

# Champions of Psychology: Victor Benassi

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

Victor Benassi is a professor of psychology and faculty director of the University of New Hampshire (UNH) Center for Teaching Excellence. His research has addressed such topics as judgment of personal control, belief in alleged paranormal phenomena, and depression. Additionally, Professor Benassi is involved in developing and implementing Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) programs at UNH. He is one of several people from UNH who developed and implemented a formal academic program in college teaching that is available to graduate students and faculty from UNH and other institutions. In recent years, he has been developing an online course titled *Preparing to Teach a Psychology Course*. Through the efforts of eight master teachers of psychology, over 200 graduate students and faculty from the United States and eight other countries have completed the course. Benassi has published numerous articles and chapters on issues related to PFF and faculty roles beyond research. Information about the PFF courses can be found at [www.unh.edu/teaching-excellence/GRAD980/Index.htm](http://www.unh.edu/teaching-excellence/GRAD980/Index.htm)

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

**Benassi:** I was taking a college course in educational psychology as a requirement for a specialization in secondary education. I would arrive early for the course and browse through some of the books that were stored in a classroom bookcase. One day, I borrowed a copy of Joseph Wolpe's *Psychotherapy by Reciprocal Inhibition*. I was hooked. From there, I read sections of books by Pavlov, Skinner, and others. Eventually, I ended up in a PhD program focused on the experimental analysis of behavior at the City University of New York (CUNY) that had been started by William Schoenfeld and a few colleagues who had recently moved from Columbia University.

**APSSC:** How did you go about developing your current research interest both in social psychology and the teaching of psychology?

**Benassi:** My interests in social psychology can be traced back to my time at CUNY. While there, I developed a research interest in superstitious behavior in pigeons. After graduate school, I met a colleague at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) who was interested in human superstitious behavior and beliefs, including occult and paranormal belief, superstitious rituals, and so on. I saw a connection with my interests in behavior controlled by adventitious contingencies. We developed a research program together and published some papers on the attribution of psychic powers to a performer under various conditions. Our paper, "Occult Belief," generated, by the editor's account, the most letters to the editor that the *American Scientist* journal had ever received. This early move from the pigeon lab to social behavior was very rewarding and marked the beginning of my transition to becoming a social psychologist.

My interest in the teaching of psychology also was stimulated early in my career. For a while, I coordinated the CSULB psychology department's introductory psychology program that was taught using Fred Keller's Personalized System of Instruction, or PSI. As part of my job, I developed a course

on college teaching that was taken by the PSI tutors. In 1982, I took a faculty position at the University of New Hampshire, where I had the additional responsibility of further developing the department's program on preparing psychology PhD students for faculty duties, including teaching. Over the past 25 years, I have continued to work, locally and nationally, to foster the development of teaching skills among future psychology faculty.

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

**Benassi:** I was interested in the experimental analysis of behavior and in applied behavior modification. I did not initially apply for admission to a PhD program because I assumed I would be drafted into the military upon graduation from college. I failed my physical examination, however, and eventually applied to PhD programs that focused on the experimental analysis of behavior. CUNY accepted me early. My top-two choices for applied behavior modification programs put me on wait lists, so I moved to New York.

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

**Benassi:** Working closely with my advisor on research and teaching is at the top of the list, and being part of several graduate seminars with William Schoenfeld is a close second. I was so impressed with Schoenfeld's intellect and with the manner in which he tackled research problems.

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

**Benassi:** A common mistake that many graduate students and young professionals make is to try to do too many things at the same time, and not do any of them exceptionally well.

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

**Benassi:** Read broadly and think deeply about what aspects of psychological science interest you and then talk with people who know more about psychology than you do.

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

**Benassi:** Become involved with a supportive advisor who has an active research program that interests you. Then behave, behave, and behave.

**APSSC:** Much of your research has focused on the concept of personal control and effective judgment. What advice would you give students interested in pursuing this area of research?

**Benassi:** The topic of judgment of personal control has found its way into many areas of psychological inquiry — social psychology, judgment and decision-making, and neuroscience, for example. The main reason I have been so intrigued by the topic of control is that one's judgments of control (and behavior based on these judgments) can and do affect so many important aspects of our lives. Many outstanding psychologists of the 20th century have written about this and related topics: Skinner, Bandura, deCharms, Seligman, Langer, Dweck, Rotter, Wasserman, Burger, and Ellen Skinner, to name a few. I recommend that students interested in this area begin by sampling their writings.

**APSSC:** Has your research in social psychology influenced your teaching in and out of the classroom? If so, how?

**Benassi:** Research on self-disclosure, causal attribution, perceived control, judgmental biases and heuristics, and many other topics has direct application to my interaction with students and to my teaching in general. In addition, I am interested in the application of principles from basic memory and

cognition research. This research relates to how we can structure our courses, assignments, and evaluation methods to enhance student learning, retention, and transfer of knowledge.

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

**Benassi:** Select a graduate program that includes formal preparation for teaching as well as research. I believe that it is better if teaching preparation is integrated into the graduate curriculum, and my experience is that students who graduate from such programs do well on the job market and in their new faculty positions. I realize that, for a variety of reasons, such integration is lacking in many programs. In such cases, I urge students to seek out educational opportunities where they can find them. For example, we offer an online course, through UNH, every summer on designing a psychology course (GRAD 980) as well as a variety of other online courses in such areas as teaching methods in higher education and applications of cognitive principles in college courses. Additionally, many psychology organizations such as the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (<http://teachpsych.org/>) and APS (<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/teaching/>) maintain excellent websites with resources related to teaching. Of course, there is no substitute for supervised teaching experience. However, such experience alone is hardly sufficient to prepare graduate students for what lies ahead.

In my worldview, being committed to teaching does not mean that you are not committed to developing a strong record of research. The faculty I respect the most are those whose research and teaching show their passion, dedication, and hard work.

**APSSC:** As a leader of a PFF program, do you believe that there should be a national or state requirement for faculty certification?

**Benassi:** I believe that faculty associated with graduate programs that prepare students for academic careers have an obligation to those students and to our profession to prepare them for the teaching duties they will experience on the job. There are many doctoral programs in psychology in which students receive good-to-excellent preparation. At the same time, as a number of national surveys have indicated, it is not uncommon for graduate students to receive little or no preparation for teaching. However, I don't support a national or state certification requirement. I do want to see more graduate programs include formal coursework on teaching and learning as well as supervised teaching experience. Perhaps our national psychology associations could become involved in this effort.

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

**Benassi:** Psychological science will continue to make incremental progress. The current proliferation of research using brain imaging and other neuroscience methods will continue. This trend appears to be productive, but I hope we do not lose sight of the importance of other fields and disciplines to understanding behavior — sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history, medicine, and others. ?

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