

Belmont University **Psychology Department**

PsychSource #3

Choosing a Career Specialty: Graduate Study in Psychology and Type of Advanced Degree

A career in "psychology" encompasses a wide range of activities. The most popular notion of the "psychologist" is that of the Ph.D. in private practice or working in mental hospitals. However, this is only one of many available careers, which include college and university (and, more recently, high school teaching, research, and management consultation, to name a few. To help you learn about the different fields of psychology and the advanced degrees needed in these fields, we have summarized some of the major specialties in psychology on the following pages. As you consider career specialties in psychology and the advanced training required, you need to make two important decisions before applying to graduate school: (1) what specialization (e.g., social, physiological, counseling) in psychology interests you, and (2) what degree do you wish to earn (i.e., master's-level or doctoral-level)

Each of these decisions will significantly influence your choice of graduate schools. Additional information and strategies for applying to graduate school are described in PSYCSERIES #4 - Applying to Graduate School. Unlike undergraduate education, in which you choose your major after attending for a year or two, applicants to graduate schools usually have to indicate in advance their particular specialization within psychology (e.g., developmental, clinical, or social psychology). However since the first year of graduate training is typically very broad, some students transfer from one area to another. This may be easier to do in some schools than in others. Please note that it may be very difficult to transfer to a clinical program from any of the other programs. Competition for openings in clinical psychology is probably more intense than it is for entrance to medical school. You should investigate transfer possibilities ahead of time.

If you find that you are still uncertain as to which specialization in psychology most interests you by the end of your undergraduate education, don't despair. There are a number of master's programs in "General Psychology" which provide training useful to further explore your interests and decide upon a specialization. A master's in general psychology can be an excellent stepping stone for applying to a Ph.D. program in a specialization. Finally, many excellent students never consider going to graduate school because they don't believe they can afford the costs. Don't let the financial considerations deter your dream. Many graduate programs provide fellowships, traineeships, and assistantships (i.e., scholarships for graduate school) which often pay tuition plus provide a small salary to cover living expenses. The finances of graduate education are very different from those of your undergraduate degree. In many cases, you might actually have to pay very little of the cost of your education. Investigate these options as well when comparing graduate programs.

Careers in Psychology with Masters and Doctoral Degrees

Psychologists are found in a wide variety of employment settings. Any type of psychologist may

teach at a community college, a four-year college, or a university. Many who teach also conduct research. Some others are employed as researchers by the government or private industry. Still others are employed as service providers and administrators in schools, prisons, and mental health clinics and hospitals. Finally, some psychologists use their expertise as consultants for a variety of different organizations. Some common types of psychologists, their activities, and the various settings in which they work are described below. For further information on careers in psychology, you can send for the following APA publications which are available from the American Psychological Association: *Careers in Psychology* and *Career Opportunities for Psychologists: Expanding and Emerging Areas*.

Clinical Psychologist

The primary focus of the clinical psychologist is the diagnosis and treatment of mild to severe psychopathological problems. Clinical psychologists may also engage in clinical research with children, adolescents, and adults in such settings as universities, hospitals, community mental health centers, outpatient programs and clinics, day care centers, school prisons, industry, and private practice. Besides conducting research, the clinician may function as a consultant, supervisor, or administrator in any of the above locations. Nearly half of all clinical psychologists that have PhDs work in educational settings such as universities; the remainder work in direct-service settings such as hospitals, clinics, and private practice. Clinical psychology programs approved by the American Psychological Association include a broad background in general psychology (e.g., perception, social psychology, developmental psychology, statistics) and courses specifically oriented toward clinical degree, such as practice in assessment and therapy. A year's internship in a clinic setting is required for the doctorate. Although in most states individuals with masters and bachelors degrees may not establish a private practice, they may work under the supervision of a doctoral-level psychologist. Before considering a master's degree in clinical psychology as your final objective, you should speak with informed clinical psychologists in your own state and investigate current licensing laws. Admission to clinical programs at the doctoral level is extremely competitive. Of all the specialty areas in psychology, this area appears most popular among applicants.

Counseling Psychologist

Counseling psychologists are oriented to assessing and helping people with normal life-span issues such as career development and adjustment, marriage and family counseling, and a variety of other issues associated with problems encountered by most people during their life span. These psychologists provide assessment of and counseling for personal, career, and educational problems, especially in university counseling centers and community mental health centers. Counseling psychologists also conduct research on normal personality development and career development. Over half of all counseling psychologists hold positions in educational settings, many of them in university and college counseling centers. Most of the remainder are located in community mental health centers and general medical and surgical hospitals, especially within the Veterans Administration. There is an increasing tendency to restrict the title "counseling psychologist" to those holding doctoral degrees. Graduate programs in

counseling psychology are one of the most competitive graduate specialties in psychology.

Developmental Psychologist

Developmental psychologists study physical growth and behavioral changes, beginning at the prenatal and infancy stages and continuing through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Observational as well as experimental methods are used to investigate such areas as aging, basic learning processes, cognition, perception, language acquisition, socialization, sex roles, and abnormal changes in development. Most developmental psychologists work in university settings, teaching and doing research. They may also consult with public school systems, hospitals, and clinics or provide direct services to children, families, and the elderly. A PhD or EdD is usually required for employment in university settings. Persons with bachelors or masters level training often work in applied settings such as day-care centers and in programs with youth groups.

Educational Psychologist

Educational psychologists study how people of all ages learn. They conduct basic research on topics related to the learning of reading, math, writing, and science. In addition, educational psychologists are also involved in the design of instructional methods, including computer software, training teachers, and assessing teaching effectiveness. Although most educational psychologists are employed in universities, in both psychology and education departments, other employment settings include the federal and state government, especially in school systems and business, designing and evaluating employee training programs.

Environmental Psychologists

Environmental psychologists investigate the interrelationship between people, and their physical environment. They study the effects on behavior of physical factors such as pollution and crowding, and of sociophysical settings such as hospitals, parks, housing developments, and work environment, as well as the effects of behavior on the environment. They also engage in applied activities such as evaluating work environments or assessing the psychological impact of environmental changes. This is a rapidly expanding field in psychology.

Experimental Psychology

Experimental psychology is a general title applied to psychologists who teach about and do research on a variety of fundamental behavioral processes such as learning, memory, language, motivation, perception, sensory processes, and the biological bases of behavior of both human beings and animals. This content and the emphasis on controlled conditions and observations in laboratory (and sometimes natural) settings characterize experimental psychology. (Scientific methodology, the research tool of the experimental psychologist, is also used in other fields of psychology) The majority of experimental psychologists are employed in

university settings; most of the remainder are employed in government and industrial research centers. A PhD is almost always required for advancement and mobility in the field.

Industrial/Organizational Psychologist

In general, industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology is concerned with problems and issues relating to the behavior of people in work settings. I/O psychologists are both scientists and practitioners in the sense that many applied problems in organizational behavior require the collection of original research data under controlled conditions. Some topics addressed by I/O psychology are: organizational structure and change; employee productivity and satisfaction; selection, placement, training, and development of personnel; and the interaction between machines and the human operator. Some I/O psychologists that specialize in particular subfields are consumer psychologists (a focus on consumer reactions to a company's services or product), engineering psychologists (primarily concerned with the interaction between the people and their work environment), and personnel psychologists (a focus on the selection and evaluation of personnel). I/O psychologists are employed in colleges and universities, private industry, applied research firms, government agencies, and private consulting firms. Basic preparation for I/O psychologists is completion of an MA or PhD in a recognized graduate program.

Neuropsychologists and Psychobiologist

The psychobiologist studies the interrelationship between biology and behavior. Various specialized directions in biopsychology include psychopharmacology and mental health, behavior disorders and rehabilitation, comparative psychology and zoology, genetic approaches to behavior, prenatal and postnatal development, and learning and brain functioning. Psychobiologists and neuropsychologists conduct research in universities, hospitals, and pharmaceutical laboratories and usually have a PhD degree and may require additional postdoctoral training. Neuropsychologists may also diagnose and treat disorders related to the central nervous system. Over 70% are employed in educational settings, usually as teachers as well as researchers.

School Psychologists

School psychologists are skilled in the assessment and facilitation of the intellectual, social, and emotional development of children. Their skills include the administration of intelligence and personality tests, interviewing of parents and teachers, and determining adaptive behavior levels of children. The school psychologist develops recommendations for children with special needs, and functions as a consultant to teachers in the resolution of a variety of classroom problems. Depending on training and opportunities, school psychologists have various functions in the schools, which may include individual psychoeducational assessment and remediation, in-service training of teachers, counseling and psychotherapy with children, and consultation and organization development with various levels of school personnel. The majority of psychologists in this field complete their formal education at the 60-credit master's level.

Social Psychologist

The social psychologist investigates in the laboratory the influence of cultural and social factors on behavior. Some of the research has focused on the areas of social learning, social perception, motivation, attitude formation and change, mass media effects, group dynamics, aggression, helping behavior, and leadership. The social psychologist may teach at the high school or university level and may conduct research on social problems in almost any location. As with most of the other research psychologists, more than 70% are employed in university settings. A PhD is almost always required.

Some Emerging Specialties in Psychology:

Family Psychology

Psychologists who are interested in issues related to the prevention and treatment of family conflict and the maintenance of normal family functioning. They may be involved in the design and implementation of family related programs (e.g., marital enrichment, parent education) or in providing treatment for family related problems (e.g., child abuse, sexual dysfunction).

Forensic Psychology and Psychology and the Law

Individuals in this field are interested in examining legal issues from a psychological perspective (e.g., juror behavior). Forensic psychologists are active in the applied and clinical aspects of psychology and law. They often have graduate training in both psychology and the law. Forensic psychologists might be involved in making recommendations concerning child custody, evaluating a defendant's mental competence to stand trial, or counseling inmates and probationers.

Health Psychology

Practitioners and researchers who are concerned with the promotion and maintenance of good health. Health psychologists may design and conduct programs to help individuals improve their health (e.g., stopping smoking, weight loss, stress management) or conduct research to study conditions and activities that contribute to health and illness.

Rehabilitation Psychology

Rehabilitation psychologists are researchers and practitioners who work with individuals suffering from a physical deprivation (e.g., birth defect, stroke).

Information was adapted from the 1986 revision of *Careers in Psychology*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association and PSYCSERIES, Kennesaw State University, Marietta, Georgia.