

# Champions of Psychology: Traci Mann

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

APS Fellow Traci Mann is an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Minnesota. She received her PhD in Psychology from Stanford University. Before joining the faculty at Minnesota, she was on the faculty of the Department of Psychology at UCLA for 10 years. For a number of years, she has conducted research on the self-control of health behaviors, with a particular interest in understanding why reasonable, well-informed individuals who want to behave in healthy ways fail to do so. She seeks to answer questions about the conditions under which individuals control their health behaviors, including which individuals will attempt to control their health behaviors and the factors that influence when they will succeed. By viewing self-control as an interaction between attention and the environment, she is able to account for a wide variety of previously unexplained self-control failures — failures that are implicated in a host of health problems, ranging from overeating to substance misuse to sedentary lifestyles. Mann's research has been published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *Health Psychology*, *American Psychologist*, and *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, and it has been funded by R01 grants from the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. In recent years, she has also conducted research on the predictors of eating in everyday life as well as the relationships between stress, dieting, and diet failure.

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

**T.M.:** I'm a terrible role model on this question, as it happened for the most frivolous reason possible. I started doing psych research in college as a way to get to know a cute guy who was doing research. I fell in love with research (and the guy), and although the guy broke my heart, the field of psychology has always been very good to me.

**APSSC:** How did you go about developing your current research interests, and how have they influenced you as a person?

**T.M.:** When studying eating disorder prevention in graduate school, I read up on obesity in preparation for my preliminary orals, and I found it incredibly interesting. Despite studying completely unrelated things at the time, I never stopped thinking about the eating habits of dieters and their difficulty controlling their consumption. From what I've learned studying self-control over the years, I constantly discourage everyone I know from dieting. I hope this has a positive impact on their quality of life. Not

dieting has certainly made *my* life more pleasant!

**APSSC:** What suggestions do you have for choosing an area of study within a field as large and diverse as psychology?

**T.M.:** Sounds like a cliché, but follow your heart. The hard part is figuring out what your heart is trying to tell you. What topic makes you want to get off your chair and go to the library in search of that ancient reference that isn't available online? What topic do you keep blowing off your other work to think about? What gets you riled up in conversations? What makes you want to write a seething op-ed piece for your local newspaper?

**APSSC:** How did you go about selecting a graduate program?

**T.M.:** Randomness played a bigger role than planning. Late in college, I was still deciding between going to graduate school in engineering and going to graduate school in psychology. When I wrote away for applications (that's what you had to do back then), I was strongly leaning toward engineering, and when it came time to apply, I applied to those same schools — but to the psychology departments. So I applied to study psychology at some of the best engineering schools in the country — MIT, Carnegie-Mellon, Stanford, University of Illinois. I applied to 12 schools, which I ranked in order of preference (based on criteria that escape me now) before finding out where I got accepted. I got in to my top choice school (Stanford), and then rejected from the next six. That made things easy. I didn't even visit.

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

**T.M.:** The most rewarding aspect of graduate school for me, without a close second place, was talking about and collaborating on research with my classmates. I learned so much from them, and had so much fun in the process. They are still the people I e-mail with research questions, stats questions, and teaching questions.

**APSSC:** How does a graduate student work towards becoming a first-rate researcher?

**T.M.:** Collaborate with a bunch of different people — yes, including classmates — to learn different skills, techniques, philosophies, and ways of thinking about research. Few people are great at every aspect of research, but you can learn from everyone's strengths.

**APSSC:** What are some of the common mistakes you see graduate students and young professionals making?

**T.M.:** First of all, following trends, hot research topics, or highly fundable topics despite not being interested in them. Second, trying to squish their data into their hypotheses, instead of letting the data speak to them. And the biggest mistake of all, which I still fight against, is letting fear guide your career decisions. In particular, letting fear of rejection or embarrassment prevent you from applying for things that you want. I always worry that selection committees will laugh at my application. Well, so what if they do? All that means is that I've brightened their day.

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

**T.M.:** Most importantly, in my view, nothing matters more than persistence. And I do mean *nothing*. I'm not the smartest person, the hardest worker, or the most creative thinker, but I'm managing in this field because I am ridiculously persistent.

**APSSC:** Writing and publishing are often anxiety provoking events for graduate students. What do you know now about this process that you wish you would have known early on in your career?

**T.M.:** In grad school and early in my career, if I read an article that was difficult to understand, I assumed that I was dumb and that the author was too smart for me. Now, if I can't understand an article, I suspect it may very well be the reverse. My point is that writing clearly is more important — and likely more difficult — than writing flowery prose. In terms of publishing, I wish I knew from the beginning that reviews are almost always pretty harsh — even ones that recommend accepting the paper. I had to thicken up my skin to stand it, and even then, I don't think I managed to not cry after reading reviews until I had children, at which point I was able to put work into a bit better perspective. I try to remind my students that at least our reviews aren't plastered all over newspapers for the world to see, like movie reviews. Finally, persistence *really* matters when it comes to publishing. As one of my graduate students recently said, "Fifth journal's the charm!"

**APSSC:** Much of your research focuses on attention and health-related behaviors. What advice would you give to graduate students to remain healthy while balancing work, school, teaching, research, etc.?

**T.M.:** Everyone knows I am a bit of a hypocrite in terms of health behaviors, because in my work I promote healthy behavior, but until recently, I didn't take particularly good care of myself. In graduate school, it's absolutely crucial to find a way to get away from work regularly and blow off some steam. Exercise is great for this. I bet going clubbing would do the trick too, but I've never done that, so I can't be sure.

**APSSC:** What do you see in the future for the field of psychology?

**T.M.:** I see what is already happening, just more so, which is the breaking down of barriers between areas until none of us has a clue what area of psychology we are in anymore. And I think this is great.

**APSSC:** Is there a question that you wish I would have asked and what would have been your answer?

**T.M.:** I don't know what the question would be, but I know what my answer is: Don't worry, it's all going to work out just fine. ?