every year.¹⁶

It should thus be clear that the start of the NUS psychology programme in 1986 was also the start of the challenge, albeit a most welcome one, of making a success of psychology in Singapore. Germination had now occurred, but the programme was still very much located within a rationale motivated by the pragmatic concerns of Singapore's rapidly industrialised *entrepôt* economy and its associated social issues. Simply put, the development of the programme was to unfold within the larger context of national development, and was thus subject to expectations related to national needs and priorities. In this regard, the University was primarily a teaching institution—a means to prepare useful manpower—and much less a research-intensive

¹⁶ Another successful applied degree that was started during this period was the master's programme in Speech and Language Pathology. This programme came under the auspices of the Division of Graduate Medical Studies (DGMS) in the medical school, but was instigated by Susan Rickard Liow, a staff member of the psychology programme. Rickard Liow, a clinical psychologist, was recruited very early in the programme, who turned to research in psycholinguistics when it became clear that early hopes for a clinical psychology programme were not about to materialise. She moved over to the Department of Otolaryngology in 2007 to assume post as Programme Director for the programme, and has been the inspiration for a generation of speech therapists. She remains in post.

institution as which it sees itself now. On the other hand, while it was increasingly recognised that psychologists were needed, the country had been in the habit of deploying honours graduates to on-the-job training before confirming them as psychologists, without any explicit provision or need for professional qualifications. On its own, as a new programme, it faced immediate recruitment needs, while its twinning with the social work programme raised issues of resource sharing and developmental focus.

Sprouts

Curriculum

When the first cohort of psychology students entered NUS in July 1986, they did so very much in the spirit of a pioneer—or “guinea pig”—cohort. No-one knew what lay in store, and there was only one staff member teaching the programme. Harrison was a very tall man, towering over his students and colleagues, and thus easily standing out in a crowd. He did not favour set textbooks, instead relying heavily on circulated notes for much of his teaching.¹⁷ He was also a strong advocate of non-parametric statistics for psychology, although in this case, a textbook was stipulated for his teaching.¹⁸

Harrison was devoted to the programme that he had helped to start, and was endlessly willing to take time and trouble to iron out its teething problems.¹⁹ For the first intake, he devised an idiosyncratic system of assessment to screen applicants for the new programme; right from the start,

¹⁷ This was before the days of easy photocopying, and long before the Internet became ubiquitous. The department photocopier was a cumbersome device: the entire upper part of the machine slid over the glass, obliging single-sheet manual feed. Duplicated notes, on the other hand, were prepared by using a typewriter to type onto a wax stencil, which was then transferred to an inked drum capable of rapidly running off multiple sheets. Older readers will recall such Gestetner machines well. It was therefore no small matter for a lecturer to envisage preparing a series of duplicated notes to cover an entire course. It is also easy to forget—in these days of word-processing software with instant correction—how much care had to be taken to stick to essentials and to get the notes correct. Even a typo error on the stencil required careful correction with liquid red wax, followed by retyping at exactly the same spot on the stencil.

¹⁸ Leach (1979). Leach, having spent time at the University of Sheffield’s Department of Psychology, was known to Harrison.

¹⁹ Harrison left the Department and University in 1989. Now retired and living in Macau, he has vivid memories of his time with the programme, and of the energy and enthusiasm with which Dean Thumboo pursued the establishment of the programme.

applicants far outnumbered the available places.²⁰ This screening included an intelligence test as well as ad hoc procedures Harrison devised. These were time-consuming to evaluate, and were replaced the following year by the Raven's Standard Progressive Matrices. Such admission tests for students intending to take psychology continued until the 2000/2001 academic year, whereupon such tests were generally done away with by the University as students moved towards declaring their major subject only after their first year of study.²¹

John Elliott in 1987 with Godfrey Harrison (left). The duo were the two teaching staff in the first year of the psychology programme. Photo courtesy of Department of Social Work, National University of Singapore.



²⁰ "... although there was very little prior information about the psychology programme (most of us knew about it AFTER we had enrolled in FASS) ... more than 500 undergrads sat for [the selection test] and wanted to be considered for the course. This showed that even though it was much less well-established or known among 'A' level holders, the interest (or curiosity?) in psychology was high, even at that time, among the students". Mariam Aljunied, Personal communication, 28 January 2017.

²¹ Although mostly done away with, such tests still apply today for admission into some specialties in NUS, such as dentistry.

Underpinning the programme was the essential requirement that students were able to progress to postgraduate studies overseas, but this academic internationalism had to be balanced against local relevance, such that the graduates would be useful on a more immediate basis. A committee was thus set up, chaired by the Dean, and tasked with drawing up a blueprint for the programme. The members of the committee included staff from management, psychiatry and social work, and they received inputs from a number of interested individuals as well as from the PSC. The latter, unsurprisingly, had a somewhat cautious attitude, even though they were well aware that fresh graduates could not enter the job market as professionals. The committee sat frequently throughout 1985, and much of its work consisted of reviewing proposals for the curriculum, and for the laboratory and other requirements the new programme would need. These requirements included an observation facility, and later, a computer laboratory. Harrison produced a position paper, he and Ward prepared a curriculum, and the committee submitted its proposals to the Vice-Chancellor and Senate in December that year.

Among the inputs from individuals, three were requested from individual psychologists.²² In their own ways, all three stressed the need to include both breadth and specific applied foci in the curriculum. This resulted in the inclusion of courses on abnormal and industrial/organisational psychology. At the same time, the need for the curriculum to reflect international standards and coverage was a repeated theme, and the importance of a good grounding in empirical skills was recognised. This led to the requirement of a substantial individual research project, then known as the Academic Exercise and now called the Honours Thesis, in the honours year and a course on psychometrics. Also included were courses on group dynamics in both the third and fourth years, an atypical emphasis but one seen as relevant for graduates likely to work in some capacity in the human services or human resources sector.

Soon after the programme was launched, and with more staff recruited, the need for a revision of the curriculum became apparent. A committee chaired

²² The three were John Beck, a Sheffield-trained applied psychologist and Senior Lecturer in the School of Management; Malcolm Kilcross, an applied psychologist in the UK Civil Service; and the present author.

by Ramadhar Singh²³ was set up to look into this, paying close attention to what was happening in other universities. From that point onwards, the curriculum became more noticeably like that of any other major university, with optional courses coming to the fore. While the number of such courses fell far short of the range offered in US universities, the availability of greater choice was occurring at a time when British Commonwealth traditions in higher education were still strong in Singapore and there was often a considerable limit on optional courses in UK universities.²⁴

In the initial years of the programme, students were to be admitted to specific departments or programmes, on top of being admitted to FASS. Thus, the criteria for admission comprised a combination of 'A' Level examination results and department admission tests. Psychologists have long been aware that interviews, besides being time-consuming, have a mixed track record as selection devices, usually with rather low levels of validity and reliability.²⁵ They therefore tend to prefer objective tests of one sort or another. It was thus neither surprising, nor controversial, that the programme used the Raven's Matrices as a selection instrument in its initial years. Predictive validity was never established to any degree of certainty, but the instrument could at least serve as an objective means of making difficult decisions on students at the boundary between acceptance and rejection, given that not all applicants could be admitted.

Once admitted, students in the first year would take two introductory courses: an introduction to psychology course and a course on research methods and statistics. At that time, courses in psychology and elsewhere in FASS extended over the entire academic year (i.e. over two semesters), at the end of which there was a final unseen examination which lasted three hours. While this arrangement was the norm, there were some "half-subject" second- and third-year courses in psychology that spanned only a

²³ Singh was an early recruit for the programme, joining in 1988 and remaining until 2010. He already had a distinguished academic record, specialising in social and industrial/organisational psychology. Trained at Purdue, he was appointed as an associate professor and became the first full professor in the Department in 1997. He is now Distinguished University Professor at Ahmedabad University in India.

²⁴ The University of Sheffield in 1986, for example, offered its three-year single-subject direct honours course in psychology with no choice whatsoever. The University's 1985 *Social Sciences: Prospectus for Entry in October 1986* baldly stated that "All students take a common course organised around four interrelated lecture courses, plus a general methods course and various practical and statistical methods classes".

²⁵ See, for example, Goho and Blackman (2006) and Shahani, Dipboye and Gehrlein (1991).

single semester. This was largely driven by the nature of psychology (with its numerous branches) and also by the need to enable sufficient coverage to conform to international standards.

Pedagogy

The present system of lectures supplemented by tutorials was already in place when the programme started. An attractive feature then, especially from a pedagogical perspective, was that tutorials were small in size, comprising seven students or so in a tutorial group. Tutorials were held weekly, lasted an hour, and the small size meant they could be held in the staff member's office.²⁶ In later years, tutorial size quickly grew as the number of students admitted to the programme increased faster than the increase in staff strength. Thus, the early cohorts of the programme enjoyed a great degree of individual attention during tutorials; this may have been unnerving for some of them, but was probably a benefit in the longer term.

As for lectures, to be transported three decades or so back would be to enter a rather different world. Today, Microsoft PowerPoint slides are ubiquitous, while online resources and aids for engagement in the lecture theatre are not only not uncommon but encouraged. Today's students are apt to expect copies of PowerPoint slides before the lecture, and staff constantly grapple with whether to webcast their lectures, bearing in mind the tendency for students to stay away if they do. Back in 1986, however, blackboards were still in use, and whiteboards were still a novelty.

²⁶ Staff offices then (in the FASS Block AS1, which was the first locale for the psychology programme) were not dissimilar to the current offices—after all, an office is just an office. However, the arrangement for staff telephones was unique—there was one phone for every two rooms, placed on a rotating panel that was set on a small opening outlet carved out of the shared partition wall between the two rooms. When the phone rang, it was thus unknown who the call was for until it was answered. There was a high degree of auditory transparency inherent in such a set-up, and its demise was not regretted. When the present author joined the programme, he was assigned an office room next to—and sharing a phone with—the late Ong Chit Chung, who was then a lecturer in the Department of History (which shared a corridor with the Department of Social Work). Ong received surprisingly frequent calls, the reason for which became apparent in 1988 when he was elected as Member of Parliament for the Bukit Batok single-member constituency.

John Elliott in 1989 with a tutorial group of seven students from the second intake of psychology majors. The gender imbalance in this photo still holds today, although it is now less stark. Photo courtesy of Winston Goh (the lone male student in the photo).



A blackboard in a lecture theatre being prepared for use for a 1988 meeting of the Society of Social Work and Psychology Students. Photo courtesy of Winston Goh.



The newest technical aid then was the overhead projector (OHP) which used transparent plastic sheets (called transparencies) and always carried a spare bulb in its casing in the event that the bulb blew while in use. Writings on transparencies were sometimes prepared in advance—sometimes not—and sometimes overwritten on the spot with specially-designed OHP pens. Ambitious, well-organised lecturers might even inscribe an entire set of transparencies onto the OHP roller mechanism and wind them forward as they lectured, somewhat in the fashion of a medieval scroll.

Perhaps even more striking to today's students would be the fact that mobile phones had barely been invented and for those privileged enough to have one, they were cumbersome gadgets with no cameras or recording facilities. In any case, it was forbidden at that time for students to record lectures on tape recorders unless they had the express permission of the Head of Department and the lecturer concerned.

The prohibition of the use of tape-recorders in classes. Circular dated 22 July 1987 from the NUS Registrar's Office.

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE 888/87

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 Singapore 0511

Ref: 44

TAPE RECORDER

22 July 1987

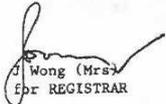
du

Heads of Departments
 National University of Singapore

USE OF TAPE-RECORDER IN CLASSES

Since 1980, it has been the University's policy that students should not be allowed to use tape-recorders at lectures, tutorials, seminars or other classes unless otherwise agreed to by the Head of the Department concerned. In the Faculties of Arts & Social Sciences and Law, written permission must be obtained from the lecturer concerned before a tape-recorder may be used.

Heads of Departments are asked to draw this to the attention of their staff and students.



Wong (Mrs.)
 for REGISTRAR

In those days, the University would from time to time film a lecturer in action for the purpose of self-improvement. The resulting video cassette was given to the staff member and it was stressed that this was not for evaluation purposes nor viewed by the Head or anyone else. It would be much later that a proper systematic evaluation of staff teaching by peers—now known as a teaching peer review—was started as part of the reforms introduced by Shih Choon Fong, who took office as NUS President in 2000.²⁷ These reforms also shifted the University in the direction of a greater research and entrepreneurial emphasis, and led to the structure of the University mostly seen today.

During the early years of the programme, a course might entail assignments such as term papers, but none of these carried any weight towards the final grade of the students. The University was opposed to giving students credit for project work, essay assignments or any other form of continuous assessment (CA), on grounds that it was impossible to prevent plagiarism.²⁸ Unsurprisingly, this led some students to show some resistance to project work, although some staff exercised creativity to recognise such work.²⁹ Even invigilated class tests did not count towards the final grade and were only for the purpose of providing feedback on progress. The general degree was solely determined by examination results, accumulated over three years. These results in turn determined a student's eligibility for enrolment in the honours year. This state of affairs persisted

²⁷ The NUS President was formerly styled the Vice-Chancellor, following the British Commonwealth model for universities. Vice-Chancellor Lim Pin preceded Shih and was the last Vice-Chancellor to be so titled. The Vice-Chancellor, subsequently the NUS President, is the executive head of the University. The University's formal head, the Chancellor, is a ceremonial position held by the President of the Republic of Singapore.

²⁸ Today, continuous assessment is not only the norm but is sometimes adopted on a 100% basis (meaning there is no final examination). Alongside the increased use of such assessment, there has been increased education about plagiarism. Nonetheless, plagiarism still rears its ugly head every now and then, often exacerbated by a tendency for students to expect to find the best answer from other sources and then to reproduce that as word-perfect as possible. The present author has encountered several egregious cases, including one where a student plagiarised an honours thesis that the author (unbeknownst to the student) had examined and therefore recognised.

²⁹ When the present author taught the developmental psychology course for the first time in 1989, he insisted that all 14 students did an empirical mini-project as a learning experience. He could not give them credit for it, but saw to it that a methods question was included in the final examination which allowed them to make use of the project to help answer it.

until the 1992/1993 academic year, when some credit was allowed for CA. Even then, it took nine more years before 100% CA modules (i.e. without a final examination) were allowed.³⁰

Standards

At the time that the programme was established, it was usual to have Faculty-level committees charged with oversight of the various disciplines in FASS. More than one department or programme could be put under a single committee and for some years, Sociology, Social Work and Psychology shared an oversight committee. These committees were chaired by the Dean and meetings were attended by the respective Heads of Department, sometimes with other senior staff, and occasionally by outside experts. These committees often raised questions as to the direction or emphasis of departments and programmes, and thus provided a layer for the keeping of standards.

Another means of monitoring academic standards was the external examiner system—a further legacy of the UK system of university governance. This entailed the appointment of a single external examiner, who was sent all final examination scripts and the Academic Exercises, and who would give a report based on his reading of these materials. Every other year, the external examiner would visit Singapore and conduct his examining over a week or so. External examiners were appointed for a term of two years—for the programme, the first external examiner was Derek Blackman of Cardiff University who served two terms, and who was followed by Peter Bryant of the University of Oxford who also served two terms. The system worked well enough in those days when there was only one examination on which everything depended, and when the number of students was not so great as to overwhelm the ability of a single examiner to view all scripts to judge standards. In this connection, it is also noted that for the first eight years of the programme, examination scripts (and not just the Academic Exercises) were double-marked, in addition to any external examiner inputs. Eventually, though, the system of double-marking was dropped in 1995, except for the Academic Exercises, mainly due to the burden of marking as

³⁰ Minutes of the Department Staff Meeting on 25 Oct 2001 record that the NUS Senate first approved 100% continuous assessment for PL3121, the Independent Research Project module for the psychology programme.

student numbers increased, but also to give staff more autonomy over the management of courses.

It is not to be supposed that the external examiner was expected to read every script or Academic Exercise in detail. He could be asked to moderate where internal examiners disagreed or to look at papers where the marks distribution was out of the ordinary, and he could recommend changes where he felt these were called for. However, the aim of having an external examiner in the first place was to ensure standards were up to scratch, rather than to provide additional or definitive marks. Therefore, it was his reports on the progress of the programme, and on the standards attained or sustained, that formed the backbone of the external examiner's contributions. Initially, department staff were inclined to regard the external examiners as if they could, in fact, mark everything, and they were seen as figures of great authority. This was perhaps not surprising given that the psychology programme was just at its beginnings.³¹ Happily, the external examiners' reports were generally favourable, and in particular they mentioned the high standard of the Academic Exercises on more than one occasion.³² This was important because it was very necessary for students doing the honours year to show that they could competently undertake a substantial piece of empirical work.

During the period when external examiners were employed, there was also a good deal of uniformity exercised in the setting of examination papers. These papers were almost invariably three-hour papers requiring essay answers and were always unseen. There was also a correspondingly longer period allowed for marking. The shift to shorter two-hour examinations, with shorter expected answers and often complemented

³¹ External Examiner Blackman recalls a certain "undue readiness to take my judgements of individual scripts (including projects) rather than those of internal examiners ... I felt that some colleagues were initially quite disturbed by my reluctance to give specific marks and make specific comments (I can see their pens poised to change their marks in the meeting even now)". Personal communication, 11 October 2016. Blackman can probably be credited with bringing departmental expectations of the external examiner's role into something more in keeping with usual practice in UK universities.

³² One external examiner told the present author that he kept a few of the Academic Exercises in his office to show to his own supervisees the standard they ought to be willing to contemplate—"to terrify them" as he put it—though he also considered that the works were sometimes overly long and over-strong on statistical analysis at the expense of conceptual thinking. The Exercises were indeed formidable and not inexpensive, quite often exceeding 10,000 words, and with hard black bindings adorned with gold lettering. Six copies had to be submitted, in the days before "soft copy" submissions.

with multiple-choice questions, was a later development. So was the tendency to keep papers confidential so as to allow the re-use of questions, especially those of the multiple-choice nature. Until the changes introduced by NUS President Shih, examination papers represented a public record of the knowledge and expertise students were expected to have attained. Today, assessment is far more individualised, varied and module-specific, especially when the final examination is less dominant in the determination of students' final grades. By extension, staff have far greater latitude to set assessments (including the final examination) in the style they deem best. The suitability of such assessments has also become a matter for the teaching peer review, rather than something devolved to an external examiner. Indeed, there is no more external examiner system, with the role of evaluating department progress and standards now transferred to a University-appointed Visiting Committee. The Visiting Committee will become prominent in Chapter 4, when the separation of the social work and psychology programmes is discussed.

In those years as well, the University did not specify an expected curve or distribution of marks to be used to moderate the grades awarded. However, there was a limit to the number of students who could proceed to the honours year, and it was further expected that the distribution of the class of honours³³ for graduation would not be unreasonable. The fledging programme soon posed a challenge to this, most likely a reflection of the calibre of the students in it. Among its second cohort of 10 honours students, eight were graded as deserving of a Second Class (Upper Division) degree. The grades were approved by the external examiner but nonetheless some representation was needed to convince the Faculty-level Board of Examiners that such a proportion was justified. Appeals referencing the small size of the cohort did not convince. A more successful argument was that these students had already been selected from the upper tier of psychology majors and that the uneven distribution—in favour of the second upper—appropriately recognised the students' capabilities without prejudicing the standards of the degree.

³³ At that time and for many years to come, there were four classes of honours—first-class, second-class upper division, second-class lower division, and third-class. First-class was a rarity for a long time, although David Chan from the first cohort attained it. Mostly, honours students were jostling between the two divisions of the second class of honours—more typically called second upper and second lower.

Laboratories

An essential part of any psychology programme is the acquisition of methodological skills. From the start, Harrison had envisioned setting up a computer laboratory, and indeed saw it come to pass. In his inimitable style more than three decades later, Harrison recounts the origins of this laboratory:

In the psychology programme's second year I told my head of department that its students should have a computer room; in 1987 this suggestion wasn't earth shaking but much more nearly so than remarking, say, "More research is needed on this topic". Conversations must have taken place and the Dean asked me about my proposal. It interested him. There was as near a pause as his conversations [ever] had and then looking straight at me he asked whether I was confident such a room would be much used. I said I was. He then asked if I was sure of my confidence, or some such second order enquiry. Again, I said I was. He ended that conversation by promising that if such a room came to be he'd make sure to see how well used it was.

The room did come to be. I don't know how much diplomacy and paperwork getting it took. I know it was a well situated room easily accommodating 20 ... PCs, standing on rows of tables, each machine before a resplendent red office chair (we found a company with two dozen gas suspension rotating chairs too many) and adjacent to cupboards enough for ancillary equipment. Some programs the PCs ran were for online experiments, not as rigorous as postgraduates would set up but good enough to let students experience the effects the experiments had been found to demonstrate and to get data from themselves or acquaintances.

Of course, word processing was one common use of the Psych. Computer Room's machines and running implementations of common statistical techniques another. There were even demonstrations of the emergence of statistical distributions that the students used when making statistical inferences; Tom Lee wrote a beauty for the binomial distribution. Students running it could see how the several binary outcome events' distributions presented on monitors within sight became more and more alike as the number of events grew, however different those distributions had been early on when summarizing few events. Even without any Internet to attract students, the room came to be continuously open in term time [and] not [only] close to exams. That went on for maybe a year, during which the Engineering

Faculty, close by, had opened a Computer Room for its students. That saved them the journey to ours!³⁴

Chua Fook Kee, the first psychologist to head the Department of Social Work and Psychology, teaching a class in the computer laboratory at Block AS6. Undated photo courtesy of Winston Goh.



The computer laboratory was in an adjacent block (Block AS6) and was a new venture for FASS, one soon (as Harrison notes above) to be emulated elsewhere in the University. The computers were set on open movable tables, and all power cables fell from sockets arranged in rows about 2 metres above the tables, somewhat below the ceiling. This unorthodox arrangement avoided the problem of having to arrange permanent outlets on fixed tables, or of tripping over wires laid on the floor even if stuck there with masking tape. Along with many remarks expressing admiration for this useful new facility, some adverse comments were received, to the effect that the hanging wires looked messy. Nonetheless, when the Department moved in 1988 from Block AS1 to Block AS6, the hanging wires and movable tables were repeated even with the expanded space of a new and larger computer room. It was only much later—when computer laboratories became standard fixtures throughout FASS—that this set-up was abandoned in favour of customised computer stations.

³⁴ Harrison, Personal communication, 13 April 2016.

Another resource innovation was the set-up of an observation laboratory. This laboratory had four cameras strategically placed for best capture of what was going on in the room and controlled from a control-cum-observation space behind a one-way mirror. The inputs from these cameras could be usefully combined and edited, and this facility was thus useful for work where a filmed record was helpful, such as observations with infants or children. It was later used extensively by Vera Bernard-Opitz³⁵ for her work on autism, but was also useful for teaching small classes wherein staff could film themselves and the simultaneous reactions of the students. This latter capability could provide for a salutary and valuable experience.

Library Resources

Of all the needs faced at the start of the programme, the provision of good library resources was one of the most fundamental. In the longer run, laboratories and practical facilities for observation and experimentation would be critical especially for research, but from the outset, the development of library resources was absolutely essential. As a result of all the years during which psychology was not a priority, its library holdings had somewhat been neglected and many journal subscriptions allowed to lapse.³⁶ When Elliott joined NUS in 1986, Harrison asked him to manage the acquisition of books and journals for the programme. The Dean had secured a substantial budget for books and journals,³⁷ but spending it promised to be a tedious business.

³⁵ Bernard-Opitz was a German clinical behavioural psychologist with a single-minded commitment to the cause of children with autistic spectrum disorders. She was a staff member from 1988 to 2001, and was the coordinator of the Structured Teaching for Exceptional Pupils (STEP) programme in Singapore. She also set up a Behaviour Intervention Centre for Children (BICC) within the programme.

³⁶ Thankfully, the subscription to *Psychological Abstracts*—an essential record, in the pre-digital age, of the abstracts and sources of all papers in psychology published worldwide in a given year—had been retained. There were unexpected riches in the library too: for instance, it had *British Journal of Psychology* issues all the way back to 1953. Perhaps more surprisingly, there was a run of the *Annual Register*—an annual review of politics and events, published in London—from 1758 to 1911, and some later volumes as well.

³⁷ Soon after arriving, the present author had reason to speak to Dean Thumboo on some matter relating to library resources. Before the conversation even got under way, the Dean, referring to the earmarked fund for library resources, at once asked, “Is it enough?” This commitment to resource provision was one of the most encouraging aspects of the early days of the programme. As for journals, this was long before articles were available online or in softcopy, and researchers were still in the habit of providing, and requesting, offprints of papers by ordinary mail. Indeed, the University provided printed reprint request postcards for staff to fill in and despatch for this purpose.

Rules for the use of the Social Work & Psychology computer laboratory. Announcement put up by Godfrey Harrison.

RULES FOR THE USE OF THE SOCIAL WORK & PSYCHOLOGY COMPUTER LABORATORY*

These rules exist to ensure smooth running of the laboratory and access to the computers by students. Please ensure by your cooperation that this freedom of access can be preserved.

1. The use of the laboratory is restricted to staff and students of the Department of Social Work and Psychology. Students may not bring friends into the laboratory without prior approval from the Departmental Office.
2. All laboratory users are required to enter details in the user's [sic] log book on starting and finishing.
3. The Student Laboratory Assistant (SLA) in charge of the laboratory has overall responsibility for the observance of these rules, and has full authority to enforce their observance.
4. The SLA may request proof of identity by matriculation card from any student, and will require any unauthorised student to leave the laboratory.
5. Any form of illegal duplication of copyright material is strictly forbidden. This includes any copying of Departmental software.
6. Departmental software is to be kept under lock and key except when in use. Users must sign for software in the user's log book. Software may not be removed from the laboratory.
7. No computer, software, manual, printer, cable or other apparatus or material or any part of any of these things is to be removed from the laboratory. Used printer ribbons may be brought to the Departmental Office for replacement with approval of the SLA.
8. The telephone in this laboratory is for use in laboratory matters and is not to be used for personal calls.
9. A user is not entitled to more than 2 hours of computer time per day if other users are waiting. Time spent as SLA does not count towards this two hour limit.
10. Advance booking of computer time up to 1 week in advance may be made through a booking sheet in the laboratory (maximum 2 hrs per day).
11. Notices on the Bulletin Board should be approved and stamped by the Departmental Office.
12. No food or drink may be brought into the laboratory.
13. Computer games are not allowed.
14. Please observe quiet.

*Put up by Godfrey Harrison, together with a further 2 pages of rules for Student Laboratory Assistants and related matters

Happy newly-graduated psychology honours students in their Bachelor of Social Sciences (Honours) academic gowns in 1991 at the Bound Periodicals section of the Central Library. The two males—Cha Yeow Siah (front) and Winston Goh—are still with the Department today, while Lynne Tan (middle of the front three) was one of the Department's Senior Tutors. Until around 2000, the Library bound its journal collection in leather. At one time, these bindings were a prison industry but by the 1980s, the Library was using private bookbinding firms. The bindings conveyed a wonderful atmosphere of scholarship but were very troublesome to photocopy from, as they were stiff and it was difficult to get the page flat on the photocopier glass. Photo courtesy of Winston Goh.



For every book to be purchased, a small but detailed form had to be filled up. Likewise, journal subscriptions needed details, even though there were going to be far fewer subscriptions than book requests.

Elliott therefore went to see the librarian in charge of psychology purchases—at that time Pat Gaw—and asked if there was any way the acquisition process could be simplified. To his delight, this understanding lady suggested that, in future, the library could send staff the psychology catalogues from publishers, and if staff in the programme cared to indicate the books wanted, the library would take care of the paperwork. Thereafter for many years, catalogues were circulated to the psychology staff, and the collection grew at a great rate. This is only one example of the unfailing support and practical assistance that the library showed from the start of the programme—and even to the present day—and it is a pleasure to put on record how much the constructive and helpful attitude of the library staff fostered the development of the programme.

Indeed, the library holdings in psychology were not only useful for the programme, but also seen by many as a national resource, since this was the National University of Singapore, and the only one offering a psychology programme. Accordingly, efforts were made to establish a broad reference collection, including in areas not much taught at the time, such as neuropsychology and environmental psychology. In fact, there was hardly a case in which a requested book or journal subscription was refused. Conversely, there were plentiful cases in which back runs of journals were purchased in order to build up the journal holdings, though in some cases, such as for *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, these back issues took the form of microfiches (rolls of microfilm) which had to be painstakingly read on dedicated machines in the bowels of the library, and which made sourcing and inspecting older materials a surprisingly troublesome venture. Nonetheless, it was manifestly clear that the library resources for psychology were growing, which could only be a good thing for the newly-established programme.

Research

The research environment at the start was exciting in two major ways. The University was prepared to fund research through a system of grants, which spared researchers the need to source for funds from external sources. The programme quickly began to attract the lion's share of the grants made available in this way, in part because it was the only experimental and

laboratory-based discipline in FASS and it sometimes needed expensive equipment or materials (e.g. psychological tests). The programme's record in research is left to any interested reader to judge, but its ability to secure and productively utilise research grants likely put it in good stead when the issue of separating from social work came to the fore in later years.

Such funding support in the early years is perhaps best illustrated in the work of Chua Fook Kee. Chua would later become the first psychologist to head the Department of Social Work and Psychology, but in the early years of the programme he was first and foremost an influential cognitive psychologist. At that time, and indeed increasingly over time, NUS operated within the Microsoft Windows computing environment.³⁸ Chua, however, was a committed Macintosh (or Mac) user, and put his expertise with Apple devices to good use in devising ways to programme Mac computers for use as experimental stations. This was, of course, before the widespread availability of Mac and Windows programmes allowing for the design of experiments. More pertinent, and probably because of his dedication to Mac-based work, Chua was granted a small laboratory with Mac machines. He was also given a room to house a tachistoscope—a device for presenting images for very brief periods of time—long before this apparatus was superseded by computer-controlled presentations. Chua would also pay his participants for their time and effort—in this regard, he was a pioneer spirit for the practice of paid participation, which is now commonplace in research done by psychology staff.

On top of the opportunities made possible by the availability of funds, there were vast intellectual opportunities afforded by the fact that almost no local psychological research had been done up to then. Psychology in Singapore was thus very much a fertile research ground.³⁹ The existence of years of local research in various branches of medicine—reflecting

³⁸ The computers in the programme's first computer laboratory were all Windows-based machines, as were those in subsequent computer laboratories.

³⁹ As a case in point, an early effort at a bibliography of developmental psychology papers reporting research in or referring to Singapore prior to 1993 (Elliott, Ward, Chang & Loh 1996) listed a meagre total of 542 entries, even after stretching the criteria for inclusion to the limits (e.g. papers with a primarily social work or medical focus). This contrasted with, for example, the 1,733 entries in Brackbill's (1964) bibliography of published papers and books on human infant behaviour alone, published 32 years earlier at a time when it was a relatively new field. This dismal total for Singapore papers even included conference papers and abstracts, conference presentations, and dissertations, all of which were excluded by Brackbill.

the University's medical origins—had led to some published research in psychology, but this rarely extended beyond clinical or developmental papers being included in a bibliography. In most areas of psychology—and especially in experimental, cognitive and comparative psychology—research was sparse to say the least, and thus even more ripe for enquiry.

In a way, this paucity of research is unsurprising, and congruent with the absence of psychology in the wider consciousness of Singaporeans. In a society where there had never been any psychology departments or programmes, or any public education in psychology, the discipline was often a misunderstood field of enquiry. This was true even in academic circles. In the early years of the programme, psychology major students had to take a second major subject, and not a few commented that their teachers in other departments seemed to have an uncertain grasp of the nature of modern psychology. Some taking philosophy classes, for example, reported that their lecturers seemed to think that psychology was still narrowly confined to behaviourism and logical positivism. This may have reflected the fact that behaviourist approaches to therapy were increasingly preferred in clinical circles in Singapore and elsewhere, and certainly is in line with the pragmatic approach to social issues characteristic of the post-independence government. On the other hand, some in sociology classes mentioned that their lecturers were critical of biological psychology and suspicious of mental measurement. This was perhaps understandable given that this was a time of controversy over nature-nurture issues—particularly as regards race and intelligence—and there was general hostility in the social sciences towards biological explanations of or influences on human nature.⁴⁰ This was also not long before the publication of *The Bell Curve*,⁴¹ which had been preceded by a slew of publications representative of an academic climate in the social sciences that was somewhat hostile to psychometrics and some of psychobiology.⁴²

⁴⁰ When the present author started the first NUS module in evolutionary psychology in 2003, a senior colleague—probably mindful of some of the aggressive confrontations that resulted from the publication of E.O. Wilson's *Sociobiology* in 1975—wondered if it was wise to introduce such a controversial topic at all.

⁴¹ Herrnstein and Murray (1994).

⁴² See, for example, Gould (1981), whose approach exemplified the passionate character of the debate over measurement issues and apparent genetic determinism. Other publications include Kamin (1974) and Montagu (1969), who entirely denied any kind of heritable effect on intelligence and aggressive behaviour respectively.

Such misperceptions and misconceptions were so pervasive that when providing an earlier review of research in the first decade of the programme, the present author felt obliged to include an outline of the nature of psychology and psychological enquiry, to ensure that readers would be aware of the actual character of the modern discipline.⁴³ On the other hand, such inaccurate views of psychology also opened up opportunities to showcase what psychological research was all about, and what it could offer to the knowledge base.

Visiting Expertise

While the department initially had a rather limited number of psychology staff, another resource came in the form of expert assistance provided by visiting UK academics. During that time, the British Council supported such academics to visit other Commonwealth universities, with a visit typically lasting three months. These visits provided mutually beneficial opportunities for both visitors and the programme/department they were based in. For the new programme at NUS, this resource was most welcome, and it is fair to say that visitors to the programme were worked very hard during their time there. Two visitors were a particular resource for the programme in its early years.

One was Derek Blackman from Cardiff University, who, as mentioned earlier, would become the first external examiner for the programme. Blackman was a behaviourist, and in the course of being external examiner, he became intimately familiar with the programme. He also knew Harrison and wrote an article for *The Singapore Psychologist* in 1987, a journal which Harrison edited at the time. In the article, he made a number of very sensible observations about the new programme that had just started up, disarmingly prefaced by a note stating that he had never visited Singapore before. He favoured an emphasis on social, developmental and applied psychology, in keeping with the notion that practical utility was an important consideration. The programme need not, he felt, slavishly follow the pattern of interests characteristic of psychology departments in the UK. These interests had become dominant in the period of rapid expansion in the early 1960s, when many new universities were established.⁴⁴ These sentiments were actually very aligned with those guiding Head Vasoo, who saw the psychology

⁴³ Elliott (1999).

⁴⁴ Blackman (1987).

Staff of the Department of Social Work and Psychology in 1988. Photo courtesy of the Department of Social Work, National University of Singapore.



The psychology academic staff are Godfrey Harrison (1), Chan Cheng (2), John Elliott (3), Chua Fook Kee (4), Susan Rickard Liow (8), Loke Wing Hong (9) and Boey Kam Weng (10). Irene Ho (5), Janice Ow (6) and Manimegalai Palanisamy (or Mani for short, 7) were administrative staff who moved to the Department of Psychology when it was formed in 2005.

programme as complementary to that of social work, and viewed both from the perspective of a practitioner. In actuality, the article was held over for at least a year by Harrison, who had been advised by a senior colleague in another department that it might be seen as an effort to use an outside voice to press for something more than just the psychology programme, and would thus be counter-productive to the efforts to establish the programme in the first place.⁴⁵

The other was Ian Howarth, Head of the School of Psychology at the University of Nottingham. Howarth was an interesting visitor as his school had pioneered the use of intercalated years whereby a psychology student might spend a year in industry before completing the degree and graduating. This led to considerations of internships (or placements) as a possibility for the NUS psychology programme—given how they were used extensively in the social work programme—but despite many discussions, the idea did not prove practical for psychology. Howarth nonetheless left an impression, acquiring some startled respect from staff when he elicited spontaneous applause from students at the conclusion of a lecture on cognitive psychology. This previously unheard-of tribute was all the more remarkable insofar as cognitive psychology was one of the courses that produced much resistance and dismay among students, probably because only around a quarter of them would have taken science subjects at ‘A’ level. Indeed, although only a single lecture, it would have made some in-roads towards counteracting the view of psychology as practitioner-oriented and much a course only for those interested in the helping profession.

As irregular as these visits were, they were undoubtedly helpful for a programme just starting out. They added a distinctly international flavour to enrich the students’ experience, and thus, in their own ways, helped move the programme along.

So from curriculum to standards to resources, the newly-established NUS psychology programme was seeing its first shoots.

⁴⁵ Harrison. Personal communication, 26 October 2016.

Chapter 3

Blossoms and Thorns

The NUS psychology degree structure comprised a 3-year general degree, followed by a fourth honours year, entry to which was competitive. In British Commonwealth terms, this was essentially the Scottish and Australian system, rather than that of the English universities which favoured direct honours. 1986 to 1989 saw the first cohort of some 50 students go through the first three years of the programme and graduate with a general degree, and 1990 saw 11 of this cohort go the further distance to graduate with an honours degree.

Honours year students were a select group, having had to attain a certain standard to be accepted into the fourth year. All this—and perhaps the graduation of the first honours cohort in particular—provided for a sense of closure to the process of developing a working programme for psychology within the Department of Social Work and Psychology. Staffing had proceeded apace, while the curriculum had been reorganised, with new honours courses initiated and taught, and standards endorsed by the external examiner. This period, and the period that followed, were a time of consolidation, with further developments in staffing, research and the emergence of the first postgraduate degrees. There was also some development of facilities. However, these developments were mostly uneventful, although they were a little uneven and revealed some of the problems that the double-subject department had to overcome.

The first intake of psychology students outside the Department (Block AS1) in 1987. Photo courtesy of John Elliott.



S. Vasoo (1), John Elliott (2), Ann Wee (3), Godfrey Harrison (4), Ong Teck Hong (5)

On the Student Side

The Honours Year

The honours year started under a system whereby students first graduated with the Bachelor of Arts (BA) general degree. At that time, the BA degree required students to read two major subjects and a minor subject, after which they could proceed to do the honours year in either major (but not both) if they did well enough. After completing the honours year, students would graduate with the Bachelor of Social Sciences (Honours) degree. The Honours degree was classed—following the British system—into First Class, Second Class (Upper Division), Second Class (Lower Division), and Third Class degrees.¹ As they were already highly select, it was almost unheard of for anyone to graduate with a Third Class Honours degree. In fact, the first few cohorts of psychology students somewhat exceeded the University guidelines on the upper limits of the number of Second Class (Upper Division) degrees, and as earlier mentioned, arguments had to be made at higher levels to get them all through.

In line with custom and practice in FASS, a room was allocated for the use of the honours cohort. The room was used for classes—conducted in the form of seminars—but students would decorate and customise it to suit their purposes, sometimes setting aside a space to serve as a pantry. These early cohorts were small, could fit into a single room, and developed a high degree of camaraderie. The honours year seemed to be the point at which the students felt properly able to identify with the Department, as they had a single specialism to master and a place in the Department they could call their own. NUS has always been a large university, and has greatly expanded its intake over the years as the Singapore Government has sought to increase opportunities for a university education.² Consequently, it was (and still is) difficult to establish a sense of department or programme identity among students, unless the department or programme was small.

¹ In 2015, the terminology was altered such that honours students now graduate “with highest distinction”, “with distinction”, “with merit” or just “with honours” (the old Third Class), or a Pass degree (i.e. a BA).

² At the time the psychology programme started, total NUS undergraduate enrolment was of the order of 9,000 students, already a very substantial number. As at 30 August 2020, NUS had a total undergraduate student enrolment of 30,473 for full-time undergraduate courses, of which 6,038 were in FASS. See NUS Registrar’s Office, *Summary of Undergraduate Student Enrolment 2020/2021*, at <http://www.nus.edu.sg/registrar/docs/info/student-statistics/enrolment-statistics/undergraduate-studies/ug-enrol-20202021.pdf> [accessed 22 Feb. 2021].

The honours year was initially reserved exclusively for students eligible for honours. In later years, it became possible for third-year students to enrol for honours modules. While this allowed the range of available modules to be extended, it also meant that the students taking honours modules became more numerous and more heterogeneous—not surprisingly, the subsequent honours cohorts were less cohesive. In addition, outside of classes, there were very limited provisions for staff and students to interact. It is notable that Warr,³ in his history of the Department of Psychology at the University of Sheffield, stresses that a common room for the use of staff and students generally was an important element in building department identity and esprit de corps.

The Academic Exercise (which later became the Honours Thesis) was initially an obligatory module. Psychology is an empirical discipline, and relies on data to answer questions of the human experience. In the early years of the programme, however, there were no laboratory modules to provide students with an empirical experience. It was thus important that the programme's honours graduates should have not only the capability but also the experience of conceptualising, designing and executing a self-contained research project which had to be empirical and required primary data. The requirement that this be a piece of empirical work has remained to the present, although exceptions can now be granted to make use of existing or archival data (i.e. data already obtained). Purely theoretical “library research” was never acceptable—a stance that continues to this day for the research modules that students have to take. This Academic Exercise/Honours Thesis was always intended as a substantial piece of work—most ended up with 8,000 to 10,000 words (excluding tables and other peripheries)—and initially carried the weight of two honours courses but later increased to three. As such, it almost always occupied the students for two semesters, and the weeks just before the submission deadline would be highly stressful times for them.

The Society of Social Work and Psychology Students (SSWPS)

The formation of the SSWPS as a reconstitution of the Society of Social Work Students clearly reflected a desire for integration across the two programmes within the Department. There were (and still are) numerous student societies in NUS, catering to various religious or hobby groups, and it seemed rather

³ Warr (2001).

The first cohort of honours students looking into the first honours room. Photo courtesy of John Elliott.



David Chan (1), Sim Tick Ngee (2), Julie Goh (3), Bernadette Sim (4), Mariam Aljuntied (5), Joy Tang (6), Loh Cheng Yin (7), Cynthia Goh (8), Winnie Chik (9), Kwan Mei Yee (10), Neoh Sue San (11)

arbitrary to insist that a student society must be department-based rather than programme-based. In the event, the SSWPS was a very active student group, and tapped onto the vast enthusiasm and energy of the early cohorts of psychology students. Among its most notable early achievements were a journal—unfortunately discontinued after an ambitious first issue of 80 pages—and a careers convention for psychology students.⁴ Most ambitious of all was a visit in 1989 to universities in the UK by a group of six students, mostly from the psychology programme. This was intended to look into openings for UK postgraduate studies and the group produced a substantial booklet (*Studium Iter Britannia*) describing what they discovered and providing details—entry requirements, fees, and so on—for the pursuit of both social work and psychology in the universities of Birmingham, Cambridge, Hull, London (Birkbeck College), Oxford, Reading, Sheffield and York.

Front cover of the *Studium Iter Britannia*.
Photo courtesy of Winston Goh



⁴ While social work students already had career options and were already sought after, the market for psychology students was almost unknown at that time.

Winston Goh, from the second cohort of psychology students and now Associate Professor as well as current Head of the NUS Department of Psychology, offered his recollections of this visit:

I remember the second Executive Committee of the Society of Social Work & Psychology Students was a bunch of crazy, gung-ho, but ultimately hardworking people. We organised so many events that year—academic and career talks, dinner and dance, fund-raisers, orientation camps, trips to employers such as Woodbridge Hospital—that I think our grades suffered (mine certainly did). Thankfully I wasn't retained (yes, there was retention⁵ in those days!).

As the year for the graduation of the pioneer batch of psychology majors approached, many students in the department expressed a desire to pursue higher degrees overseas, particularly in the United Kingdom. Inspired by the success of a study tour to Hong Kong by the Society's social work students in 1986, we organised a study trip to 8 universities in England ... to find out more about the postgraduate courses in Psychology and Social Work. The Society produced a magazine listing information collected from the trip—admission criteria, application procedures, courses, expenses and maintenance costs, financial assistance, quotas, scholarships, tuition fees—for students thinking of doing postgraduate studies in England.

For the six of us who went on the trip at the end of March, it was certainly something to look forward to after the final exams (yes, exams were over by March in those days, with holidays stretching to July!). It was the ultimate road-trip for us undergraduates—driving ourselves to the various cities and staying in youth hostels. At the universities, it was an eye-opener to see the experimental labs, observation rooms, and other facilities in the established departments. Our department has certainly come a long way in emulating some of those labs today.

I remember this trip fondly as it involved many firsts for me—first time flying, first time driving in a foreign country, first time seeing snow (yes, it snowed in April!). I also learned three valuable lessons. First, never leave the lights on in the car when parked in the snow—the car won't start in the morning! Second, "chopeing" (reserving) of beds in youth hostels is not respected—I returned one night to find someone else sleeping on my bed (and lost a favourite watch of mine as well!). Third, always have emergency money at the end of the trip—the London tube (and buses) went on strike on our last day, and we had to take a London cab to the airport!

⁵ Retention in the Singapore context refers to the repeating of an entire year due to a student's poor grades or failure.

These students evidently made a good impression. The late Christopher Spencer, of the Department of Psychology at the University of Sheffield, fondly recalled this visit 27 years later: “I treasure the memory over all these years of this dynamic, organized and determined visiting party: completely charming, so much more socially skilled than an equivalent aged/staged British group would have been”.⁶ The students also renewed acquaintance with Chan Cheng—the Department’s first Senior Tutor⁷ who had earlier put in two years with the psychology programme—at the University of Oxford where he was reading for his DPhil in Experimental Psychology under Donald Broadbent.⁸

The careers convention organised by the SSWPS was also something of a landmark. It did a good job of opening students’ eyes to careers in psychology, and to the standing of psychologists overseas (in the UK at least). As well as local speakers, two British television programmes were screened. One of these showed the work of an occupational psychologist in private practice, specialising in counselling for senior company executives, with a successful case study. The fee collected for this job was very substantial—in five figures pounds sterling—but when asked about it on the programme, the psychologist in question pointed out that it was still only a fraction of the money saved by not having to replace or retrench a senior company executive, which would otherwise have been necessary. The other programme showed the work of an assessment centre for Royal Navy officers, and was an excellent illustration of the importance of simulated situations for selection purposes. A few years later, in August 1991, a Singapore Police Force assessment

⁶ Personal communication, 20 December 2016.

⁷ The Senior Tutorship scheme was a means to build up the local core in the University. At that time, good honours graduates were recruited for a one-year teaching stint before being sent—with salary and stipend—to a good university in the US or UK to pursue their PhD. Upon completion, they returned to serve a bond with the University.

⁸ For many years, Broadbent headed the Medical Research Council’s Applied Psychology Unit at the University of Cambridge, and the present author recalls attending at least one lecture by him as an undergraduate. He moved to the University of Oxford in 1974, retired in 1991, and passed away in 1993. Chan therefore must have been one of his last postgraduate students. Chan later fell afoul of the law—in 1999, he disappeared whilst being wanted by the police for allegedly molesting boys at a camp he was running (“Molest case: Warrant out for NUS don”, *The Straits Times*, 1 December 1999, p.1), though not before conscientiously marking his students’ examination scripts, as was noted in the newspapers at the time (“Wanted don had marked exam papers”, *The Straits Times*, 2 December 1999, p.3). He subsequently resurfaced in 2018 and was sentenced to a jail term of 43 months (<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/lecturer-who-molested-schoolboys-in-1999-loses-appeal> [accessed 22 Feb. 2021]).

centre used an emergency scenario of an escaped tiger for police officers. The guiding hand behind this was David Chan, from the first cohort of honours graduates. After completing his degree, Chan—then still a serving police officer—returned to the Force and this assessment centre project was one of the ways his time in the programme was put to good use outside.⁹ Chan was also instrumental in the initiation of a police psychological service, which has expanded considerably in the years since.¹⁰ After two-and-a-half years in the Force, Chan returned to NUS as a Senior Tutor, and later completed his PhD at Michigan State University.¹¹

Students from the SSWPS outside the University of Sheffield's Department of Psychology in 1989 with the late Christopher Spencer (right). Photo courtesy of Winston Goh (centre of photo).



⁹ Chan details his own journey as follows: “I joined by choice as a regular police officer (police constable) i.e. a full time job in 1984 and in 1986 took no-pay leave to study psychology at NUS but each year during the three month vacation I would return to Tanglin Police Station to do my full time regular police job. After graduating, I returned to the police and was posted to Police Headquarters to do staff work where I started doing assessment centre and other work under the Manpower Department”. Personal communication, 11 February 2017.

¹⁰ See Khader, Koh and Tan (2002) for an overview of psychology in the Singapore Police Force to that date.

¹¹ Chan is now Professor of Psychology and Director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute at the Singapore Management University. He regularly contributes to the public education of psychology by penning articles for *The Straits Times* and participating in various fora discussing issues of the day.

On the Staff Side

Staffing

At the time when the psychology programme started, a head of department was able to serve for an indefinite period, unlike current practice. A long-serving head could therefore wield considerable influence over the development of the department through overseeing new staff appointments over a long period. That influence extended to existing staff too, as he or she was also responsible for evaluating their performance and progress. Such evaluations were often done with relatively little systematic information—in the evaluation of teaching, for instance, there was as yet no system of student feedback nor any system of peer review. The head might thus sit in on a lecture, or take advice from other colleagues, but in the end enjoyed great discretion and power in doing the evaluations.

At the start, there were already two staff members with psychology qualifications teaching in the social work programme—Ong Teck Hong and Anthony Chang (A. Chang).¹² However, both could not easily be detached to the psychology programme, and so Harrison was the sole staff member who started with the programme. For the most part, staffing for the programme was built up by recruiting specifically for it. Alongside early PhD-level hires—such as Chua Fook Kee, Loke Wing Hong,¹³ and Susan Rickard Liow—there were also honours-level senior tutors and teaching assistants recruited from the first few cohorts of the programme. The latter group was recruited to conduct tutorials for a year or two and was then sent overseas to obtain their PhD, after which they returned and served a bond in the Department. This approach—given renewed focus in recent years—was also intended in part to build a Singaporean core to ensure the long-term viability of the programme. In this regard, the programme boasts a good track record—there were seven such recruits, and four remain with the programme (now a department) to this day, where they are senior staff.¹⁴ While this system had the merit

¹² A. Chang was a developmental psychologist who later taught the developmental psychology course in the programme and supervised Academic Exercises/Honours Theses, and was accordingly included as a staff member of the psychology programme from 1989. Ong remained with the social work programme throughout—he was a counselling psychologist interested in substance abuse.

¹³ Loke did work in psychopharmacology and was especially interested in the effects of caffeine and alcohol on cognitive performance. He was with the programme from 1988 to 1994.

¹⁴ Winston Goh, Nicholas Hon, Sim Tick Ngee and Melvin Yap remain today with the NUS Department of Psychology. Chan Cheng, David Chan and Lynne Tan have left, with David Chan the only one remaining in academic life.

of long-term planning for building up the department, it is also arguable that staff serving a 5-year bond might not be as energised or determined to pursue research as they would have been without it. The programme might thus have been fortunate in its choice of recruits, and their success does not necessarily equate to an endorsement of the system. On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that the University during this period tended to see itself as predominantly a teaching institution, which meant a good tolerance of staff focussing on their teaching rather than research. A more explicit focus and emphasis on research, with a concomitant reward and recognition system, would be another legacy of NUS President Shih's tenure.

In the early years, recruitment was very much a matter for the Dean and Head. Search committees were rare or if they were formed, they did not involve existing staff. Nor was it usual to have a candidate visit NUS as part of the evaluation.¹⁵ A consequence of this was that the addition of staff to the psychology programme appeared a rather ad hoc process. Appointments seemed to be made because a qualified candidate was available—either locally or from overseas—and there was some follow-up discussion between the Head and a few colleagues as to the merits of the candidate. Little was then known until, if all went well, a new face showed up along the corridors of the Department and was introduced to staff as their new colleague. This rather uninvolved process for appointments probably conveyed a message that staff were to just do the jobs they were hired to do, and little more. Certainly, it meant a lack of discussion—especially among psychology staff—on how the programme should develop. This in turn likely contributed to a lack of excitement and enthusiasm among psychology staff even though the programme was new and there was much scope to shape its direction—an observation noted by, and which was quite a surprise to, Ian Howarth when visiting in 1990. In fact, custom and practice at that time did not particularly support democratic or “bottom-up” processes for shaping the development of a programme or department. Specific to the Department, Head Vasoo had the unenviable task of balancing and developing the two programmes under him. Indeed, whilst he strove to be impartial towards both programmes, he sometimes had to convince his social work colleagues that the new programme needed the support he tried to give it.¹⁶ Meanwhile, on the other side, there were growing new appointments to the psychology programme, but these needed to earn their

¹⁵ An exception was made in the case of Ramadhar Singh, a potentially senior appointment from a relatively nearby country.

¹⁶ See also Vasoo's reminiscences on his time as Head (Vasoo 2012).

tenure, which in turn meant strong inducements for them to keep their heads down and get on with their careers.

The upshot was the emergence of a rather heterogeneous group of academics in the Department, and in the programme in particular. Much credit must nonetheless go to Head Vasoo and Dean Thumboo for the expeditious way in which a body of staff was built up for the psychology programme. On the other hand, staff recruited for the programme owed their position to a Head from a different discipline whose priorities included balancing two programmes, and indeed, who saw himself as the leader for both. No formal appointment of a leader for the programme was ever made, until the year before the issue of separation of the programmes arose in 2000. There was thus little incentive in the early years for the disparate staff to forge a common direction or focus for the programme. To some extent, the exigencies of the day made this inevitable, but it is possible that they created difficulties in the longer run. Over time, limitations in the programme started to appear, such as when the need for clinical and other applied postgraduate degrees began to draw attention.

The staffing of the programme thus grew in ways that did not promote a particularly united or coherent group. To what extent this was a consequence of the particular staff recruited and their respective personalities, simply reflected practical constraints in staffing, or revealed more overarching practices of the day as uncondusive, are matters for debate. It is probably fair, however, to say that any ad hoc assembly of academic psychologists would likely yield a fractious group. However, when selected by a Head of Department from another discipline on the basis of sporadic consultations with existing staff, or on the basis of interviews conducted overseas by delegated university staff usually from other disciplines, the potential for division is probably increased. Moreover, being the only such group in the country made for a sense of isolation. There were no local colleagues with similar academic standing or interests—fellow psychologists in cognate areas were only to be found overseas.

The selection of new staff for the programme depended heavily on applicants' paper qualifications and reports from interviews. In a few instances, there were Singapore applicants whose potential inclusion in the programme might raise the question of preference for locals. Obviously, it makes good sense to employ competent locals as staff, but there remained the question of whether they should be privileged over equally- and especially better-qualified foreign candidates. This is still very much an issue today but suffice to say here that this issue—then and now—is invariably affected by

the politics and policies of the day. There was also considerable variation in the calibre of foreign applicants. Many applications were received that must have been made more in hope than in any expectation of success. Some applicants were clearly attracted by the prospect of life in Singapore—one in particular, from the US, was candid enough to confide in conversation with the present author that finding a country with safe streets and which seemed relatively free of crime was the main factor in his desire to live and work here.¹⁷ Such pragmatic considerations must have motivated many applicants from less developed countries as well. In addition, the name of the department—Social Work and Psychology, a very unusual combination if not unique—tended to create the impression that the two programmes were linked, and therefore that some alignment or shared interest was expected in prospective staff. This may well have attracted particular applicants. On the other hand, it may have deterred others, given a concern that they would have to straddle two disciplines. It is impossible to know how many potentially suitable staff were deterred from even applying, due to concerns over this point. Indeed, this ambiguity was to become a point of tension within the Department, at least for the psychology staff.

Lest a picture is painted of a fractured department with two programmes pulling in separate directions, let it be clear that there were undeniable points of contact and collaboration between some staff in the two disciplines. Indeed, successive Heads of Department (beyond Vasoo) were apt to see and favour the positive side of having the two programmes under a common umbrella. As Dean Thumboo envisioned, the addition of the psychology programme to the Department gave a good deal of impetus to the development of the social work programme. From that vantage point, it is hard to see any reason why anyone would hanker after an alternative arrangement of separate departments, with the likely loss of standing in the University due to the inevitable loss of size, with smaller student and staff numbers.

Also to be clear, the social work staff impressed all along as a very cohesive and united group. They had shared in the difficult origins of their department, facing difficulty in gaining academic recognition whilst having to do a vital job from the days before independence, when Singapore contained some of the most densely-populated slums anywhere in the world. They must surely have been perplexed and dismayed at the lack of a comparable unity among

¹⁷ He probably mistook the present author for a fellow expatriate, who might thus have an understanding attitude.

their psychology colleagues, as Head Vasoo somewhat elliptically remarked in his account of the time of his headship:

On reflection, I must say that it was not easy to manage both psychology and social work staff but in the case of psychology, each of them had their own academic agenda ... On a few occasions, there were outbursts between psychology staff which I had to hold down ... I was never partial to either the social work or the psychology staff then and I hope that this will be appreciated in the annals of the local psychology programme development.¹⁸

The difficulties facing the Head should not be underestimated. For instance, in the matter of the quite challenging task of allocating resources between programmes, Vasoo is quick to credit the generosity of his social work colleagues for allowing him to direct departmental resources to the psychology programme, even when such came at the expense of their own programme. He goes on record to state that he faced no major hindrances in building up the psychology programme so as to be regarded as important and value-adding.¹⁹ What Vasoo does not say is that, in addition, the two programmes differed in the nature of their appeal, the type of students they attracted, and their respective balancing of professional and research foci. The University administration could see the advantages of locating programmes within a single department for ease of administration and economies of scale; specific to psychology as located with social work, there were other considerations as have been discussed in earlier chapters. The fact that this twinning of psychology and social work could or would also create tensions arising from the competition for resources, and from the desire more and more psychology staff had for greater autonomy, did not seem to be considered a major difficulty. Again with hindsight, the psychology staff may have been ill-prepared for the idea that these administrative considerations—as well as the gains of the social work programme from having a psychology programme lined up with it—meant that a separation of the two programmes was not planned for or even envisaged in the longer term when the psychology programme became better established. As the idea began to sink in, some psychology staff became apt to chafe at the resulting constraints in matters pertaining to the development of the Department. Indeed, rather than thinking at the department level, or giving thought to

¹⁸ Vasoo (2012: 32). Insofar as the present book is a contribution to the said annals, it indeed seeks to offer the desired appreciation.

¹⁹ Vasoo (2012).

how the two programmes could be more securely integrated, there was an increasing tendency to think in terms of the development of the psychology programme as if it were to become independent.

In the event, after a strong burst of recruitments in the first few years of the programme, staffing became more uneven, levelling off and even declining slightly in the run up to the separation of the programmes. Meanwhile, student numbers continued to grow apace throughout the period, creating a heavier teaching workload for staff. Together with the simmering tensions already described, there was an air of uncertainty for staff in the programme, which was not helped by its mix of local and foreign staff who sometimes had very divergent aspirations.

Academic Freedom and the Local-Foreign Divide

The local-foreign issue and its related issue of academic freedom bear further discussion, if only to provide the context for a better understanding of some of the thorny episodes in the programme.

When a new programme is being started, and is the only one in the country, a high proportion of foreign staff is inevitable. Not surprisingly, even though the local-foreign issue was dealt with on a case-by-case basis in the early years of the programme, the need to quickly staff the programme and the scarcity of qualified local applicants meant the inevitable recruitment of foreign staff, making early staffing heavily foreign. In most instances, this would be uncontroversial. After all, as a general ideal, universities are places where academic credentials should matter more than details of nationality. Indeed, even the word “university” implies a universality such that it should be a place that transcends the purely local and aspires to higher academic standards and practices. Moreover, Singapore is a multi-ethnic and pluralistic country, and has a long history of accepting immigrants to a relatively high degree, even in the days of the British Empire. It might thus be expected that in such a cosmopolitan city state, academic merit would be the primary if not sole basis for recruitment of university staff. However, with greater numbers of foreign staff, the issue of academic freedom can collide with local values and practices. Indeed, in the case of the psychology programme, it would even trickle down to local staff and result in thorny episodes.

Given Singapore’s history of being a colony and then fighting for survival post-independence and after the British withdrawal, its universities have never been allowed to treat academic freedom as somehow more important

than their contribution to the public good, as defined and promoted by the government of the day. For example, in 1968, Toh Chin Chye, Deputy Prime Minister and a physiologist by training as well as past Reader in the University, was appointed Vice-Chancellor of what was then the University of Singapore. Toh had definite views on the priorities of development for the University in the immediate post-independence period. Ann Wee, Head of the Department of Social Work before Vasoo, recalls frequent clashes with Toh, who needed considerable persuasion to allow the inclusion of any social work degree in the University curriculum, and was adamantly against it being an honours degree.²⁰ Similarly, in 1980, Tony Tan, Education Minister, was appointed Vice-Chancellor of the University and oversaw its merger with Nanyang University to form the National University of Singapore. This was a somewhat controversial step, as Nanyang University was the product of public subscription, set up in 1955 in protest at the lack of any provision for higher education in Chinese by the Colonial Administration of the day. It held fast to its attachments to the Chinese language and culture, but such attachments were seen as potentially inimical to the development of a truly national Singaporean character, and thus inconsistent with the policy ideals of nation-building.

Thus, there was some precedent for the government of the day to appoint politicians to positions of influence in the University, aligning with the view that the University was—and is—seen as an important cog in the programme of national development rather than a disconnected academic institution. In this regard, it would be naive to suppose that a well-developed sense of expected national priorities did not exist in the NUS community when the psychology programme started in 1986. Among others, the relevance of seeing the place of the University within the national agenda speaks to the question of what the University could or would allow for in the way of freedom for its staff to speak out on non-academic issues. The University was in fact prepared to give wide latitude for academic research, but allowing staff to use their positions in the University as a basis for commenting on or intervening in matters of public policy, or worse for criticising the government, was quite another matter. This was apt to be particularly problematic where foreign staff were concerned. Long before the start of the psychology programme, there had already been instances where foreign academics had criticised government policies and been cautioned or dismissed. A famous example is D.J. Enright. In his inaugural lecture in 1960, Enright, a poet and professor

²⁰ Wee (2012).

of English literature, criticised efforts to foster what he felt was a synthetic local culture. This was the year after self-government had been gained, and after the general election of 1959 in which the PAP formed the first self-governing administration. Enright was promptly summoned to the Ministry of Labour and roundly rebuked to the effect that people with no loyalty to or roots in Singapore—“mendicant professors” was the term used—could not expect to work in the country if they made disparaging remarks about how Singapore was attempting to conduct its cultural affairs. He was obliged to apologise in a public exchange of letters, and was then allowed to continue in post. It was clear from this episode, however, that remarks critical of policy could not be justified on grounds of academic freedom. At the time, Enright enjoyed a lot of support from students and colleagues, but education was an exceedingly sensitive topic—after all, this was the run-up period to the merger with Malaya in 1963, a period with its corresponding politics.²¹ From that day to the present, and certainly over the period when the psychology programme was developing, it was definitely expected that university staff would avoid any public statements that could be seen as political.

A lesser-known example—but one more relevant to psychology—was Leonard Cohen. Cohen was a professor of psychology in the Business School at Nanyang University, and in 1969 was appointed to head a Behavioural Sciences unit, potentially a forerunner location for a psychology programme. However, Cohen was dismissed a year later on grounds that he did not possess the qualifications he professed to hold, and was in effect a charlatan. Surrounding this was his involvement in a proposed academic staff association and his criticism of certain government policies. These stimulated a more careful scrutiny of his credentials, with embarrassing results. Although he and his sympathisers characterised this dispute—similar to the one involving Enright—as a matter of academic freedom, it did not look that way to the government whose policies were being attacked.²²

²¹ For a historical account of the politics of the time, see Drysdale (1984). For Enright’s own account, see his somewhat cheekily titled *Memoirs of a Mendicant Professor* (1969). Enright in fact remained as Professor until 1970.

²² See, for example, “Expert hits pioneer firms: High profits and dividends but such low basic wages”, *The Straits Times*, 3 July 1970, p.4; “Nantah says I’ve got no proof: Cohen”, *The Straits Times*, 29 October 1970, p.17; “Nantah sacks Cohen: Three reasons given”, *Singapore Herald*, 12 November 1970, p.1; and “Cohen and family sail for home”, *Singapore Herald*, 12 November 1971, p.6.

Rather, it probably looked like using an ideal of free speech, in the guise of academic freedom, to pursue a political or social agenda.²³

The rights or wrongs of the particular cases mentioned above are a matter for the reader to decide upon, but there is no denying that there were well established precedents for the University to set limits to academic freedom or freedom of speech in the name of national development. It was just not considered acceptable for university staff to make public comments or interventions in policy unless they were citizens. Even for citizens, it was important that they not take advantage of their university position to support a political agenda. While local staff easily understood and complied—whether or not they agreed—such restrictions could lead to difficulties with foreign staff who were used to speaking as they wished, or local staff who did not accept them. Understanding this context helps explain a key thorny episode as the psychology programme developed—the 1993 case of Chee Soon Juan, which generated much interest and publicity when it occurred.²⁴

Chee is today a well-known Singapore opposition politician, but he is by training a psychologist in the field of neuroscience from the University of Georgia in the US.²⁵ After he completed his PhD, he was one of the few Singaporeans with a training in any aspect of biological psychology, and was thus a potentially valuable member of staff. However, he almost at once became a critic of government policies via letters to the newspapers, and thus may have made exactly the presumption of academic licence to criticise that had enmeshed Cohen (and Enright). Considering that he was a Singapore citizen, it is difficult to fault Chee for thinking he could act as he did. At any rate, he gave practical effect to his views by joining an opposition party,

²³ A recent example involving politics and academic freedom can be seen in the case of Thum Ping Tjin and the New Naratif involving the historical account of Operation Cold Store, an internal security operation in 1963. For a comprehensive and referenced account, albeit one sympathetic to the Singapore Government, see <http://ifonlaysia.com.sg/2018/03/public-hearings-fake-news-27-29-march.html> [accessed 22 Feb. 2021].

²⁴ A disclaimer by the present author is in order here: I was one of two senior psychology staff consulted by Head Vasoo in connection with the dispute between the University and Chee, and formed the view at the time that the University's position was justified. I therefore cannot now claim to be an impartial observer with no vested interest in this case. In the summary account given here, however, I have dutifully endeavoured to be fair, and have relied on documents in the public domain to present both sides of the case. The reader with any serious interest in this episode, however, will need to consult the contemporary accounts and form his or her own opinion.

²⁵ Chee (1991).

and his entry into politics as an opposition parliamentary election candidate precipitated disagreements with Head Vasoo.

These disagreements came to a head when Chee was discovered covertly recording a conversation with Vasoo, prompting the latter to look into other aspects of Chee's work. This led to him finding that Chee had claimed some of his wife's PhD expenses under a grant intended to support his own research. This should have been a minor matter—the sum was relatively trivial—that could have been sorted out with goodwill on both sides. However, the manner in which Chee defended his actions was deemed objectionable by the University, and he was dismissed with three months' notice. Chee felt that his dismissal was unjustified and politically motivated, and said so in terms that included a claim that evidence had been fabricated. This led to court actions by Vasoo and two other University staff. Chee neither retracted his views or claims, nor defended himself in court, thus losing the court case. On its part, the University rescinded its three-month notice, and instead dismissed him with immediate effect. At this, Chee commenced a hunger strike and became more or less a cause célèbre. Following a debate in Parliament,²⁶ Chee ended his strike, but he has never accepted the University's or Government's versions of these events.²⁷

The case certainly succeeded in dividing both students and staff in the Department and outside it, since many took sides with Chee in his protests of his treatment. Moreover, this may have revived fears in some quarters that perhaps psychologists were not that "reliable" and someone like Vasoo was needed to keep an eye on things. This, not surprisingly, would have rendered the possibility of a separate department for psychology even more remote. However, in the present author's opinion, the real importance of the Chee case lies in the fact that a great deal of the debate on it—and especially as seen from outside Singapore—revolved around the issue of academic freedom, free speech and political liberties. This was an example—very much in the tradition of Enright and Cohen—whereby an academic, albeit a citizen in this case, felt able to make policy criticisms as a matter of free

²⁶ The debate is reported in full in https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic?reportid=008_19930413_S0003_T0004 [accessed 22 Feb. 2021]. The present author was in the public gallery.

²⁷ There is a very substantial collection of newspaper reports and other documents relating to this case, which the interested reader should consult. For a summary of the specific issue of the NUS case giving both sides, see "Ripples from Dr Chee saga still felt", *The Straits Times*, 17 April 1993, p. 32. The most detailed account, from Chee himself, can be found in Chee (2012).

speech, since a university ought to be a (or the) place for such freedom, only to discover that an academic appointment in Singapore conferred no such licence. However, the actual details of the case did not revolve around issues of academic freedom or free speech; rather, they concerned the integrity and character of the respective parties, and whether or not the entire episode had been an excuse to get rid of a political voice. Many observers felt that this matter reflected badly on the University because it brought politics into academia; at a deeper level, however, it highlights the fact that there was some resistance—especially but not only among foreign staff—to the idea that a university should in fact be seen as a part of a nation-building exercise. Chee had done his tertiary education in the US, and been attracted to the ideals of democracy and free speech he experienced there. In this respect, Chee is not unique—from time to time, the present author had had conversations with other foreign colleagues who were similar products of educational systems in liberal democracies, who expressed (or just hinted at) their dislike or resentment of what they saw as a rather stifling atmosphere, in which they did not feel as free to comment on or criticise what they saw around them in the way they could have done had they been in their own countries. In the present author's view, this may well be another contributing factor to what Howarth had noted about the lack of enthusiasm for the development of the psychology programme.

Buddings

Higher Degrees

It was always envisioned that the psychology programme—as with other FASS degree programmes—should include postgraduate degrees by research. It was, however, not so clear at the start whether or when the demand for applied or professional qualifications—especially in clinical psychology—would lead to postgraduate professional programmes being started. Thus, while the postgraduate research degree in psychology started soon after the first cohort graduated—with the first master's and PhD degrees awarded in 1993 and 1999 respectively—and without fuss, there was a long delay before any postgraduate professional programme began. Indeed, it was only after the programme became its own department in 2005 that efforts to launch a clinical psychology master's programme took off.

The late launch of the clinical psychology postgraduate programme was partly due to the very limited clinical resources available in the psychology programme. There were no appointments of clinically-trained full-time staff

between 1998 and 2005. On the other hand, the available clinical resources had dwindled—Boey Kam Weng left in 1998, Vera Bernard-Opitz in 2001, while Susan Rickard Liow had become more and more focused on language and the development of speech therapy, moving to the Division of Graduate Medical Studies to start the Speech and Language Pathology master's programme in 2013. Only Chang Weining Chu (W.C. Chang) remained throughout that period as a clinically-qualified staff member; even then, however, her research interests were more cultural and social than clinical.²⁸

Most certainly, there were early discussions on the possibility of starting clinical or other applied psychology programmes. Rickard Liow, in particular, was a British clinical psychologist and had originally joined the Department with the expectation of teaching clinical psychology. She was one of those keenest on starting a postgraduate programme in this field. Alas, all discussions on clinical psychology programmes petered out for various reasons. There was understandable reluctance on the part of the Head and some other colleagues to attempt to spearhead a major initiative in the absence of any clear local framework for supervised practice or internships. In addition, there was at that time no requirement, or even expectation, in MOH or IMH that clinical psychologists should have a clinical qualification. Clinical training on the job was deemed to suffice. A couple of early surveys showed overwhelming support among graduates and students for a postgraduate clinical qualification. Indeed, clinical psychology was by far the most desired postgraduate career among the student population and alumni. Nonetheless, the bootstrap problem previously alluded to was a major obstacle, and this was compounded by the lack of employment openings for clinical psychologists. There was therefore an evident gap to be bridged, between the likely need on the ground and the reality of satisfactory training requirements in the form of supervised practicums. A figure of around 600 hours of supervised clinical experience with clients seemed typical of a good clinical training course, but it would pose a formidable challenge for any local programme. Nonetheless, the need and desire for clinical qualifications and training continued to preoccupy many minds.

As for other areas of psychology that were not clinical, there was a different kind of bootstrap problem for higher degrees. There were relatively

²⁸ W.C. Chang, an American citizen of Chinese extraction, arrived from Texas in 1989 in time to teach statistics to the first honours cohort. She started with an exuberant streak of assertive nationalism, posting a large sign stating "The Time for Texas is Now" on the door of the honours room.

few employment openings for such graduates, and overseas postgraduate qualifications were favoured by employers, including the University. Moreover, the programme had no record of postgraduate activity nor anything to recommend a postgraduate programme save the quality of the supervisor and the potential for research. Good students from overseas would thus have little incentive to come to NUS unless they specifically wanted an opportunity to work on a particular problem or with specific staff. Conversely, good students graduating from the programme were strongly incentivised to seek their postgraduate training overseas, especially if they aspired to an academic career in psychology, as there were few to no opportunities for PhD employment outside of NUS and the norm was for NUS to not recruit its own PhD graduates, to guard against in-breeding. In this setting, the most advantageous possibility was to seek appointment as a Senior Tutor in the Department. As mentioned in chapter 2, this pathway in fact laid the foundations of a very solid core of local staff for the psychology programme.

Professional Practice

In all branches of psychology where psychological services were offered, the prevailing practice was for honours graduates to learn on the job once employed. There was thus little reason for them to seek formal qualifications in some branch of applied psychology unless exceptionally motivated. In fact, a small number—no more than two per year—did go off to universities overseas, most frequently to enrol in industrial-organisational or occupational psychology degrees, although a few went to educational psychology or took counselling qualifications. As official attitudes changed over time, the practice of sending employed graduates for higher degrees became more frequent, and the total number of graduates with professional qualifications began to grow, although no figures appear to exist for the national situation because psychology has never been a registrable profession in Singapore. It is likely that MINDEF and MOE led the way in sending their psychology staff for higher degrees, with MOH later following suit. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and the former Ministry of Community Development²⁹ were also among the civil service organisations building up higher-degree holders from their existing pools of psychology graduates.

²⁹ Now split into the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) and the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF).

To fulfil a need to represent the psychology profession locally, the Singapore Psychological Society (SPS) was set up in 1979, with Long Foo Yee as its first President. The Society's aspirations are described in its general aim: "the advancement of psychology as a science and as a profession in Singapore".³⁰ Its main function was to provide a common point of contact for the dispersed community of psychologists in Singapore, and to make progress towards greater professionalisation. However, the absence of registration for psychologists—together with the lack of any psychology programme or department even at the undergraduate level—made it very difficult to sustain an effective society. Optimism greatly increased when the NUS psychology programme started, and this gave impetus to the SPS. However, the academic focus of the programme, and the lack of professional or applied courses in particular, limited what it could achieve.

Nonetheless, the Society pressed on. It started a sporadic journal, *The Singapore Psychologist*, in 1980. Around 1984, Elizabeth Nair, President of the Society, asked Harrison to take over the editorship, which he did. This in turn brought the journal into the Department in 1986. After Harrison left NUS in 1989, he passed the editorship to Elliott, who later passed it to W.C. Chang, in whose hands the journal continued as the *Asian Journal of Psychology*. However, this rather ambitious attempt at transformation—with its aim of soliciting and publishing regional as well as local research—did not take off, and only a single issue was ever published.

The SPS also took the initiative to provide a directory of members, intending it to be a resource listing of Singapore psychologists for the public. This listing was not complete, since the absence of a national registration system meant that there was no obligation for any psychologist to apply for SPS membership or to be listed in the directory. However, there was a good deal of interest in it, and a lot of time was spent determining the criteria for the various grades of membership. The essential rule that was eventually followed was not to allow a claim to local practitioner competence or academic standing that would not be recognised in the country in which the applicant obtained his or her qualification and experience. This in turn raised the issue of which degrees from overseas institutions should be recognised for the purposes of acquiring a postgraduate professional qualification. Much time was spent poring over materials—such as the British Psychological Society

³⁰ The Singapore Psychological Society website, available at <https://singaporepsychologicalsociety.org> [accessed 22 Feb. 2021].

(BPS) Directory of Postgraduate Courses—to determine which courses were recognised by the BPS for various professional purposes. This effort, however, was complicated by the fact that the PSC—which made recommendations on the acceptability of overseas qualifications for employment in government service—would not release any list of its approved courses, probably a means to preserve its flexibility so as to consider returning Singapore scholars on a case-by-case basis.

In the early years of the programme, there was quite a lot of involvement by the psychology staff and students in the Society, since the Department was seen as the natural nub for the addition of an academic dimension to the Society. Perhaps the climax of Department involvement was when two staff members—Chee Soon Juan and Elizabeth Nair—organised a very successful first Asian Conference in Psychology at the end of 1991, which among other things netted something like S\$10,000 for the benefit of the Society. However, as time went on and the prospect of local professional qualifications being available faded, interest and involvement somewhat fell away.³¹

All in all, the period from the start of the psychology programme in 1986 up to the turn of the century can be characterised as one of consolidation within the organisational and national status quo. Looking back at those 15 years or so, the Head of the Department of Social Work and Psychology and all the psychology staff do have much to be proud of. The psychology programme had quickly gotten up to speed and some of its first shoots had blossomed. Blossoms often come with thorns, however, and so there were thorny episodes along the way. As the programme trudged along, it seemed inevitable in the later years that a further breakthrough would be needed—one which could only be attained by the programme becoming a department of its own.

³¹ Happily, the Society is today much recovered. It continues to make representations on the need to register psychologists, but has a much greater membership now that there are psychology graduates from four purely local universities—NUS, Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore Management University (SMU) and Singapore University of Social Sciences ([SUSS] which began by hosting the UK Open University courses locally, under the auspices of the Singapore Institute of Management)—and from the local campuses of overseas universities, most notably James Cook University. Accordingly, the Society has a very active programme of professional activities reflecting the increasing numbers of practitioners on the ground.

Chapter 4 | A New Season

As discussed in an earlier chapter, there were good reasons for starting the psychology programme in the Department of Social Work. As time passed, however, there was an understandable wish for greater autonomy among the psychology staff, which led to some divergence of views on the continuation of this twinning arrangement. This dissension would begin to take a life of its own, and result in the two programmes separating in 2005. For social work, it was a return to being its own department after 19 years. On the other hand, for psychology, 1 July 2005 marked the date the Department of Psychology at NUS came into being.

In the diplomatic words of Brenda Yeoh, who became Dean of FASS in 2010, the separation “provided both disciplines greater degrees of freedom to pursue their own destinies”.¹ When the programmes separated in 2005, Yeoh’s implied sense of liberation was indeed very real for many of the psychology staff, as it brought an end to a period of increasing frustration. By the time Yeoh became Dean, she would have seen for herself how this liberation had enabled psychology to grasp the opportunity to make good strides.

A new season had indeed arrived in 2005, but it was one very much unforeseen when the programme started in 1986. From the start, Dean Thumboo had made it clear that a separation of psychology was not envisaged. There was therefore little reason for any of the psychology staff

¹ Nair (2012: 4).

to have assumed or indeed have had any inkling that they were developing a separate department, at least not in the initial years. Nonetheless, in the present author's opinion, two things led to expectations in this direction over time. The first had to do with inherent limits in the goodness of fit between the disciplines of psychology and social work. The second, ironically, was a perceived pressure towards greater integration of the two programmes rather than greater autonomy. Both these points need some elaboration.

Inherent Differences between Disciplines

In 2012, the social work programme celebrated its 60th year with a publication edited by Sudha Nair² that documented its history. From the accounts of the contributors—all of whom had headed the programme or department at one time—it is clear that the professionalisation and practice of social work were important aspects of this period. Social work is the discipline—above all others—that has systematically put into local practice the social ideals and concerns that may have only been abstractions in the more academically-focused social sciences such as economics, sociology and indeed much of psychology. Nair's volume makes clear that social work contributed immensely to the task of constructing an inclusive society in the period after World War II and throughout the years following Singapore's independence. Indeed, the present author worked as the only psychologist in the Ministry of Social Affairs from 1973 to 1976, and concurrently served as a part-time tutor for social work students. Those experiences left an indelible mark, and contributed to a high regard for what social workers and administrators trained in social work were able to achieve. Therefore, nothing in the present account—which perforce has to dwell on some of the frictions and difficulties associated with the separation of psychology and social work—should be read as detracting from the importance of social work and all that the Department of Social Work has achieved in its rich history.

The academic reasons for locating the psychology programme in the Department of Social Work were that it was considered a cognate discipline, was already being taught to social work students, and already had psychologists among the staff of the department. Manifestly, some branches of psychology are highly relevant for social workers, although equally evidently others are not. In particular, developmental psychology, social psychology and abnormal psychology are all of fundamental value to social work. However,

² Ibid.

this relevance is grounded in the application of principles to practice, which is at the heart of social work education. Modern social work degrees in Singapore grew out of their predecessor qualifications—the Colonial Social Science Certificate (from the London School of Economics), the Social Work Certificate (commencing 1952 in the University of Malaya in Singapore) and the Diploma in Social Studies (also starting in 1952). The Diploma was a postgraduate practitioner course—the forerunner of the modern Master of Social Work programme—and aimed at mature students who were normally already graduates. However, the social work undergraduate degrees, both general and honours, were also designed for intending social workers or social administrators. This was the major focus and *raison d'être* of social work education. Indeed, the Department of Social Work was first named the Department of Applied Social Studies, and only later became the Department of Social Work and Social Administration in 1966. Its name changed again—to the Department of Social Work—in 1972, reflecting the increased emphasis on social work service. Vasoo, who headed what became the Department of Social Work and Psychology from 1987 to 1999, repeatedly stresses the importance of combining theory and field work:

Those early inroads into teaching, of being challenged by older mature students imprinted on me a need for field experience besides merely possessing an academic perspective of social work training.³

In the present author's view, these words nicely capture the reality of social work—that it is not primarily a theoretical discipline but rather a profession, informed by relevant social theory and research. Herein, however, lay the first and most obvious limitation to the sustainability of keeping social work and psychology within the ambit of a common department. Just as with other professional degrees (such as law or medicine), social work qualifications were primarily intended for practitioners and social policymakers or administrators, rather than for the purpose of a general education. Through many an interaction that the present author had with social work colleagues, it was not uncommon to hear regret from these colleagues that the pool of available qualified social workers has been diminished by the willingness of employers to treat social work graduates as excellent employment prospects in a range of other positions, often with higher salaries. This made it harder for organisations, and especially voluntary welfare organisations, to attract and retain social work staff.

³ Vasoo (2012: 27).

On the other hand, the psychology undergraduate degrees were never designed to qualify their holders for professional practice. Rather, the emphasis was—and still is—educating students in the principles and state of knowledge of an exceptionally broad discipline, or cluster of disciplines, as a foundation for a range of careers, only some of which entail working professionally as a practitioner psychologist. Relatively few students entering to do psychology eventually embark on practitioner careers—or, for that matter, academic or research careers—though many may have started off wanting to pursue them. Academic psychologists are happy as a rule that graduates in the subject can bring a psychologically-educated mind to a wide range of careers in which they may not hold the title of psychologist per se.

Pressure for Greater Integration

In Nair's volume, Ann Wee provides a vivid account of the struggle to separate social work from the Department of Economics—in which it started—to form the Department of Applied Social Studies in 1956. This was despite the fact that “Professor [Thomas H.] Silcock [Head of Economics] admitted that representing a discipline that was not his own was a somewhat stressful responsibility, and it was he who initiated the separation of social work from economics”.⁴ Ironically, a similar struggle would eventually contribute to the separation of psychology from social work.

It must have been difficult and trying for the Head of the Department of Social Work and Psychology to reconcile the different emphases that the two disciplines brought to the table. In hindsight, there was an additional challenge—the desire to secure the joint future of the two programmes within the Department by integrating them in certain ways, and minimising or foreclosing on developments that could have supported increased autonomy if not separation. It may be that some of the early desire to include as much applied focus as possible in the psychology programme came from a social work perspective that had so effectively adopted exactly that approach.⁵ Even though this desire was resisted in the original curriculum in the interests of internationalising the degree, it must have been tempting to work towards

⁴ Wee (2012: 13).

⁵ Some psychology staff not from British Commonwealth or American traditions of psychology degrees were sympathetic to this view. The present author recalls Vera Bernard-Opitz, for example, who was trained in Germany and herself a clinician, expressing some surprise and regret that the psychology degree was not seen as primarily intended for the purpose of training practitioners.

two parallel and complementary but interfacing programmes under a common direction, providing both better social work training whilst also producing psychologists with a practical slant and practitioner skills. This, however, would have unavoidably shifted the priorities of the psychology programme away from an emphasis on both pure and applied research, one that characterises the best psychology programmes elsewhere.

Notwithstanding Dean Thumboo's cautionary words, many psychology staff—including the present author—thought that as the psychology programme developed, it would naturally reach a point at which separation had to be considered and indeed would be appropriate. This was probably a misconception, or at least a misreading of the times. As already mentioned, there was never a formal leader for the programme, until shortly before the issue of separation landed on the table. For the 1999/2000 academic year, Ramadhar Singh was designated as the Deputy Head for Psychology. Later, in 2003, Chua Fook Kee became the first psychologist to head the twin-programme department. However, despite the increased representation of psychologists in the department leadership, and even after the psychology programme was well-established and staffed, there continued to be indications that the twinning arrangement would continue indefinitely. For example, the annual University Handbook listed staff of the Department without regard to which programme they taught in—formally, staff were thus not affiliated to any particular programme. In fairness, it should be said that this was standard practice at that time in departments with more than one programme. The Department of Social Work and Psychology was thus not treated differently from, say, Economics and Statistics, which at that time also offered separate programmes within a single department. Department Handbooks also followed this norm, reinforcing the sense that gaining a separate identity for psychology was not a priority:

Social Work and Psychology programmes are offered in the department. These two programmes provide students with the knowledge and skills to work with people in various settings. Both programmes, which have different milestones of development, benefit from interdisciplinary contact. There is clear recognition too, that each programme has particular fields which are uniquely its own. These features give strength, breadth and depth to the department and enhance the development of interdisciplinary teaching, training and research.⁶

⁶ Department of Social Work & Psychology Handbook (ca. 1997: 5). Essentially the same statement appeared in all versions of the handbook.

On the other hand, such a twinning approach to the two disciplines was not one likely to reassure either existing or potential psychology staff who might be concerned about the academic standing or development of the programme, or who might be unsure about being expected to engage in joint teaching, training or research with social work staff.

In the years that followed, there were further developments that suggested—if anything—an emphasis on increased integration across programmes. Some staff—notably A. Chang and Vicky Tan—were assigned to teach in both programmes. The former had a longstanding appointment in the social work programme, which he had joined in 1972 and where he taught psychology. The latter was a Senior Tutor with a social work degree, later qualifying in counselling and teaching this in the psychology programme. In fact, it was only when the two programmes separated that distinct programme affiliations of staff were actually settled. This actually made for quite a bit of drama, as each member of staff was only then informed by the Dean which Department—Social Work or Psychology—they would be working in.⁷

Other matters—minor in themselves but bearing greater weight as they accumulated—added to this sense of obligatory union. Until 1997, Academic Exercises (or Honours Theses) could name only the Department on their title page, and not the programme from which they originated. This caused resentment among some psychology students, who clearly identified with only one programme. In fairness, it must be added that these exercises/theses were listed separately by programme in the Department Handbook. There was also an insistence that facilities such as computer laboratories and observation rooms be treated as department rather than programme resources, more or less regardless of their greater value to one programme or the other. Along the same lines, there was an immediate objection from the Head when psychology students proposed setting up their own student society. As mentioned earlier, the Society of Social Work Students was reconstituted as the SSWPS to be the sole student body for students on either programme.

⁷ Interestingly, and perhaps as a well-deserved recognition of their importance, administrative staff in the General Office were able to express a preference for which department to go to. Among others, Irene Ho and Janice Ow elected to join the Department of Psychology. Ow remains to this day with the Department, while Ho retired in April 2018 after serving more than 50 years in NUS.

Staff listing in the Department Handbook for Social Work and Psychology in 1997. There was little or no way to tell who was associated with, or qualified in, which discipline. Senior tutors, teaching assistants and visiting/adjunct staff were listed on the next page of the handbook (not shown here).

II. Academic Staff

Head of Department

S. VASOO, PhD MSW Hong Kong, DipSocStud Sing

Associate Professors

Bishop, George, PhD MS Yale, BA Hope College, Holland

Chang Weining Chu (Mdm) PhD MA Houston, BA Taiwan

Elliott, John, PhD Sheff, MA BA (Hons) Camb

Singh, Ramadhar, PhD MS Purdue, MA BA (Hons) Bihar

Senior Lecturers

Ang, John, MSW Hawaii, BSocSci (Hons) Sing, CertEd TTC

Bernard-Opitz, Vera, (Mrs) PhD Gott, Postgrad & PhD Stud Calif, MSc Gott

Blake, Myrna L (Mrs), PhD USM, MSocSci Sing, DipSocStud Sing, CertEd Bath

Cheung, Po-Lo, Paul, PhD Michigan, MA MSW Hawaii, BA BSocSci (Hons) Sing
Cert.PopSt. Hawaii

Chua Fook Kee, PhD UCLA, MA Cant, BA Well,

Howard, Richard, PhD Belfast, BA (Hons) Oxford

Ngiam Tee Liang, PhD UC Berkeley, MSc (Econ) Swansea, BSocSci (Hons) Sing

Ong Teck Hong, PhD Wales, MEd Washington, BA NU, DipEd Sing

Ow, Rosaleen (Mrs), PhD Sing, MSc Cardiff, BSocSci (Hons) Sing

Rickard Liow, Susan (Mrs), PhD BSc (Hons) Lond, DipClinPsych, AFBPsS, C.Psychol

Tan Ngho Tiong, PhD Minn, MSW Penn, BA Sing

Ward, Colleen (Miss), PhD Dunelm, BS Spring Hill

Lecturers

Barrett, Mark, PhD Texas A&M, MSc Murray State, BS James Madison

Bentelspacher, Carl, PhD USC, MSSW Wise, BA Calif Stat

Chan Cheng, DPhil Oxf, BA (Hons) Atkn, BA York,

Chang, Anthony, PhD, MSocSci Sing, BSc NSW

Macner-Licht, Beryl (Mrs), MSW MPublic Health Minn, BSW Hebrew Univ

Mekhta, Kalyani, PhD MSocSci BSocSci (Hons) Sing

Nair, Elizabeth (Mrs), PhD Nottingham, BPsych UWA

Sriram N, PhD MS Oregon, B.Tech IIT Madras

Cracks

In a sense, the combination of two academically distinct disciplines—social work and psychology—within the same department did raise two main problems: academic differences and autonomy. Academically, social work and psychology have different criteria for excellence, arising from their respective emphases on professional practice and theoretical research. This, among other things, meant differing infrastructural needs for the delivery of quality education and research. Psychology, in particular, needed laboratories for its research, something unheard of in social work and indeed many other social sciences.

Regarding autonomy, there were issues of reputation, resource sharing and staff morale. As for reputation, it was necessary, for instance, to explain to external persons—including potential psychology staff—that this was actually a department of social work *or* psychology, and that students were not obliged to take both subjects nor were psychology staff expected to have any familiarity with social work. As for resource sharing, being located in a single department meant it was necessary for the two programmes to prioritise such matters as the relative merits of candidates for research student scholarships even when these candidates were pursuing different disciplines. And as for morale, the psychology staff—who might have been expected to be enthused and excited to be in at the start of a new academic development—sometimes found it difficult to find direction since there was no designated leader of the psychology programme for more than a decade. It did not help that in the end, all matters came back to the Head of Department anyway.

Despite the undercurrents, the amiable but determined Vasoo kept a firm hand on the steering wheel as the Department grew and saw increasing student numbers. After the rapid expansion of staff in the first few years of the psychology programme, the last decade of the 20th century was more a period of consolidation under his continued headship. Since the earliest years of the previous decade, Vasoo had supported the idea of developing the psychology programme within the Department of Social Work, and was therefore enthusiastic about it. He made it clear that the new programme had to be provided with the resources it needed, sometimes even in the face of some misgivings from his social work colleagues.

Despite perceived pressure for greater integration, and a Head of Department wanting very much for the two programmes to thrive within a single departmental structure, policies specific to psychology were emerging by way of custom and practice. For example, it was decided

that for psychology, the Academic Exercise or Honours Thesis had to be an empirical research project that included primary data. Proposals for this project were to be presented to the class of fellow honours students, and staff were encouraged to attend not only to flag gaps or problems with proposals but also to serve as a de facto ethics review board. In this regard, the programme showed itself to be ahead of the times, paying attention to ethical considerations years before the Institutional Review Board (IRB) appeared on the scene.⁸ Similarly, a modest test library was acquired for use only by suitably qualified psychology staff and students. These psychological tests were made available in a controlled manner in accordance with the requirements laid down by the test publishers.

Throughout this consolidation period, there were also programme-specific work groups and considerations when it came to curricula. For psychology, care was taken to give regard to the requirements of degree recognition to ensure that its graduates had access to postgraduate degrees overseas. There were thus many discussions on curriculum development, and reviews that considered the coverage students were getting and what should be required “core” modules. These discussions entailed extensive reviews of what good departments elsewhere did, especially in the US, the UK, Canada and Australia, which were the most frequent destinations of students heading for postgraduate studies.

Thus, many aspects of department management actually occurred at the programme level. Even when it came to the 5-year equipment plan that was updated annually, separate plans were put forward for social work and psychology. The reader should therefore not have the impression that efforts to ensure continuation of the department as a twinned affair meant a complete lack of functional separation and autonomy for psychology. However, wider issues kept coming to the surface. The desire for postgraduate professional degrees, especially in clinical psychology, was a recurrent issue. It was not easy to envisage setting up such degrees without the availability and backing of a body of practitioners willing to provide the many necessary hours of supervised practicum experience. This, however, would require much

⁸ Although clinical ethics committees had long existed in Singapore, the field of research ethics was less well-established, and was reviewed in 2005, following the publication of a National Bioethics Advisory Report on research with human subjects (Bioethics Advisory Committee, 2004). Soon after, the NUS IRB was set up, and required all research, including that for the honours thesis, to be reviewed by it. Over time, however, approval authority was delegated to departments for some types of research, and this greater devolution to departments has continued.

single-minded commitment, not to mention systematic staff recruitment, something a twin-programme department would be hard-pressed to sanction. Probably as a compromise, a master's in applied psychology programme was set up, with emphasis on candidates undertaking a major work of an applied nature. However, this programme was no substitute for the more conventional, and more demanding, professional courses that required accumulating practical experience. It is thus not surprising that this applied programme was terminated in the final years of the combined department.

Fracture

In 2000, Vasoo stepped down from the headship. At that time, appointments to head a department were made without necessarily having a systematic canvassing of staff opinion, though this was about to change with the installation of new NUS President Shih.⁹ The University appointed Ngiam Tee Liang, an experienced and well-respected social worker, as Acting Head to replace the outgoing Vasoo. Ngiam was later to serve a term in the political arena as a Nominated Member of Parliament,¹⁰ before becoming Head of the Department of Social Work when the two programmes separated in 2005.

In the year he became Acting Head, Ngiam unwittingly set in motion the events that led to the eventual parting of ways of the two programmes. Under Ngiam's headship, the issue of separation which had been simmering under his predecessor's watch became acute. The number of students taking psychology had been growing with little signs of tailing off, but staff numbers had remained more or less constant over the preceding decade. In addition, there were no signs of likely progress on issues of postgraduate professional qualifications or even the expansion of postgraduate research degree enrolment. The psychology staff were not all united, but a good number felt

⁹ Among the changes was a limit of three years for a term of appointment as Head of Department. This was renewable only for one more term, as a rule.

¹⁰ A Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) is, as the name implies, nominated by a Parliamentary Select Committee, and appointed by the President of Singapore on the recommendation of Parliament. They are not elected, and cannot vote on financial bills or constitutional amendments. The NMP scheme was started in 1990 as a way to increase diversity in Parliament at a time when the governing PAP tended to have an overwhelming majority of MPs. The scheme was by no means uncontroversial, since some opposition MPs and politicians argued that it undermined the need for them, and was essentially undemocratic. Nonetheless, the system has continued to the present day, although with some tweaks along the way. Ngiam served from 2002 to 2005.

sufficiently strongly on the matter to meet in the American Club—courtesy of W.C. Chang—to determine whether anything could be done. One of the matters discussed at this slightly conspiratorial but essentially ineffective meeting, was who might be prepared to speak out for and head a psychology department if an opportunity arose and one were formed. This possibility was explored because new NUS President Shih had signalled his intention to provide for staff to have a say in the selection of University leaders (such as Heads of Departments).

As it transpired, all such talk proved premature and came to nought. Nonetheless, events moved quite fast on their own thereafter. Ngiam had conceived the idea of a departmental retreat, a one-day affair to be held on 7 September 2000, with the intention of discussing the future of the Department. In itself, this was an excellent idea, but the one item many psychology staff wanted to discuss more than any other—the possibility of a separation of programmes—was not on the agenda. Rather, Ngiam indicated that he had already discussed the matter with Lily Kong, Dean of FASS,¹¹ and did not intend to pursue it any further. After some persuasion, however, he agreed to include this issue for discussion. The retreat began with a general meeting of the entire department, and thereafter, discussions on various issues (including separation) were conducted separately by programme. Somewhat surprisingly, this was actually the first time the psychology staff had had an opportunity to openly and formally discuss the issue of separation as a group. In the event, the minutes record that the 14 psychology staff attending the retreat all agreed that a separation would be desirable, though one expressed reservations as regards timing. At any rate, the eventual upshot was an agreement to form a joint working group with social work staff to look into the separation issue and consider its pros and cons.

However, events took an unexpected turn in that Dean Kong visited the Department on 25 September 2000, and requested a paper on the issue of separation, with a 2-week deadline (although later extended to 18 October 2000). Consequently, a special Department meeting was called on 4 October 2000 to discuss the issue. That meeting turned out to be difficult. Social work

¹¹ Kong was Dean from 2000 to 2003. She is now President of the Singapore Management University.

staff said very little, though one—Maliki Osman¹²—raised the question of how resources would be allocated in the event of a separation. In giving voice to this, he of course put his finger on an issue that had been one about which Vasoo had earlier been obliged to defend his position—his undeniable generosity to the psychology programme—and which had continued to exercise minds as long as the Department comprised two programmes under a single administration.

The psychology staff, however, were divided. George Bishop, John Elliott and David Chan in particular argued for separation, but they were opposed by Ramadhar Singh, who was supported by a few other colleagues. Part of the reason for this opposition was that Elliott, unwisely perhaps, had already drafted a position paper on separation and had visited colleagues individually to ascertain their views—13 of them had been in support, with six against. Singh felt this to be inappropriate, believing that staff did not have the authority to make proposals or to take such initiatives. Perhaps he also felt that this was an undermining of his position as the Deputy Head for Psychology.¹³ Nonetheless, Dean Kong's intervention had the effect of ensuring that Ngiam did proceed to form a working group. The group was chaired by Ngiam as Head of Department, and comprised three elected staff from each programme—Alexander Lee, Maliki Osman and Rosaleen Ow from social work; Chua Fook Kee, John Elliott and Sim Tick Ngee from psychology.

In the end, three proposals emerged, in the form of position papers. The first argued for the formation of two separate departments—this was the report of the working group, and was supported by the social work staff and by 12 psychology staff. A second was much more ambitious, in effect suggesting that the social sciences within FASS be reorganised into an institute with teaching departments (social work, psychology, economics, geography and sociology) and interdisciplinary research centres (child development, behavioural intervention, family studies, cognition, neuroscience, ageing and substance abuse)—this was tabled by five psychology staff. A third paper arguing for no change was put forth by Singh. These possibilities were further discussed at a second special meeting on 17 October 2000. This session was

¹² Maliki went on to become an MP for the PAP at the General Election of 2001. He quickly made his mark and following the 2020 General Election, was promoted to Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, Second Minister of Education, and Second Minister of Foreign Affairs.

¹³ The present author has no recollection of Singh ever having convened a meeting of the psychology staff. He remained very much in the background until events obliged staff to take a position.

even stormier, with Singh indicating he would object directly to the NUS President if the working group's recommendation was submitted to the Dean. As it turned out, all three documents were submitted to Dean Kong.

Given the manifest dissent among the psychology staff, and with other major administrative changes taking place at the University level, none of the proposals was pursued. However, so large an upheaval could not be disregarded, and it was decided that the Department would advertise for a professorial-level appointment in psychology, to develop the discipline but without committing the Department to a separation. The resulting advertisement rather oddly mentioned the possibility of a separate psychology department in due course, presumably hoping that this would be an inducement for the more ambitious to apply. However, perhaps not surprisingly, the applicants from this ambivalent advertisement did not satisfy the University's expectations. Although the Search Committee for this appointment eventually came up with a shortlist it thought it could just about recommend, the Provost's reaction after interviewing the top candidate was far from favourable, and no appointment was therefore made. In many ways, this ambivalent approach nicely illustrated exactly the problems of the uncertain identity of a twin-programme department—an uncertainty that a Visiting Committee would soon identify and pronounce as a limiting factor in the recruitment of psychology staff and the development of research in the psychology programme.

All this while, the new regime under NUS President Shih was making changes to how the University operated. There were clear attempts to move the University towards greater focus on research and entrepreneurship. Regarding management, new provisions for leadership appointments—such as term limits for the appointment of department heads—came into effect, and department staff were invited to give their views on potential heads. For the headship of the Department of Social Work and Psychology, many staff therefore contributed inputs, including the present author who pointed out that although the psychology programme had the majority of staff and offered one of the most popular and sought-after undergraduate degrees in FASS, the Department had never had a psychologist as its head since the programme started. This, together with other representations, may have contributed to the decision, in 2003, to appoint Chua Fook Kee as the Head of the Department of Social Work and Psychology. In fact, Chua would end up overseeing a transition of the psychology programme into a full-fledged department of its own. The ripples of the Ngiam retreat had proved sufficient to prompt an eventual decision to split.

Separation

Chua was a cognitive psychologist with a robust and unconventional non-nonsense approach.¹⁴ The University leadership likely saw him—quite correctly, as it turned out—as someone who could take firm control of an increasingly fractious department. On the other hand, Chua was considerably dedicated to his research and was therefore a somewhat reluctant Head.¹⁵ Nonetheless, he would preside over several significant developments that would transit psychology from programme to department.

One such development that was newly thrown into the mix was the report of the Visiting Committee which visited in 2004. As mentioned earlier, these committees were discipline-specific, and replaced the previous system of external examiners to provide an external check on the standards and progress of a department's programmes. Under Chua's watch, the 2004 Visiting Committee made a restrained but definitive statement on the need to address the different needs of the respective programmes in the department, unequivocally stating that:

The current affiliation with Social Work is confusing and misleading to outside observers, including potential future students and faculty (as indeed it was to ourselves when we were invited to serve). The very different goals, priorities, and infrastructure needs of the disciplines of Social Work and Psychology interfere in non-trivial ways with both groups' processes of planning for the future. Therefore the Committee recommends that Psychology, with the help of the Dean, move immediately to create a separate identity from Social Work.¹⁶

The Visiting Committee was careful to stress that this separate identity did not necessarily entail the establishment of a separate department. They entertained some doubts as to the viability of any such a course of action—

¹⁴ Students in the first honours cohort may remember how Chua cancelled a class less than 5 minutes in, when he found out that no-one had done the readings he had assigned for that session.

¹⁵ Chua later gave further administrative service as a Vice-Dean of FASS in the years after separation, and retired from his tenured Associate Professorship in 2016. He is still research-active and remains an Honorary Fellow in the Department of Psychology.

¹⁶ Visiting Committee Report on Psychology (2004: 9). The Committee comprised John Frisby (University of Sheffield), David Funder (University of California at Riverside), Harry Reis (University of Rochester) and Kua Ee Heok (NUS Department of Psychological Medicine). Kua advised the Committee, but by common consent of all committee members recused himself from involvement in writing the report, to allow for it to be a wholly external product. This internal report was circulated to staff.

on account of the smaller size of the resulting departments—and felt it risked being seen as a panacea. The real challenges facing the programme in their view were to actively develop research resources and areas of expertise, and to grow the number of postgraduate research students.¹⁷ Nonetheless, they were clear that identity was an important issue, urging that “All advertisements, websites, and brochures should be prominently labelled as ‘Psychology’ even if the department is not formally divided from an administrative standpoint”.¹⁸

It may be noted that when they visited again in 2009, the Visiting Committee made reference to their 2004 visit and the issue of morale in particular. They said they had found in 2004 “a demoralised department bearing a large student-faculty ratio (in excess of 40:1). The department had inadequate space, including a lack of specialized laboratories, and it was inappropriately administered within a structure that included the Department of Social Work”.¹⁹ In fact, the staffing issue had become critical. The number of full-time psychology staff declined from 20 in 2002 to 14 for the 2004/2005 academic year, a reduction of some 30%. Several staff had reached the conclusion of their contracts and decided to leave, or they left because they were not renewed—these included most of those preferring the idea of research centres to separate departments. The tide was turning in favour of one camp. However, many of these who left were experienced teaching staff—including Mark Barrett,²⁰ A. Chang, Rick Howard²¹ and N. Sriram²²—which left a huge gap in teaching resources. This was made worse when two further staff—W.C. Chang and Elizabeth Nair—left before

¹⁷ In this aspect, the Committee proved to be prescient. One major need that continues to the present is to increase postgraduate research student numbers, without which the hope of attracting the best academics to the department will likely flounder.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.9.

¹⁹ Visiting Committee Report on the Psychology Programme (2009: 2). The external membership of the Visiting Committee remained unchanged, while Kua stood down altogether, with no replacement for him.

²⁰ Barrett had considerable regional experience in the evaluation of social and health-related programmes, and for very many years co-taught the History and Systems of Psychology module with the present author. This was a seminar class in the honours year, and the two attended all sessions and often debated issues with each other in class, as an aid to encouraging student participation in discussions. Though making for interesting sessions, this was not an economical use of staff time, and was abandoned after Barrett left.

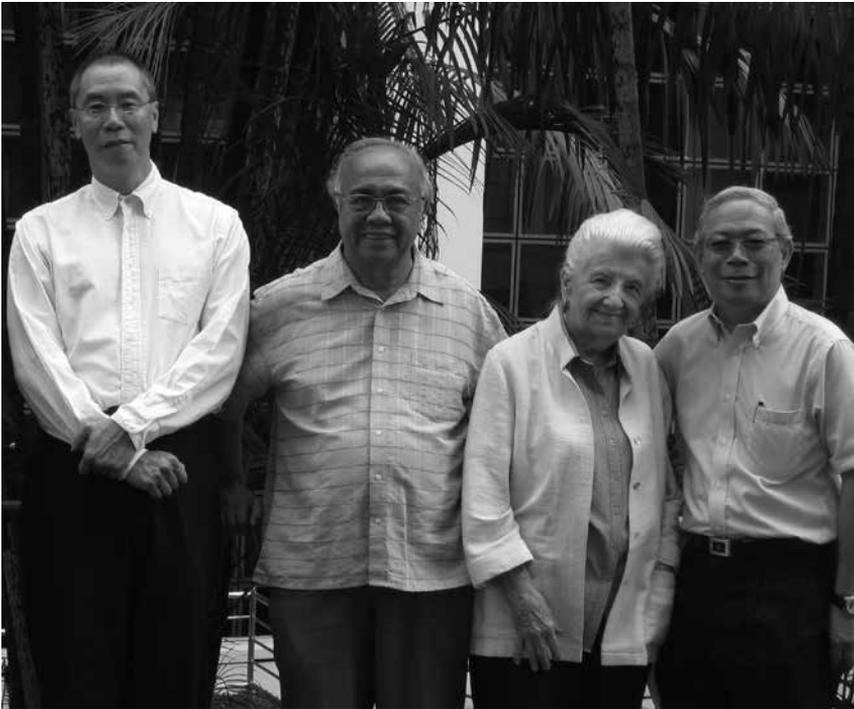
²¹ Howard was a British biological psychologist with an interest in forensic psychology.

²² Sriram was essentially a methodologist interested in implicit decision processes, having moved into psychology from a foundation in chemical engineering.

the new department opened in July 2005. Student numbers, on the other hand, showed no corresponding reduction or even moderation. Teaching resources were becoming distinctly stretched, and the situation was becoming increasingly difficult.

Meanwhile, the social work staff were apparently experiencing bouts of uncertainty at the prospect of having a psychologist as their Head of Department. Chua had always enjoyed amicable relationships with his social work colleagues, and had prudently avoided any entanglement in the more acrimonious elements of the separation debates. Indeed, this relative neutrality must have made him a favourite for the headship when Ngiam's term as Acting Head was up. Ngiam, though, continued as the designated Programme Head of Social Work, and in that capacity was able to attend the regular Heads of Department meetings at the Faculty level.

Heads of the Department of Social Work and Psychology who oversaw and developed the psychology programme from its inception. From left: Chua Fook Kee, S. Vasoo, Ann Wee, Ngiam Tee Liang. Photo taken in 2012, courtesy of Department of Social Work, National University of Singapore.



In 2004, Tan Tai Yong took over as Dean of FASS,²³ when Lily Kong was elevated to become Vice-Provost. Tan had been Vice-Dean under Kong for the preceding two years, and so was well acquainted with the issues of the Department. He soon met with the respective staff of the two programmes, and the upshot of these meetings was a renewed push for separation. This time, however, there was far greater consensus among the psychology staff, since all the staff resisting the original working group's proposal had left, except for Singh.

The separation issue had in fact been discussed within the department—but inconclusively—throughout the preceding two years. However, practical steps incorporating the possibility of separation were already taking place. In April 2002, an existing block (AS6) in FASS was due for renovation and was set aside to house the Department. Specific plans were made to locate the psychology and social work programmes on the third and fourth floors of the block, respectively.²⁴ In September 2004, after the meetings with Dean Tan, Chua and Ngiam submitted fresh proposals for their respective programmes. Together with the 2004 Visiting Committee's report and the evident need to settle the matter, Dean Tan saw to it that a fresh proposal was made to the Provost and then to the Senate for the setting up of separate departments for psychology and social work. His proposal specifically mentioned the difficulty of recruiting and retaining psychology staff given the anomalous placement of the psychology programme, and also drew attention to the difference in indicators of excellence characteristic of the respective disciplines.²⁵ This submission proved successful, and the new Department of Psychology was to start in July 2005 with George Bishop designated to head it.

And so ended the undercurrents of the several years leading to separation. In a strange way, when it finally happened, separation still caused a measure of surprise, not least of all to Bishop who was on sabbatical leave at Duke University at the time. In June of that year, he received an email notifying him of his appointment as Head of the Department of Psychology, and soon returned to step directly into the throes of not only managing a body of staff—albeit one he was already familiar with—but also setting and ramping

²³ Tan served as Dean from 2004 to 2009. He is now President of Yale-NUS College.

²⁴ According to the Department staff meeting minutes. Both would relocate again in subsequent years—Psychology to its present home in Block AS4 and Social Work to Block AS3. That the two departments are now in entirely different blocks is perhaps the ultimate symbol of the separation.

²⁵ As circulated to FASS staff, in FASS Circular 8 of 2004-2005.

up a whole new department. It was a daunting prospect, especially with rising student and falling staff numbers. Adding to this was the expectation that in line with the new University emphasis on research, psychology—already research-productive before separation—would become even more so with its independence. As events turned out, having made the decision to separate and start a new department for psychology, the University, and especially Dean Tan, gave Bishop very strong support, which in turn rapidly transformed the new department.

A New Dawn

When he assumed headship, Bishop faced a severe resource challenge, and drew up for Dean Tan a list of what he saw as needful. The original submission to separate the programmes had envisaged no substantial increase in expenditure resulting from the separation itself. This was correct insofar as provisions had already been made for physical separation, with the programmes having located to separate floors of the AS6 block. However, this expectation of no increase in costs was wildly optimistic when considering the twin needs to cope with the rising student numbers and to make up for the accumulated staff losses over the years—from a fairly stable number around 20 between 1992 and 2000, a quarter or so had left by the time of separation although many of those who remained had been with the programme for at least a decade. Such a disproportion meant heavy demands on teaching off the bat, and would certainly hamper efforts in research. Moreover, the submission for separation took no account of the requirements for research space in the form of laboratories and dedicated equipment. Precisely because the criteria of excellence had shifted towards research in the form of publications—as Dean Tan articulated in his submission for separation—it was clear that additional space would be needed, not just for existing staff but also for any recruitment effort to be successful as good incoming staff would need laboratory space.

Bishop therefore put forward an ambitious request for staff and space—the appointment of five new staff members each year for the next three years and the allocation of 800 square metres of additional space to develop laboratory and other research facilities. To an outsider, this must have appeared an outrageously ambitious expansion programme, not to mention a most costly one. But Dean Tan stood by his support for the separation and soon enough, the Department was allocated the second floor of Block

AS4 for its office requirements and the entire fourth floor of Block AS5 (the adjacent block) for the setting up of laboratories, research cubicles, and technician support. Whilst it can never be ascertained for sure, it is likely that such availability of space—as well as the messaging from this strong show of support from university authorities—made the newly-founded Department much more attractive to prospective recruits. For sure, the Department could now explicitly include the availability of research space for its recruitment efforts.

Happy faces outside the General Office of the new Department of Psychology in 2005. From left: John Elliott, Vicky Tan, Winston Goh, Long Foo Yee, George Bishop. Photo courtesy of Long Foo Yee.



Beyond the newly-founded department, the University had also moved to develop a more refined concept of the educator track—then known as the teaching track—as a genuine career option for staff. With the University emphasising research, research excellence—which for psychology took the primary form of publications in journals—was becoming a (or the) key criterion for attaining tenure. The educator track was thus intended for

staff who were outstanding teachers²⁶ but who through disinclination or for other reasons did not sufficiently invest in research—or at least showed the fruits of such research—to justify being offered tenure. There is of course a concern that educator track appointments are seen as second-class; to this, the University has always maintained that teaching should carry equal weight even while there is emphasis on research.²⁷ At any rate, the emergence of the educator track provided considerable help in building up the new Department of Psychology. This was because it allowed the quick expansion of staff to meet the teaching load, while also freeing up time for those on the tenure track to continue with, if not expand, their research. A key event in this regard was a visit by Tan Chorh Chuan, NUS Provost at the time who would later become NUS President.²⁸ At that meeting, the issue of teaching load was raised in the context of the need to not compromise research, and soon after, the Department was informed that it could recruit a further number of educator-track staff.

The upshot was that with a combination of educator-track and tenure-track appointments, the staff strength of the new department approached the five-per-annum target set by Bishop. When he took office, there were 16 full-time academic staff, and by the end of his first three-year term, this number had grown to 28. A further nett gain of six staff in the next three years meant that in the six years since its independence, the Department had more than doubled its staff under Bishop's watch. His ambitious plan has borne fruit.

Beyond Bishop, it should be eminently clear that various University leaders—Dean Tan in particular—played critical roles in the coming into being and rapid growth of the independent Department of Psychology. Not only that, the leaders—Dean Tan now joined by Provost Tan—provided

²⁶ What constitutes an outstanding teacher is open to debate, especially in terms of how it is to be operationalised. For a long time, such a teacher was one to whom students gave highly positive ratings and feedback. In subsequent years, the University added the practice of peer review, whereby two peers—one from within the Department and another outside it—would write a report based on their study of a portfolio provided by the teacher and a physical observation of at least one class taught by the teacher.

²⁷ To the University's credit, it has sought to raise the standing of the educator track staff. While tenure is still reserved for those on the (usual) tenure track, those on the educator track can now aspire to an "open contract" which is essentially like tenure. Even privileges like sabbaticals are now available to educator track staff.

²⁸ Tan was Provost from 2004 to 2008, and NUS President from 2008 to 2017. He is now Executive Director of MOH's Office of Healthcare Transformation (MOHT) and the first Chief Health Scientist at MOH.

various forms of support that can be characterised as remarkable and bordering on the extraordinary. Their contributions are recorded in the present account as a form of gratitude, for they ensured that the Department, even if starting its new life on hard ground, was primed to thrive.

A new season had indeed arrived.

From a starting cohort of 72 students and a single staff member in 1986, there are now 900 students or so who take the introductory psychology module in an academic year, and around 220 graduate every year with a Bachelor of Social Sciences (Honours) degree in psychology. In the 2021 world university rankings by subject, NUS Psychology ranked 16 out of 303 on the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) list¹ and 57 out of 533 on the Times Higher Education (THE) list,² both very respectable positions. NUS Psychology has certainly come a long way.

At the societal level, psychology is today well recognised as a hub science—or a set of behavioural sciences—and its graduates enter careers of many kinds. The majority are not employed as psychologists or engaged in psychology-related work, but substantial numbers doing psychological work can be found in government ministries (especially MOH, MINDEF, MOE, the Ministry of Home Affairs [MHA] and the Ministry of Social and Family Development [MSF]) where they engage in research and practice. As regards practice, the old apprenticeship model—where a fresh honours

¹ QS *World University Rankings 2021: Psychology*. Available at <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2021/psychology> [accessed 21 Jul. 2021].

² THE *World University Rankings 2021: Psychology*. Available at https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2021/subject-ranking/psychology#!/page/1/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats [accessed 21 Jul. 2021].

graduate was appointed, learned on the job, and was then conferred the psychologist title—has largely given way to the recognition that professional qualifications entailing postgraduate training are now a requirement for such work. The private sector—from firms offering human resource management and marketing expertise, to private practitioners in a range of areas such as clinical, counselling and industrial-organisational psychology—has likewise grown beyond recognition. Indeed, in the absence of any system of national registration and licensing, it is difficult to number the psychologists on the ground today, but it most definitely far exceeds that when the programme started in 1986, when the number of PhD-level psychologists in the country would not have reached double figures.

The Department has also moved dynamically in tandem with trends in Singapore and elsewhere, and sometimes has even taken the lead to spur further developments. In 2008, the Department became the first—and remains the only—local autonomous university department to offer a clinical psychology master's programme. Officially known as the Master of Psychology (Clinical) programme, it originally started as two programmes (one local and one jointly offered with the University of Melbourne) but now has only the local one. The programme has been a success, producing more than 100 graduates who now practise in the field as clinical psychologists. The bootstrap problem has been turned on its head, and many graduates from the programme now offer supervision opportunities for new intakes.

It is not only in clinical psychology that the Department has moved boldly. In 2015, in recognition that a master's degree was increasingly the qualification needed to practise as a psychologist (regardless of domain), the Department offered a through-train accelerated master's programme. Officially known as the Concurrent Degree Programme (CDP), it allows top students to graduate with both a master's degree and an honours degree within 5 years, instead of the usual 6 (4 years for the honours programme and another 2 for the master's programme). For the larger NUS population, the Department gamely took on the challenge when a university-level programme to train soft skills in undergraduates landed in its lap. This programme—Roots & Wings 2.0—was launched in 2018 with innovative pedagogies, and has seen more than 3000 places taken up for the learning of skills like collaboration and optimising performance.

There has indeed been much happening in the new season, and much to be excited about.

Academic and administrative staff of the Department of Psychology at the farewell function for John Elliott in 2019. Photo courtesy of Melvin Yap.



John Elliott (9) and Susan Rickard Liow (10) were early staff members of NUS Psychology, along with Janice Ow (8) who was an administrative staff member from its inception. Among NUS Psychology's own undergraduates who are now staff members are Lee Li Neng (1), Winston Goh (2), Ryan Hong (3), Jia Lile (4), Nicholas Hon (5), Matthew Lim (6), Melvin Yap (7), Mariam Aljunied (adjunct, 11), Eddie Tong (12), Sim Tick Ngee (13) and Stephen Lim (14).

A Strange but Not Unique Start

It was a strange start for NUS Psychology—to become first a programme in 1986 and then a department in 2005. However, it is by no means the only one to have faced resistance to being established, or at least to have been late arriving. This perhaps has also contributed to the myth that psychology is a young discipline, especially in Singapore.

The history of psychology has examples of departments having to start up in the face of objections and misapprehensions, often from inside the academic establishment. As far as the present author can tell, nowhere else has psychology started off harnessed to social work, but there have been comparable anomalies. In the UK, for instance, the psychology departments of the Universities of both Oxford and Cambridge started with a good deal of reluctance, which also highlighted the late development of psychology departments generally in that country. Indeed, having started off with an early psychological laboratory which opened in 1913, the University of Cambridge enjoyed such a monopoly that a great many UK university departments for some decades after World War II were headed by Cambridge alumni trained or strongly influenced by Sir Frederick Bartlett, who, in turn, had gained his inspiration from W.H. Rivers and a tradition of comparative anthropology. Long before this, however, there were objections when psychophysics was first mooted, when a proposal for a laboratory was made in 1877. The idea of experimenting with people seemed at that time to be objectionable, on essentially religious grounds.³ Nevertheless, psychology at Cambridge existed for many years as a Department of Experimental Psychology, with a subsequent sister Department of Developmental and Social Psychology, and it was not until 2012 that a unified Department of Psychology was established.

Over at the University of Oxford, a memorandum by Weiskrantz⁴—a Reader in Psychology at Cambridge in the 1960s before moving to the Department of Experimental Psychology at Oxford—recounted similar problems with getting the resources and approvals needed. He noted that

³ “Cambridge University refused to permit the establishment of a psychophysics laboratory because study of such a topic would ‘insult religion by putting the human soul on a pair of scales’” (Hearst, 1979: 7, quoted without attribution). For the history of psychology at Cambridge, see the University of Cambridge Department of Psychology website, available at <https://www.psychol.cam.ac.uk/about-us/history> [accessed 22 Feb. 2021].

⁴ Weiskrantz (nd).

Henry Wilde, in 1898 endowing the Readership (later Professorship) in “Mental Philosophy” which bears his name, had stipulated that “the post should be ‘exclusive of the methods of experimental psychology’”.⁵ It was with difficulty that a single-subject honours degree was eventually inaugurated much later in 1970, despite objections from philosophers. It is thus perhaps reassuring to realise that the commencement of an honours psychology programme in Singapore lagged a mere 16 years behind so ancient and eminent a university as Oxford, and that the creation of a separate and comprehensive psychology department in Singapore anticipated that of a similar department in (equally eminent) Cambridge by a good seven years.⁶ Even at the very good provincial University of Sheffield, Harry Kay, the founding head of the psychology department imbued with a sense of the potential of applied psychology after being influenced by Bartlett (and his wartime service), nonetheless had difficulties persuading the university to separate psychology from philosophy.⁷

In the US, the history of modern psychology seems to show greater enthusiasm and energy in the development of the discipline, at least compared to the UK. Nonetheless, a different story sometimes emerges when it came to actually establishing departments. Referring to Edwin G. Boring, the eminent historian of psychology, Goodwin remarks that

... Boring served in World War I in the Army mental testing program, taught briefly at Clark University, then went to Harvard in 1922. He remained there for the rest of his career. At Harvard Boring spent the next decade building up the laboratory and trying to convince the authorities that psychology should be a separate department, not just part of the philosophy department. This did not occur until 1934.⁸

In fact, it is not until the lens is turned to Germany that there is sight of what appears to be an early enlightened attitude to the establishment

⁵ Ibid, p.22, quoted without attribution. University of Oxford Council Regulation 24 of 2002 states that “For the purposes of this professorship the term ‘Mental Philosophy’ shall be taken to mean the theoretical and conceptual study of the human mind” (<https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/wildeprofessorofmentalphilosophypdf.pdf> [accessed 22 Feb. 2021]).

⁶ The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge are respectively ranked third and fourth for psychology in the 2021 QS rankings (<https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2021/psychology> [accessed 21 Jul. 2021]).

⁷ See Warr (2001) for a discussion of the case of Sheffield and the emergence of psychology departments in the UK generally.

⁸ Goodwin (2012: 13).

of psychology as a field of enquiry, starting with Wilhelm Wundt's well-known laboratory, established in 1879 at the University of Leipzig, and his much lesser-known (at least to the English-speaking world) but extensive 10-volume *Völkerpsychologie*.⁹ It appears that the *Zeitgeist* in unified 19th-century Germany was well-disposed to the extension of enquiry in new directions.¹⁰ In fact, the situation there at that time was strikingly similar to that in post-independence Singapore, in that "German academics had achieved *Lehrfreiheit*—academic freedom to study and teach whatever one wanted ... Academics could do whatever they wished within the confines of the academy, but they were not to interfere in social or political matters".¹¹

The general lesson appears to be that psychology, even in the most prestigious universities, has often experienced difficulty in establishing itself, especially whenever its approach was not congruent with the ethos or prevailing views of other disciplines, since it does not as a rule have in advance an independent and well-informed or receptive public. The case of NUS Psychology is interesting insofar as it was the ethos in social work rather than the more commonly-coupled philosophy that in part constrained the effort to establish the subject as an independent one. The fact remains, however, that psychology's struggles in the face of misunderstandings about its nature appear to be the rule almost as much as the exception—the ground was hard and not just in Singapore. Indeed, it is arguable that, in some form or other, the ground is still sometimes hard as some of these misunderstandings persist to the present day.

What Next?

In today's world where psychology is increasingly recognised as interfacing many disciplines, it is taught as a hub science.¹² As discussed in Chapter 1, one of the issues that held psychology back in the years before the establishment

⁹ Wundt (1832–1920) is widely acknowledged as the founder of experimental psychology. The establishment of his laboratory is often marked as the beginning of psychology as a discipline in its own right.

¹⁰ See Leahey (2000) for a summary of the German 19th-century academic environment, with particular regard to psychology.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 274, citing Danziger (1990).

¹² For a good number of years, the first-year textbook for the Introduction to Psychology module was *Discovering Psychology* by J.T. Cacioppo and L. A. Freberg (various editions). This text, while detailed and demanding for a single-semester module, was adopted in part because it explicitly makes plain the hub position of psychology in a nexus of cognate disciplines.

of the NUS programme was the view that psychology as a profession would be expensive and better served, at a time of limited resources and other higher priorities, by training psychologists overseas. Yet, even though the degree has now been running for more than three decades, programmes leading to professional qualifications in psychology are still limited locally, despite the clinical psychology master's programme. However, there has been considerable realisation that psychology has much to offer in terms of the application of research and research techniques to a diversity of issues where psychology might provide a practical solution or at least contribute a useful perspective. This is undeniably an advance.

The present situation opens for discussion a question that has been debated elsewhere for decades: how to reconcile the academic and professional aspects of psychology. It is often confusing to the lay person that psychology is at once a research discipline and a profession with specialisms. People—including would-be first-year students—are still surprised to discover that the honours degree is not a practitioner qualification, though this misconception has diminished over the years. It probably does not help that the same name—psychology—is used for both the research and the professional arms of the subject. It may further confuse that psychology finds application in numerous ways that do not entail a formal professional qualification, so long as the student has a good grasp of what psychology can offer by way of research findings, research techniques and the conceptualisation of issues. It is here that another history—in the present author's opinion—has lessons to offer.¹³

Looking at the post-war development of psychology in the US and Singapore, there are interesting parallels. In the US, as psychology became better known, there were increasing expectations that psychologists would be able to make useful contributions in an increasingly diverse range of areas. As psychology developed its ability to address problems of applicability, it developed professional specialisms, and the lessons learned differ for different specialisms. Taking first a look at clinical psychology—since this is the one area of psychology that probably commands the greatest interest in Singapore—it is noted that it started in the US in the 19th century, and had to contend with reservations from psychiatrists, who were reluctant to cede clinical or therapeutic responsibilities to clinical psychologists.¹⁴ The

¹³ The discussion that follows relies on a number of secondary historical sources, notably Goodwin (2012), Leahey (2000) and Woody and Viney (2017).

¹⁴ This situation is manifestly also true locally.

result was that clinical psychologists in the US subscribed—for a time—to something called the scientist-practitioner (or Boulder) model which yielded a PhD qualification at the end. As practitioners, they needed to offer evidence-based treatments, which in turn meant that they should be trained with a strong research foundation and should contribute to research in order to improve treatments. An in-depth training in research was, especially at that time, something that distinguished psychologists from their psychiatrist colleagues, and hence this formed a large part of the appeal of the model. This model originated in the 1949 Conference on Graduate Education in Clinical Psychology at Boulder, Colorado. The conference lasted two weeks and marked a sustained effort to define the requirements of training in clinical psychology. However, the model arguably proved more appealing in theory than in practice, and while still regarded as desirable in principle for evidence-based practice, the emphasis on training moved to accommodate a more explicitly practitioner focus with the introduction of the scholar-practitioner (or Vail) model which yielded a Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) qualification instead at the end.¹⁵

While it would be correct to say there were also individually influential figures in clinical psychology—such as Joseph Wolpe¹⁶ or Carl Rogers¹⁷—the historical anchors were more schools of therapy or theoretical approaches. In Singapore, behavioural approaches have tended to be favoured as being pragmatic and quicker in their claimed effects. They also do not require exhaustive and subtle therapeutic conversations and interpretations, which can be difficult unless therapist and client are articulate in the same language, or sometimes dialect, in the case of Singapore. However, there is also much current interest in more humanistic and positive approaches, and here again a historical parallel is apparent. The eventual appeal of humanistic psychological approaches—pioneered in the US by Rogers and Abraham Maslow—lay to some extent in their reaction to the psychoanalytical and behaviourist approaches to clinical conditions. Both these latter were seen, in

¹⁵ The PsyD can go by different names in different places but shares the same foundation.

¹⁶ Wolpe (1915–97) was a South African psychiatrist famous for applying Pavlovian principles in the treatment of disorders, and especially for introducing systematic desensitisation, based originally on (and credited by Wolpe to) the pioneering work of Mary Cover Jones (1897–1987). Wolpe is a landmark figure in the development of behavioural therapy generally.

¹⁷ Rogers (1902–87) was an American psychologist best known for the development of client-centred non-directive therapy, and a leading proponent of the ideals of humanistic psychology as proposed by Abraham Maslow.

very different ways, as undermining the autonomy of the client: behaviourist approaches left clients at the mercy of the contingencies of the environment, while psychoanalytical approaches left them victims of the demands of their unconscious. Conversely, the profession in the Singapore context tends to be integrative or eclectic, with practitioners willing to consider a range of approaches consistent with the needs of clients, and being mindful of the considerable cultural variations encountered in Singapore. The lesson to be drawn, thus, is perhaps that the development and acceptance of clinical psychological services will depend on the establishment of a well-regulated professional corps, with proper accreditation procedures, and agreed-upon standards and accepted practices. This would be easier to sustain if there were a national system of registration for psychologists. In its absence, the Singapore Psychological Society—and to some extent all departments offering clinical training—are the obvious bodies to manage not only the self-regulation of clinical psychology but also work to develop it further.

Turning to non-clinical applications such as industrial-organisational psychology, or even less known fields of application such as forensic psychology, a different story emerges. The development of these fields—at least in the US—was generally a more ad hoc affair that went hand-in-hand with their relevance as perceived by the public, by educators or by industry—what might collectively be called “end users”. For the more established field of industrial-organisational psychology, textbook accounts of its emergence suggest the impact of individual practitioners, typically making their mark in the context of a psychological landscape greatly influenced by behaviourism and its explicit efforts to apply behaviourist principles in addressing practical needs. Names such as Hugo Münsterberg,¹⁸ Kurt Lewin,¹⁹ Elton Mayo,²⁰

¹⁸ Münsterberg (1863–1916) was a German-American psychologist credited with founding forensic and organisational psychology, especially with respect to occupational placement issues. He pioneered the use of realistic settings for assessment such as in work sample tests or assessment centres.

¹⁹ Lewin (1890–1947) was a German-American psychologist who pioneered action research and pushed for the idea that applied research should be rigorous. He stressed the importance of the situation in affecting how individuals would act (known as field theory).

²⁰ Mayo (1880–1949) was an Australian-American psychologist and management theorist who pioneered the study of human social factors in industry. He was famous for the Hawthorne studies, which claimed to show that productivity was affected by the patterns of interaction in the work group.

Walter Dill Scott,²¹ Lillian Moller Gilbreth,²² and even James McKeen Cattell and Sir Francis Galton,²³ all made distinctive contributions to the broad field covered under the labels of industrial-organisational psychology or occupational psychology. Nonetheless, these fields did not appear to have the same drive to professionalise. Rather, the activities and influence of individuals—and the actual value of their research—appeared to be the important thing. Parallels can be seen in Singapore—C.C. Leong and K.C. Ong had a great impact on the application of psychology in the military; David Chan initiated and Majeed Khader oversaw the development of a substantial psychological services division within the police force; and Chan has also established a Behavioural Sciences Institute within the Singapore Management University, with the aim of being “a multi-disciplinary research institute for creating, disseminating and applying scientific knowledge about human behaviours in various social, organisational and cultural settings”.²⁴ The lesson here is thus somewhat different from that offered by clinical psychology, and in some ways more challenging. It is that a distinction between pure and applied research is obvious at the extremes, but when particular studies are considered and the more a broad view is taken, it becomes clear—especially in the long run—that the practical value of research is by no means always predictable. On the other hand, applied research needs theory, and is best developed using as rigorous an approach as would be expected in any purely theoretical domain.

²¹ Scott (1869–1955) was an early and influential applied psychologist with particular interest in advertising and personnel selection. Like Cattell, he was influenced by Galton’s ideas, though unlike Cattell, he did not know Galton personally.

²² Gilbreth (1878–1972) is regarded by some as the first industrial-organisational psychologist, and a pioneer of time and motion studies.

²³ Cattell (1860–1944), an American PhD student of Wundt, was also influenced by Sir Francis Galton (British, a cousin of Darwin; 1822–1911), who pioneered efforts to measure physical and some mental characteristics. Cattell himself later went on to found the Psychological Corporation and in effect set in motion the American psychological testing movement, even though his own efforts to devise predictive tests were not very successful.

²⁴ Behavioural Sciences Institute, SMU, “Welcome” available at <https://bsi.smu.edu.sg/> [accessed 22 Feb. 2021]. The specific mandate of the Behavioural Sciences Institute (BSI) is translational research aimed at providing evidence-based solutions to practical problems. Chan, the BSI director, actively contributes to the broader education of psychology, including writing newspaper pieces in which a current topic in public affairs is addressed using psychological research findings or theories. These articles have been published in book form under the auspices of the BSI within SMU (see, for example, Chan 2015, 2017).

This brings up the question of how we conceptualise and manage the competing merits of applied and pure research in psychology, assuming that this is a useful distinction. To start, there is perhaps a need to manage expectations between short- and long-term deliverable benefits. Having established itself as an academic rather than applied discipline for very good reasons, NUS Psychology may now have to grapple with the challenge of application. When the launch of the psychology programme was first announced to the press, a focus on applied psychology was specifically mentioned²⁵ and there has always been an understandable expectation that psychology could not be a purely theoretical discipline. On the other hand, in a sign of the times, there is now strong awareness of the potential of the social sciences to undertake research that can speak to issues of national interest. A national-level Social Sciences Research Council (SSRC) was established in 2016, and huge sums have been earmarked for research in the social sciences and humanities. In announcing the setting up of the SSRC, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Economic and Social Policies, said: “I hope that we will develop a culture that celebrates and values the social sciences and humanities, and recognises their potential for improving society, here in Singapore and in the region”. There is thus a clear expectation that a practical impact should be secured from research.²⁶ As if to make this explicit, grants disbursed by the SSRC are organised along specific themes with specific questions such as “How do workers retain or lose skills at various stages of their lives?”²⁷

There is again a parallel with, and lessons to be learned from, developments in the UK. The impact of World War II on psychology in the UK was profound. Psychologists who had been through the war were imbued with a sense of the value the discipline offered in such matters as ergonomics, information processing and engineering. In the University of Cambridge, Donald Broadbent—having graduated as a mature student in 1949—joined the Medical Research Council Applied Psychology Unit

²⁵ “NUS to offer degree course in psychology”, *The Straits Times*, 18 March 1986, p. 30.

²⁶ “MOE to put in \$350 million for social sciences and humanities research over next five years”, *The Straits Times*, 7 November 2016, available at <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/moe-to-put-in-350-million-for-social-sciences-and-humanities-research-over-next-five-years> [accessed 22 Feb. 2021].

²⁷ FASS Research, *SSR Thematic Grant: Human Development and Skills—Key Questions*, available at <http://blog.nus.edu.sg/fassresearch/grants/ssr-thematic-grant/ssr-thematic-grant-human-development-andskills/ssr-thematic-grant-human-development-and-skills-key-questions/> [accessed 22 Feb. 2021].

(MRC APU) and subsequently became its director. Although nominally concerned with medical research, its remit in practice extended to many areas of applied psychology that were only tangentially medical in their application. More notably, there was a clear realisation that theory and application were intimately interconnected, as illustrated in the following comment by Patrick Rabbitt:

I believe that what made the APU more important than other organizations doing applied work, like Farnborough, was the extent to which the applied work done there fed into theory... One example is Donald Broadbent's earliest and most famous work on dichotic listening, which led to his model of selective attention, the key to the thesis of his seminal book. Donald's work on dichotic listening was a direct result of his applied work, finding ways to facilitate pilots in distinguishing between communications from ground control and from the other aircraft. This example also illustrates the extent of collaboration and of common interest among members of the APU at that time, because while Christopher Poulton actually was the first to publish the applied work on binaural listening ... It was Donald who pointed out the theoretical significance of this discovery and started a line of research on attention that is still current.²⁸

It is also well reflected in a comment by Patricia Chen, a current staff member in the Department of Psychology:

We seem to be inclined to use the term application as if it was merely the application of a theory, or a perspective, in ways that are useful in non-academic settings, but things are more complex. My own view of the relation between theory and practice—or application—goes back to Kurt Lewin. To understand something, you have to try it and change it.

A theory is needed to try and understand the thing one wants to change. Changing something is the application. The application tests the theory, as well as doing what is needed, and may in turn require a new or modified theory. One can develop a theory in the lab, but part of testing it comes when you take it outside the lab. There is a reciprocal relationship. It is not a matter of developing a theory and giving it away to practitioners. You need to create and test theory in order to apply it.

One excellent reason for coming home, to Singapore, is that the powers that be are willing to address social issues and are open to intervention to implement good ideas. There are lots of potential for

²⁸ In Reynolds and Tansey (2001: 39).

change. If we think of pressing social issues, it will be clear that there are ways psychologists could be involved and could both apply and refine their theories.

I see the onus as on us, as psychologists, to think how best to communicate how what we do is relevant to social issues. This is perhaps particularly so in social psychology and cognate fields, but the philosophy expressed here has general application as an approach to applying psychology in any field.

A desire by funding agencies to look for useful applications in social science research in general, and psychological research in particular, is not only understandable but should be welcomed as it implies not only a recognition that evidence-based solutions are needed—and can be found—but also that psychologists have useful expertise and skills beyond those claimed by professional psychologists in delivering specific services in specific fields to specific clients. This expands the relevance of psychology as a discipline beyond the boundaries of the conventional professional careers in clinical or any other area of psychology. It is entirely consistent with a legitimate expectation of accountability in the management of research funds. On the flip side, there is a risk that an enthusiasm for practical applications can come at the expense of some curtailment or even neglect of the academic foundations on which these applications would have to rest, especially if there is an over-emphasis on immediate results at the expense of longer-term development.

Related to the question of the identity of psychology in general are questions of location and standards that are specific to NUS Psychology. These must invariably relate to the larger context of the University. In the decades since the psychology programme started, NUS has enhanced its reputation by leaps and bounds, as gauged by annual university rankings such the QS and THE rankings. It is now consistently placed among the top universities in Asia. Naturally, the University would be keen to maintain if not improve its position as a leading global university. Indeed, its website contains the following statement: “The National University of Singapore aspires to be a vital community of academics, researchers, staff, students and alumni working together in a spirit of innovation and enterprise for a better world. Our singular focus on talent will be the cornerstone of a truly great university that is dedicated to quality education, influential research and visionary enterprise, in service of country and society”.²⁹ It adds a

²⁹ <http://nus.edu.sg/about> [accessed 22 Feb. 2021].

vision is to be “a leading global university shaping the future”.³⁰ It is clear that a global impact—not just a local one—is considered important, and it is also clear that there will be a focus on talent, which in practice means the setting of high and international benchmarks not only for the evaluation of departments but also for the recruitment and evaluation of staff, with implications for staff contracts.

In this striving, there is a caveat needed. A department cannot truly flourish if it is merely a place where a collection of individual academics happens to work. It is important—in developing a top-notch department—to foster a certain *esprit de corps* and a good measure of team spirit and commitment. This can be done in many ways, ranging from structures and procedures designed to give staff and students a sense of ownership of their department, to efforts to ensure collaborative and collegiate approaches in teaching and research.³¹ Conversely, a department can be undermined by the encouragement of attitudes that excessively favour competition over collaboration, or by insufficient provision for mentoring or nurturing staff. In the case of NUS Psychology, the absence of a strong team spirit—for whatever reason—was noticed very early on, as already touched on in an earlier chapter. When the present author spoke with current NUS Psychology staff as part of writing this book, several flagged a similar want of collective spirit. This sense of compartmentalisation among staff is, on the face of it, surprising. Since its inception as its own department, its management has become progressively less authoritarian and more devolved towards greater ownership through collaborative decision-making. However, management style and processes may not be enough to overcome a pervading sense that success is an individual affair, and that collaboration is as likely to hamper as to enhance a career, judged as it is by impactful research. In this climate, a policy of selective recruitment of high-flyers, coupled with increasingly exacting standards for promotion and tenure, may work against departmental development. In theory, the University encourages collaborative research,

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ The present author was assured on good authority that when a new building was being designed in the 1970s for the existing University of Sheffield’s Department of Psychology, there was a deliberate effort made to retain the team spirit that had grown up in the department’s collection of Victorian houses and modern extensions that housed it. To that end, a common room for staff and students was sought for the new building, as had existed in the old. As this was not, however, an authorised item, it was achieved by narrowing all corridors by about 15cm, and using the space thus saved at a single central point where the corridor was widened enough to be, in effect, a common room.

preferably multidisciplinary. In practice, it may be that the kind of academic it attracts will be inclined rather to work independently and be focused on career advancement through publications in high impact journals, more or less regardless of the development of the department. The days ahead are therefore tinged with some uncertainty.

All this is not to say that the Department is in any way disunited at this time, nor is there a lack of genuine commitment on the part of staff to the well-being and growth of the Department. As aptly put by Ryan Hong, another NUS Psychology graduate who returned to the Department and is now an Associate Professor:

I have very fond memories of my undergraduate days as a psychology major. I have always been grateful to the professors who shared their expertise readily with us and availed themselves to us when we had doubts. The learning experience over those undergraduate years had been very enriching and fulfilling. It was later on, when I joined the department as a teaching assistant, that I realized the professors were actually working under unfavourable conditions (e.g. we were under-staffed and they were having to face the pressures of teaching and research). This realization made me very appreciative of the commitment and dedication my professors had towards students, despite the challenges they faced. Now that I am a professor myself, it is a privilege to contribute to this proud tradition of the department—to be student-centric in what we do—just as what my teachers had exemplarily shown back then.

Others such as Stephen Lim, yet another home-grown Associate Professor, gave a decidedly optimistic perspective:

I was an undergraduate student in the NUS Department of Psychology from 2001 to 2005... When I was a student, there were way fewer faculty members in the Department—in fact, during 2005/2006, the Department was operating on a skeleton crew.... Today, our Department has expanded significantly—staff strength, research foci, module selection, etc.... I am grateful to have journeyed with the Department for the last 18 years, and remain indebted to my teachers (many of whom have become my colleagues today) for all their kindness and support. I am privileged to be able to now give back as much as I can to the Department, and to pay it forward. I am confident that the Department will, in the many more years to come, go new places and reach new heights, and I await eagerly to witness—and indeed celebrate—every of those to-be moments.

Despite uncertainties within and without, there can be optimism for NUS Psychology. After all, it started from a hard ground, but sprouted and to some extent flourished.

Coda

John Elliott in 2019 receiving his retirement memento from Winston Goh, the current Head of the Department of Psychology. Photo courtesy of Melvin Yap.



John Elliott passed away on 13 December 2019, two days after the passing of Ann Wee, who had recruited him for the psychology programme. Elliott thus did not live to see this book come to pass, but his final sentences for the book offer an appropriate way to close:

This is Singapore. Things will get done. We will move on. Mistakes, if any, will be quietly corrected without too much loss of face. It is impossible to imagine not wanting the insights and services that psychology can offer, the only question will be quite how fast and in what form NUS and other potential centres of excellence will develop. Looking back on a privileged 32 years of involvement in the psychology degree programme, it is impossible not to feel some sense of optimism that, whether despite or because of its strange start, Psychology in Singapore and in NUS has a bright future, even if not necessarily a conventional one.

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The psychology programme at the National University of Singapore (NUS) is today highly popular with students, while the general public in Singapore has begun to appreciate what psychology has to offer as a hub discipline that straddles many fields. Things, however, were not always as such, nor was the development of the programme smooth sailing.

This book traces the journey of NUS Psychology—how it started in 1986 as a programme in the Department of Social Work (subsequently renamed as the Department of Social Work and Psychology) before becoming an independent Department of Psychology in 2005. Set within a historical context of prevailing sentiments and challenges of the times, this account of the journey illustrates how the start of NUS Psychology was in many ways a strange one. Golden nuggets of information and insights, as well as useful lessons that can be learned from this strange start, are provided by an author who walked this entire journey.



John Michael Elliott obtained his PhD in 1975 from the University of Sheffield. He joined NUS Psychology in 1986 as a Senior Teaching Fellow and retired in 2018 as an Associate Professor. Beyond NUS, Elliott made wide-ranging contributions to the academic and research landscape in Singapore. Among these were his contributions as Chair of the Singapore Children's Society's Research Committee for two decades, as member of the National Medical Ethics Committee for more than a decade, and as Academic Advisor for Psychology for the Open University Centre at the Singapore Institute of Management for more than 5 years. Elliott was particularly involved with the Orchid Society of South-East Asia, serving as its President from 1995 to 2011 and organizing the 2011 World Orchid Conference & Show in Singapore. He was awarded the Public Service Medal (PBM – Pingat Bakti Masyarakat) in 2007.

Sim Tick Ngee was part of the pioneer cohort of psychology students in 1986. Upon graduation, he joined the Department as a teaching assistant, and was subsequently sent to pursue his PhD studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He returned in 1997 and remains with the Department to this day. Sim served as Head of Department from 2011 to 2018.



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