

# Champions of Psychology: Linda Woolf, Webster University

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*This is an ongoing series in which highly regarded professors share advice on the successes and challenges facing graduate students.*

Linda Woolf, PhD, is Professor of Psychology and International Human Rights at Webster University. She is currently Past-President of the Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence and Secretary for the Raphael Lemkin Award Committee. Woolf serves on the Psychologists for Social Responsibility and National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology steering committees, and the board of the Institute for the Study of Genocide. She is an editorial board member for *Peace & Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* and for H-Genocide, an online discussion forum for genocide-related issues. Her research focuses on the psychosocial roots of mass violence, including the Holocaust, genocide, terrorism, and social justice issues such as torture and women's global human rights.

**APSSC:** What led you to choose psychology as your career path?

**Woolf:** Gabrielle Kirk McDonald, former President for the International Criminal Tribunal at the Hague once said, "We should all have a care about humanity." I value psychology, as a discipline and career, precisely because it has, at its core, a care about humanity. Whether working in a lab, school, health care setting, or global stage, psychologists endeavor to improve individual lives, the human condition, and sustainable environments for all life. What more could someone ask for in a career?

**APSSC:** How did you go about developing your current research interests?

**Woolf:** I am a product of the 1960s. My concern for peace, social justice, and human rights extends back to adolescence. As a peace psychologist, I research the darker side of life: genocide, terrorism, torture, mass hate, and ethno-political conflict. As a news junkie, I find it difficult to look away from atrocities such as human trafficking or genocide in Darfur. I am able to look into the abyss of humanity on a daily basis and still feel great hope. Therefore, I feel a responsibility to research, teach, and engage in activism on issues of human destructiveness and mass violence. I believe that through such efforts we can develop more effective models of prevention and intervention.

**APSSC:** How did you select your graduate program?

**Woolf:** There were two primary reasons I selected Saint Louis University (SLU). First, there were the professors: Judith Gibbons with her work on women and international psychology, James Korn with his expertise relative to the teaching of psychology, and Majorie Richey with her research on social psychology and hate. I owe them each a debt of gratitude. Second, SLU offered me a full teaching assistantship, and I was putting myself through school. One must balance the aspirational with the pragmatic.

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

**Woolf:** The friendships that developed during my graduate school years were and continue to be immensely rewarding. As for the most valuable aspects, three elements stand out: the development of a firm foundation in the science of psychology, an effective work ethic and discipline, and teaching experience.

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

**Woolf:** Unfortunately, graduate students may narrow their focus too much too quickly. They do not allow themselves time to explore their interests or to see research possibilities beyond those that their mentors might present. In graduate school, I somewhat let the tides of my mentors' interests shape my research and found it difficult to remain engaged. Once I discovered peace psychology, my commitment and productivity soared.

**APSSC:** What suggestions do you have for choosing an area of study?

**Woolf:** First, I would suggest that students genuinely explore before locking themselves into a particular research area. This exploration can include taking novel courses, reading outside one's normal area, and most importantly, participating in professional organizations, discussion lists, and conferences. Second, graduate students need to balance pragmatic issues such as optimization of future career opportunities with the development of interests that will lead to a lifetime of discovery. I encourage students to think carefully about what they want to be doing in 10 or 20 years and then strategize accordingly.

**APSSC:** How does a graduate student become a first-rate researcher?

**Woolf:** There is no magic secret to being a first-rate researcher. The skills required are those of success in a variety of domains. Be aware of the big picture of the research, work incredibly hard, be reliable, do not cut corners, and maintain the highest level of ethics. Additionally, develop strong collegial, collaborative relationships and give credit to others for their contributions to your research.

**APSSC:** What advice would you give to graduate students seeking careers in academia?

**Woolf: Study:** I would encourage future academics to explore the scholarship of teaching. Students may find journals such as *Teaching of Psychology* and books that highlight research on teaching particularly valuable. **Network:** The Society for the Teaching of Psychology is a wonderful professional organization that welcomes student members and sponsors programming at various conferences and at the annual APS Convention. **Get experience:** Look for opportunities to teach and invite colleagues to sit in on your classes to provide feedback. **Be active professionally:** Conducting research and other professional activities augments and enriches one's teaching. I would be a shadow of a teacher if I did not have my work beyond the classroom.

**APSSC:** What value do you see, if any, in specifically training students to teach psychology at the university level?

**Woolf:** Anyone who has ever had a poorly trained teacher knows the answer to that question! We have a

responsibility to future generations of students and psychologists to provide them with the best education possible. We cannot do this if we do not train future educators. Moreover, we do a disservice to future teachers when we assume that they can best learn the skills of their profession solely based on osmosis.

**APSSC:** Your research often contains a strong historical component. Do you think it's important for students to understand the history of psychology? If so, how can this benefit their research?

**Woolf:** I do love studying the history of psychology. It is fascinating and humbling. Knowing the history of psychology can help researchers appreciate the underlying theoretical and philosophical framework of their work. This assists with idea generation and enables researchers to question and reexamine their work.

In terms of my research, any study of mass violence such as genocide or terrorism would be incomplete and marginal without a comparative historical analysis. For example, if I only studied terrorism in light of recent world events, I might ground my conclusions more in stereotype and political positioning rather than understanding the root causes of such violence. Policymakers using such research might make poor decisions and take destructive actions.

**APSSC:** A lot of your recent research focuses on areas that are seen as the inhumanity of the human such as genocide, terrorism, and torture; yet, you also contribute a great deal to the area of peace psychology. Why you believe it is important for students to understand both sides of an issue?

**Woolf:** This question touches on a proverbial dilemma in psychology. Should we focus on the negative or the positive side of human behavior? Ideally, psychologists should study the full range of human behavior. To work toward the development of cultures that are more peaceful, psychologists need to work toward understanding peace as well as the psychosocial roots of mass violence, hate, and destructiveness. Without such understanding, our efforts will be haphazard, disconnected from effective, culturally appropriate practice, and counterproductive.

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

**Woolf:** There are many excellent graduate programs in psychology. However, we can always improve and reevaluate to meet changing needs. First, I would encourage greater internationalization and study of diversity in the curriculum. Students work in a global community and we must ensure they understand the applicability and limitations of research applied to individuals from differing backgrounds and cultures. As a profession, we also need to make psychology more inclusive. Second, I would like to see coursework added concerning social justice and effective conflict resolution skills. The former exists at the heart of what psychologists do. Our goal is improved well-being for individuals, organizations, and communities. The latter is necessary because individuals often do not know how to disagree and reach effective solutions. We often learn to avoid conflict or overvalue compromise. Conflict is normal and healthy if approached productively. As such, we need to learn and teach these skills.

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

**Woolf:** Psychology is going through some challenging times. Issues ranging from funding availability to the role of psychologists in interrogations all influence the profession. I do not know what the future

may bring, but I am committed to and passionate about my work as a psychologist. In the end, all any of us can do is strive to bring excellence to the profession and strive to work to our fullest every day.

**APSSC:** Finally, what questions do you wish we would have asked and what would your answer be?

**Woolf:** Do you really believe that work in peace psychology can end violence? I recognize that interpersonal, structural (e.g., prejudice), and mass violence are not going to disappear in my lifetime. Nonetheless, I understand that we can build peace on a foundation of small endeavors. Collectively we can work to facilitate the development of peaceful communities. Peace is not just about global issues, but is fundamental to our personal lives. Peace is family, safe homes, meaningful employment, stable communities, sustainable environments, and recovery from life's inevitable traumas. Psychologists play an important role in each of these arenas.

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