

Champions of Psychology: Dan McAdams

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*An ongoing series in which highly regarded professors share advice on the successes and challenges facing graduate students. Dan McAdams' research addresses how adults make sense of their lives through stories and how identity is a life story people begin constructing during late adolescence and young adulthood. McAdams, a professor of psychology and human development and social policy at Northwestern University, has written or edited 12 books, including *The Stories We Live By* (1993) and *The Person: An Integrated Introduction to Personality Psychology* (3rd Ed., 2001). McAdams is the 1989 winner of the Henry A. Murray Award in Psychology for the study of personality and human lives.*

APSSC: Your research addresses the notion of identity as a life story that we construct in late adolescence and early adulthood. For students of psychology currently in that phase of life, what advice would you offer as they craft their identities and become scientists?

McAdams: I have never been comfortable offering one-size-fits-all advice on people's lives. Everybody's life story is unique. In general, however, I would say that young professionals today face the daunting challenge of finding and expressing passion in at least three very different domains: professional, personal, and public.

In some ways, your professional lives as scientists-to-be may be the easiest in that there are typically clear rules for how to proceed, good models to follow, and satisfying rewards that often come your way

as you do the research and pursue the intellectual ideas that you find most interesting. Most graduate students I know are passionate about their work as scientists. But how do you find and cultivate that same kind of passion and fulfillment in a life partner and in your roles as engaged citizens who need to make a positive difference in the world? This is really hard, and it probably requires some luck along the way. Overall, the goal in all these areas is to transform your passion into a “progressive narrative of the self” — a story that grows and builds and sweeps you along as it enriches your life and the lives of those in the world around you.

APSSC: It seems that one’s life story plays a strong role in the research one pursues. Do you think that this is a good thing, making scientists more invested in their work, or do you see it as a bad thing, that biases the way we look at our research?

McAdams: Mainly I think it is a bad thing, for three reasons: first, as you say, it is likely to bias the work, to keep you from developing the kind of analytic distance that a scientist needs; second, it shows a lack of imagination and empathy; third, it suggests that psychology is but an extension of the self, that the main things that interest me are the things that are about me. Too many people go into psychology to work out issues in their own lives, in my view. The best scholars and scientists are able to find passion for many different topics in the field. They end up being interested in more than themselves.

APSSC: Many graduate students expect to choose a dissertation topic far more easily than it actually happens. Particularly for those students who want careers in academia, how would you recommend approaching choosing a dissertation topic?

McAdams: This is a tough one, and again luck may play a role. The dissertation topic typically needs to reflect some aspect of the agenda pursued by your graduate advisor and/ or committee members. At the same time, it must reflect something you are passionate about. It helps to have an open-minded advisor (though not too open-minded), and it helps if you are able to find and develop passion about many different things (though not everything). Furthermore, the topic needs to open up a program of research that you can continue to pursue once the dissertation is completed. You should be able to imagine how the work will eventually lead to new questions and new projects down the road.

APSSC: What led you to choose psychology as a career?

McAdams: I came to psychology via Freud. As a freshman in college, I read *Civilization and its Discontents*, and I was hooked by the beauty of Freud’s prose and by the force of his ideas, even as I knew that the ideas could not possibly be just right. They did not need to be right. I was looking for passion mainly; truth comes later. I went to graduate school in psychology because I was a good student and I wanted to remain a student. Coming from a small college and a small town, I was very naïve and did not know much about how an academic career would develop. I was not sure I wanted to be a professor when I entered graduate school. I just wanted to continue being a student. I was very fortunate to find inspiration in the role of the scholar/scientist/teacher that I saw modeled among some of the professors in graduate school.

APSSC: What were the most and least rewarding aspects of graduate school for you?

McAdams: I loved graduate school. I completely immersed myself in psychology. I worked all the time.

The only negative thing, ironically, was that I graduated too early. I finished my classes and my dissertation too soon, as weird as that is, and did not stay long enough and develop a broad enough web of associations. I was 25 years old when I entered the job market in 1979, as a newly minted PhD. There were a lot of things I had not learned yet — like how to give a good job talk and how to write a grant. Not surprisingly, it was tough to get a job. In retrospect, my advisor should have counseled me to take my time, get involved in more projects, and develop more publications and more relationships with important people in the field. When it came to these kinds of pragmatic and strategic things, my graduate-school advisor was completely out of touch, clueless really. But he was a wonderful inspiration for ideas and research, and he was very affirming.

APSSC: What common mistakes do you see graduate students making?

McAdams: We all make different mistakes. I am not sure I see many common patterns. Perhaps one mistake I see more often than most others is the tendency for graduate students to be more strategic than scholarly. But as I have pointed out above with respect to my own life as a graduate student, you can make the opposite mistake, too.

APSSC: What suggestions do you have for choosing a mentor?

McAdams: Well, sometimes your choices are pretty limited, once you get into graduate school. It seems to me that the mentor often chooses you. In any case, I am not sure there are any general rules here beyond the obvious ones like the mentor should not be a sociopath, you should get along with the mentor, and so on. Some of the best students I have known have cultivated two or three mentors at once. They get certain things from one mentor, and other things from another.

APSSC: If you could design the ideal program for training graduate students, what would it be like?

McAdams: It would be totally based on my own work. All graduate students would purchase and read my new book: *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (Oxford University Press). (My publisher insists I plug the book in every conversation and every e-mail, even with my wife.) Seriously, though, I am sort of old fashioned on this one. I believe in the broad-based program that attempts to give the student a full understanding of what psychology is and how it fits into the brain sciences and the social sciences. I even think that people should learn about history and systems, and that they should take courses that attempt to link psychology to sociology and anthropology, as out of fashion as that is. Most PhD programs, including the one I was in, are too focused, in my view. They are good at turning out first-rate researchers, but at the expense of narrowness. Perhaps this is inevitable, given how specialized science has become. I have always had an interdisciplinary approach to things, and I tend to project that on to the fantasies I have about what a perfect program might be. But maybe the fantasy is unrealistic for most people. It is probably good, therefore, that my colleagues in psychology do not listen to me on this one.

APSSC: What advice would you give to undergraduate students who are applying to graduate school or preparing to do so?

McAdams: Well, if you want to do therapy mainly, you don't need the PhD. An MA will do fine. For the prospective researchers out there, my advice is to take as broad an array of courses outside psychology

as you can while you are an undergraduate, so that you can better appreciate how psychology fits in to the whole scheme of things later. Be broad as an undergraduate because you will need to focus like crazy once you get to graduate school.

APSSC: What do you see as the future of psychology?

McAdams: It is impossible for me to divorce my vision from my hopes. Ideally, I would like to see more integration across subfields in psychology. I would like to see a more prominent place for personality psychology in the overall scheme of things, since I believe that the scientific study of the whole person should be at the center of psychology. I would like to see scientific psychology become more open to the narrative study of lives, looking for insights into human nature and individual differences from the other social sciences and the humanities as well as from the brain sciences. On good days like this one, I envision the future in this expansive and integrative way. On some other days, however, I imagine that the field will become more and more balkanized and that the traditionally “softer” areas of psychology (social, developmental, personality, cultural) will become marginalized in the rush to reduce all behavior and experience to brain modules and neurotransmitters. Now, I love brain modules and neurotransmitters. But psychology will best engage the passions of the best and the brightest students out there — and it will make its best contributions to science and human welfare — to the extent that it is able to integrate perspectives that range from neuroscience to the study of culture.