

UCLA Professor, Dr. Anne Peplau

How do professors wind up teaching at UCLA? Are they drawn to the splendid southern California weather? The omnipresence of movies stars? The charming streets of Westwood village?

“For starters, my boyfriend and I broke up,” quipped professor Letitia Anne Peplau, “ and I had just graduated from Harvard [with a PhD in social psychology].”

That year, in 1973, it just so happened that UCLA was looking for a professor with her exact qualifications.

“UCLA wanted someone to teach a course on gender and psychology,” she continued. Her doctorate research focusing on heterosexual dating relationships provided an excellent knowledge base for such a course.

Thirty years later, she continues to teach M165, the Psychology of Gender at UCLA, which deals with gender issues including intimate relationships, differential treatment in the workplace, and reproductive rights.

Meanwhile, Peplau also pursues independent research. She now focuses on how gender and sex roles affect relationships. Initially she concentrated on heterosexual couples, but has extended her research to include gay and lesbian dating relationships.

But why the interest in psychology in the first place?

“Well, I started off as a French Literature major” she said, citing a year spent abroad in Paris to further her studies. When she returned, however, she took a class that changed everything.

As an undergraduate at Brown University, she became interested in the civil rights movement, which at the time, in the late 1960s, was enjoying its apex of visibility and success. In line with current events, Peplau took a social psychology course that focused on civil rights and race relations.

Captivated by the subject matter, Peplau dropped her Rimbaud texts and cafe-au-laits to pursue the social sciences.

With this came a life-long dedication to the pursuit of social progress, as Peplau was convinced then as she is now that psychology can facilitate change.

As example, Peplau mentioned that her research on partner relationships of lesbians and gay men has been used as evidence in domestic violence and partner abuse court cases.

More than anything, however, Peplau teaches and studies social psychology because she is passionate about it.

“You don’t do this for money” she remarked, “But it’s a good field to go into. There’s variety in what you do, between article writing, teaching, meeting with research groups... and there’s great autonomy and flexibility.”

Peplau’s latest academic variation has been her participation in the freshman seminar courses, which are designed to get faculty in touch with students. This allows Peplau to share her passion for psychology with the underclass men and women in a more individualized environment.

To her freshmen and to all undergraduates interested in pursuing research in psychology, she offers this piece of advice: “Make sure to love what you do.”

Suzanne La Barre
UPJ, Editorial Board Member