

# Champions of Psychology: Robert Zajonc

January 19, 2005

*In an ongoing series in which the APS Student Caucus talks with highly recognized professors, Robert Zajonc recently shared his advice for success and challenges facing graduate students. Zajonc is a professor of psychology at Stanford University and an APS Fellow and Charter Member. He has served on the APS Social Science Research Council, and received numerous awards including the APS William James Fellow Award, the APA Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award, and the SESP Distinguished Scientist Award. He is renowned for his research on such topics as attitude formation, the effect of birth order on intelligence, and the mere exposure theory.*

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

ZAJONC: Before going to graduate school at the University of Michigan, I worked at a branch of the United Nations where I had contact with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The UNESCO motto is: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed," and having just been through a war [World War II], the motto was a sufficient incentive for me to get engaged in scientific initiatives that might make a contribution toward preventing future wars. I am still waiting for that contribution to be made by psychology.

APSSC: How did you select your graduate program?

ZAJONC: I applied to a number of schools in the United States, and the University of Michigan was the only one that offered me a fellowship.

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

ZAJONC: The most rewarding were the seminars, bridge, and informal chats with other students and professors. The least rewarding were the exams.

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

ZAJONC: Insufficient engagement in independent research is the most common mistake graduate students make.

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

ZAJONC: Ask not what the research problem can do for you. Ask what you can do for the problem.

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

ZAJONC: Choose one you can have a drink with.

APSSC: What advice would you give to graduate students, in particular on how to become first-rate researchers?

ZAJONC: Just do it.

APSSC: What advice would you give to graduate students who want to have careers in academia?

ZAJONC: Again, just do it.

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

ZAJONC: Psychology has been very dependent on other fields, especially cognitive psychology. This trend generated social cognition, which was mainly a set of replications of cognitive experiments with an added social content. Cognitive psychology, however, is losing its attraction, and significant and exciting findings in the field are now rare.

Two trends are emerging as a result. Cognitive psychology is now hitchhiking onto neuroscience. Other branches of psychology, especially social psychology, are in a process of revising their research paradigms. On the one hand, there is a growing interest in applied problems and in producing useful findings. On the other hand, as a reaction to the exclusive reliance on the American college sophomore, there is a wider domain of research that acknowledges the important influence of cultural factors. In all likelihood both trends will grow.

The recent election has shown the power of psychology, even naïve psychology, in influencing millions of people to vote against their own interest. I hope there will be a more formal place for psychology, perhaps in the President's Council of Psychological Advisers.

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

ZAJONC: Universities' administrative structure of departments is no longer supportive of new paradigms in the social and behavioral sciences, and this is true in the natural sciences as well. It isn't supportive because these scientific trends now rely on multidisciplinary collaboration, international contacts, and reliance on research institutes. It is in institutes rather than in departments that future work will be conducted for the most part. Institutes offer to students resources that departments do not. They house readily accessible experts in diverse fields who can offer graduate students knowledge and skills more congruent with the research problem that they decide to study.