

UCLA Professor, Dr. Paul Abramson

Who's Who: Lessons in UCLA Psychology Professors

He sports a different pair of Pumas each day of the week. He's an artist, who, in a fit of creativity, adorned his dining room walls with phrases from the United States Constitution. He knows more about sex than Henry Miller, and he has the statistics to prove it (not what you think). He's a single parent, an expert witness, and -brace yourselves- a junior college soccer coach. No he's not your ultra-hip North campus friend, he's your psychology professor: Dr. Paul Abramson.

A lot of you know him as the buzzkill who introduced Human Sexuality (Psychology 129E), as "*not* a how-to class." For those of you who stuck it out, you were privy to a psychological analysis of sex and sexuality, ranging in subject matter from the uber-eroticism of Bonobo chimpanzees, to Indian transsexuals, called Hijra, who expose their (altered) genitals to unwilling passers-by.

His examination of the strange and sexual was not an inveterate pursuit, however. Fresh from receiving a Bachelor's degree at the University of Miami, Florida in psychology, Abramson continued his studies as a graduate student at the University of Connecticut (UConn). In his first year, in 1971, he was required to conduct independent research that was both "Personally relevant and good for the field of psychology," he says. "Being twenty one," he continued, he picked what he thought was, "the natural choice, and what everyone would pick: sex."

It turns out that the "natural choice" was undoubtedly on everyone's mind but not on anyone's research list. Despite a snowballing sexual revolution, academic discussions of sex retained strong anchors in Victorianism (think Freud). Human sexuality courses had yet to grace college campuses. Abortion was still illegal, and the right to birth control had been established only years earlier, excluding married couples.

Abramson's independent research on masturbation, then, was unquestionably novel in mainstream academia, if not so surprising given the cultural environment of the early 1970s. The initial project, which focused on emotions associated with masturbation and other early sexual expressions, led to a publication in the *Journal of Sex Research*. For those of you applying to graduate school, you know how difficult it is just to get accepted, let alone see your name in the bright lights of academic publishing once you're in. It was an unprecedented feat, to wit, and it catapulted Abramson to further pursue the psychology of sex.

By the time he graduated, he was a hot commodity for psychology departments across America, from UCLA to Harvard. While donning tweed jackets, bifocals, and tramping in dirty snow in Harvard Yard was dreadfully appealing to Professor Abramson, he opted for a brighter life at UCLA, where not only the sun shines with asinine frequency, but where, Abramson says, his "politics and academic subject matter would thrive."

As a professor, he has taught “Human Sexuality” and more recently, “Sex and the Law” (Psychology 197) which follows his latest research, focusing on the potential use of the “forgotten” ninth amendment in securing sexual rights. This research emanated out of years of experience with a “highly regulated field of study,” Abramson says, “in which I was often confronted with legal conditions.” Sodomy, for example, a common erotic practice within both heterosexual and homosexual couples, was illegal until recently overturned by the Supreme Court in *Lawrence v. Texas*. Hitherto, Abramson noticed a consistent impasse to the fluidity of his work, thanks to these government sanctions.

It thus became a cause worth investigating. In 2002, after lengthy studies, and along with Steve Pinkerton and UCLA graduate student Mark Huppin, Abramson published “Sexual Rights In America.” The book, which supplements “Psychology 197: Sex and the Law” argues for a more open interpretation of the Constitution’s ninth amendment, citing debates over prostitution, and dial-a-porn, amongst other legal straddlers, as evidence for the idea that sexual choice is a natural, and unenumerated right, thereby deserving of legal protection. His current research expands on this concept, forming the basis for an upcoming book, provocatively entitled “Sex God and the Foundations of American Jurisprudence.”

While his studies appear endlessly fascinating, Abramson forewarns the overzealous admirer, “It’s a lot of work, and I spend a lot of my time reading.” Furthermore, and contrary to popular belief, it’s not easy being the “sex professor.” The stigma attached to studying sex may have eased somewhat since the days of petticoats and britches, but it has not, by any means, disappeared.

Recently, for instance, Professor Abramson was approached by a student who had full knowledge of his secret life as a soccer coach. The student requested his guidance as a faculty sponsor for an independent research project on the psychology of coaching. Abramson agreed, only to find out some days later, that the research board had rejected the student’s proposal. When he inquired into the matter, he discovered that the board had assumed that the “sex professor” had simply written off the student for research credit, without seriously considering the project. The ruling was overturned once Professor Abramson explained his background in coaching, but one has to wonder whether a likewise incident would have occurred with the (opprobrious) “molecular biology professor.”

But for all the hype surrounding sexual mores, Professor Abramson remains dedicated to thorough, innovative research. To students who are interested in conducting their own studies, Abramson encourages diligence, and recommends finding a topic that is personally significant and intriguing, since, “You wouldn’t want to keep going,” he states, “if you weren’t interested.”

Thanks to this philosophy, UCLA is at no risk of losing its top sex-researching faculty member, since Abramson’s own interest, and no doubt, the curiosity of others in society’s most inevitable -albeit taboo- behavior, is not likely to wither anytime soon. Just ask anyone what Paris Hilton has done lately.

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