

Champions of Psychology: Lisa Diamond

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

Lisa M. Diamond is associate professor of Psychology and Gender Studies at the University of Utah. She received her doctorate in Human Development from Cornell University. Diamond's research focuses on two distinct but related areas – the nature and development of same-sex sexuality and the nature and development of affectional bonds. The common thread uniting these lines of research is her interest in the psychological and biobehavioral processes underlying our most intimate and important social ties and how they exert numerous influences on social, emotional, and sexual development across the entire life course. Lisa Diamond is perhaps best known for her ongoing, longitudinal study of sexual identity, attractions, and behavior among adolescent and young adult nonheterosexual women, now in its 12th year. This is the first long-term, prospective study of adolescent sexual identity development, and her book reporting the findings, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire*, will be published by Harvard University Press this February. Diamond also studies the biobehavioral underpinnings of adult attachment relationships and their implications for physical and mental well-being. Diamond's work has been published widely in journals ranging from *Developmental Psychology* to the *Journal of Social and Personality Psychology* to *Personal Relationships* to *Psychological Review*. Her work has been funded by the National Institutes of Mental Health, the Templeton Foundation, the William T. Grant Foundation, the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, and the Wayne F. Placek Foundation. Diamond is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award from Division 44 of the APA, the Boyd McCandless Award for Distinguished Contribution to Developmental Psychology from Division 7 of the APA, the Recognition Award for Emerging Scholars from the American Association of University Women, the Emerging Leader Award from the APA Committee for Women in Psychology, and the Outstanding Young Scientist Award from the Personal Relationships Interest Group of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology.

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

Diamond: Actually, I was initially planning to major in anthropology, but then my college roommate (and best friend at the time) told me that *she* was going to major in anthropology. I thought it might be bad for our friendship if we had the same major (competition, etc), so I switched to psychology. She ended up switching to psychology, too.

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

Diamond: I have always been fascinated with close relationships and their influence on our minds,

bodies, and behaviors. Over the years this has drawn me into a number of different areas – sexuality, attachment, emotion regulation, psychobiology, health psychology, even dynamical systems theory – but my interest in close relationships remains the foundation.

APSSC: How did you select your graduate program?

Diamond: I knew I wanted to study the relationships of young sexual-minority women, so I applied to Cornell specifically to work with Ritch Savin-Williams, who was doing some of the very best work around on sexual-minority youth. Cindy Hazan, a foundational figure in adult attachment, was also there which was an extra bonus.Â

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

Diamond: Working one-on-one with my mentors. Ritch Savin-Williams was incredibly generous with authorship opportunities; he pulled me in as a co-author on practically everything he wrote, and it was the best possible training ground. As a result, we developed a really easy, comfortable style of working and writing together which continues to this day. I also have such wonderful memories of my collaboration with Cindy Hazan. We used to set aside Friday mornings for data analysis and interpretation. Cindy would bring in a big box of pastries from the Ithaca Bakery, fire up her espresso machine, and we would launch into these incredible, intellectually challenging discussions (which usually veered far away from the actual data and delved into every nook and cranny of attachment theory). Without a doubt, I learned as much from those discussions as I learned in any of my classes.

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

Diamond: They develop such a paralyzing fear of appearing “dumb” that they stop asking basic, important, “big picture” questions, like “Why do we even care about this particular phenomenon?” and “Isn’t this methodology fatally flawed?” Some of the most astute questions I have ever heard come from the mouths of first year graduate students, usually prefaced with “This is probably a really stupid question...”Â But those are precisely the types of questions that keep your creative and critical faculties sharp.

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

Diamond: Choose more than one! By alternating between related – but distinct – lines of work, you can prevent yourself from become entrenched in (and inevitably bored with) a single body of methods and theories.

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

Diamond: Make mistakes. It’s truly the best way to learn. Mistakes become more costly later on in your career (for example when you’re a brand new faculty member trying to crank out publications). But in grad school, you have more time, leeway, and guidance. So take risks, fail, ask for help, and learn how to repair and recover. Also, get some research experience in a lab other than your advisor’s. It will broaden your methods and ideas and foster more creative questions. As your career continues, there will be increasing pressures to specialize, so graduate school is a great time to sample different types of work

and really challenge yourself.

APSSC: You have a long history of grant awards, what advice would you give students about the grant application and management process?

Diamond: Be persistent and keep an eye out for small awards that are tailored to your topic area. *Ask trusted senior colleagues* (especially those that are slightly outside your research area) to read your grant proposals and give you critical feedback. If you have particular “trouble spots” (weak pilot data, problems with feasibility), ask them to devote extra attention to those areas and to help you find solutions.

APSSC: Much of your work has focused on sexual identity development in the LGBT population. What advice would you give student’s interested in pursuing this area of research?

Diamond: Ground it within a larger theoretical context (stigma management, sexuality development, stress and coping, self and identity, etc.), so that you do not become too narrow in your questions and approaches, and so that colleagues can immediately see the broader relevance of the work. Students should also look for an advisor who has specific experience with LGBT research. This is one of those domains in which expertise really matters.

APSSC: Has your research on attachment and emotional regulation influenced your interaction with students in and out the classroom, and if so, how?

Diamond: Interesting question. I think my research on attachment makes me a bit more tolerant and sympathetic when students struggle in school because of romantic relationship difficulties, such as long-distance relationships.

APSSC: You often focus on adolescent populations in your work. What should graduate students know or consider before conducting research with this age group?

Diamond: The climate for youth research has gotten trickier. Schools are increasingly wary about allowing researchers access to their students and using school time for data collection. The best approach is to develop good working relationships with schools and to *give back* to the school community. Would they like you to do a workshop on adolescent development for parents or teachers? To help out with the school science fair? To lead a discussion in the high school psychology course? Make an active effort to develop productive, longstanding relationships with schools that benefit *them*, not just you.

APSSC: Feminist psychology and theory is often seen as having a dangerous or ineffective presence in psychological research. Why should researchers be willing to take a second look at this body of work? What does feminist theory offer graduate students that they may not be finding in the mainstream literature?

Diamond: I’m not so sure it’s viewed as dangerous, but I think it’s often viewed as irrelevant, which troubles me. Frankly, most students are “out of date” on feminist theory and don’t realize how multidisciplinary, intellectually challenging, and paradigm-altering it can be. Feminist theory keeps me deeply (and healthfully) skeptical of my own assumptions and methods, and forces me to step back from my work and repeatedly ask “What sort of knowledge do I think I’m producing? What are the social and

material conditions that shape my view of this particular issue?” All psychologists would benefit from asking themselves these questions. A few years ago, I wrote an article for the feminist journal *Signs* in which I wrestled with some of these issues, specifically in the context of my research on sexual identity development. I knew full well that few of my fellow psychologists would ever read *Signs*, but the process of critically engaging those questions was *incredibly* helpful and generative for me. (Editor’s Note: Diamond’s article, *Careful What You Ask For: Reconsidering Feminist Epistemology and Autobiographical Narrative in Research on Sexual Identity Development*, can be found online at <http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/signs/31/2>.)

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

Diamond: Pick research questions that you *really* want the answers to.Â Read broadly – don’t just follow the literature in your specific area, find out what’s going on in other areas. At conferences, attend a few symposia that have nothing to do with your own research.

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

Diamond: More integration, especially across biological, social, and cultural determinants of human experience. I find this thrilling!