

# Champions of Psychology: Robert Levine

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*As part of our ongoing series with psychology's leading professors, Robert Levine, California State University, Fresno, recently shared his advice for success and the challenges facing graduate students. Levine is a professor of social psychology and an associate dean who has won many awards and published many articles in professional journals and trade periodicals. He has written three books. His most recent one, The Power of Persuasion: How We're Bought and Sold, has been translated into six languages. Levine's Web site is [www.psych.csufresno.edu/levine/](http://www.psych.csufresno.edu/levine/).*

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

Robert Levine: I've always loved watching people, traveling, and have always been attracted to the measures of social science.

**APSSC:** What advice would you offer a graduate student interested in social psychology?

Levine: I would tell them to think broadly. If you're going into social psychology, a field that takes on the entire "life space" — the whole enchilada — then you need to think interdisciplinarily and be open to multiple methodologies. Steal from journalists, anthropologists, historians, advertisers. They're all fair game. When I was researching for *The Power of Persuasion*, I took jobs selling used cars and as a door-to-door salesman. You also want to understand that social psychology as defined by our textbooks captures only a small snapshot of the entire picture. Consider all the ground in that life space that hasn't

been studied. One of the great gifts of being a social psychologist is there are so many topic options that you never have to study anything you don't find interesting.

**APSSC:** As a professor, what are some of the common mistakes you seen graduate students making?

Levine: Sometimes people make the mistake of basing decisions too much on money. The degree of difference, whether it be a fellowship or a new job, are usually so minor that they don't compare with the differences in what the quality of your work is going to mean for your career satisfaction; really, for your life. I'd also advise students to keep an eye out for options that may not be front and center. PhD programs train with a certain tunnel vision. We're trained to be first-rate researchers, and while this certainly shouldn't be undervalued, I think it's important to think about how you, personally, want to devote yourself to this field. Are you someone who wants a lot of contact with students? Do you want a balance between teaching and research? Pure or applied research? Decide for yourself which doors you want to keep open.

**APSSC:** What advice would you give students interested in a career in academia?

Levine: I would tell them that if anybody says that teaching and research are mutually exclusive, especially in social psychology, they are mistaken. The two feed off of each other, sometimes remarkably seamlessly. Mentoring, teaching, doing research, writing — they're all intertwined. Teaching clarifies your questions, your questions define your research, your students energize you and vice versa. If you're a social psychologist, this is especially true.

**APSSC:** What are some of the qualities a student should look for in a mentor?

Levine: You want a mentor who is going to be as concerned about you as they are about their data. You want somebody with skills you can emulate, but more importantly, you want someone who has the ability to move you to the next step in your development. The best information you're going to get about mentors is by talking to the mentor's mentees. In fact, the best information source for most graduate student questions are other graduate students.

**APSSC:** What is the key to being a first-rate researcher?

Levine: Have a passion for your research. Work on questions you are truly curious about and have thought about. Then you simply need to be a good systematic thinker. Some people are better at developing research questions while others are more precise at answering questions. Some prefer the data gathering, some prefer the writing stage. But certainly if you're going to be a professional researcher, you have to be willing to commit to all aspects of the research process. If you're an undergraduate, it's a good idea to get involved in a project from beginning to end and to understand that this is the sort of work you'll be doing if you become a professional. Remember that it's going to get better as you go on because you're going to eventually be choosing your own questions. Have patience, persistence and enthusiasm and you'll be fine.

**APSSC:** What would you recommend students do to get into a competitive program?

Levine: I would say primarily make sure there are no holes. Make sure your GPA is up to par and there are no bad scores on your GRE's. You also need to make sure you have no mediocre references—and don't underestimate how easily a letter can fall into the mediocre category. When you ask a professor for a reference, ask politely if they are willing to write a strong one for you. With doctoral programs being so competitive, the first cut is going to be anyone who's lacking in any single area. Once you get past that, PhD programs are going to be looking for students who have been active, who have been involved, who have shown evidence that they are going to be the most promising of professionals. As a simple beginning, it's a good idea to get involved in Psi Chi or whatever organization you have at your school.

**APSSC:** What would you advise undergraduate students do in terms of finding a specialty area?

Levine: As an undergraduate, you want to get involved in the process. In our field that usually translates to doing empirical research. Knock on the doors of professors who have reputations for being good mentors. Don't worry too much about their specific content area. You'll have plenty of time in the years to come to work on your own questions. By getting involved in a research project early on you'll figure out pretty quickly whether this is something you want to do for a career. Similarly, if you're considering going into an applied psychology area, I'd advise you to go out and do some volunteer work, preferably while you're still an undergraduate. You'll learn more than you think, very quickly, about the wisdom of your career choice.

**APSSC:** What's next on your agenda?

Levine: We have a conference that we're going to be holding at Yosemite National Park in the spring where we have invited nine of the premier social psychologists in the world to talk about their career paths and how they got into the field of social psychology. For those who are interested, the link to our

Web site about the conference is [psych.csufresno.edu/YosemiteConferenceII](http://psych.csufresno.edu/YosemiteConferenceII).