

# WADSWORTH PSYCHOLOGY MODULE

## Careers in Psychology

M. PAZ GALUPO, Towson University

Although the field of psychology encompasses a wide range of sub-disciplines, psychologists can be classified into two general categories based on what they do: experimental and applied psychologists. Experimental or research psychologists conduct basic research in a particular topic area within psychology. For example, experimental psychologists can work in a number of subfields including bio-psychology, cognitive psychology, social psychology, and developmental psychology. Experimental psychologists can work in academic settings, the private sector, and federal agencies. Applied psychologists use knowledge and skills from the field of psychology and apply it to real world situations and settings. Applied psychologists represent subfields including counseling psychology, clinical psychology, industrial-organizational psychology, forensic psychology, and school psychology. Applied psychologists can be found working in schools, counseling centers, community agencies, businesses, correctional institutions, private practices, public health agencies, hospitals, and residential care, as well as in academic settings.

Although there are many different types of psychologists whose interests vary in topic and theoretical perspective, what unifies psychology as a discipline is the common definition of psychology as the *scientific study* of mind and behavior. While psychologists differ in their interests within the field of psychology and in the type of work they do, all psychologists approach the study of psychology through scientific research. Even applied psychologists who may not be directly engaged in conducting research adopt techniques and theoretical perspectives that have been developed or tested through the research process. The following is a sample of recent research questions investigated by psychologists and published in journals supported by the American

Psychological Association (APA). As you read through these research topics, try to think of ways this information could be useful to applied psychologists.

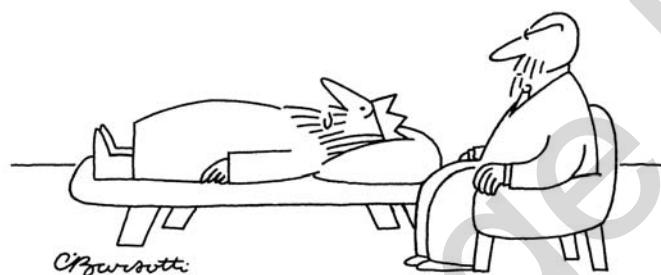
- How do children and adults differ in their recognition of smiling in others? (Del Giudice & Colle, 2007).
- Is electronic bullying related to school bullying among adolescents? (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).
- What influences sentence structure usage for individuals who are bilingual? (Bernolet, Hartsuiker, & Pickering, 2007).
- In what ways do work and family roles benefit each other? Are these benefits the same for women and men? (van Steenbergen, Ellemers, & Mooijaart, 2007).
- How does positive mood influence behaviors like donating to charity or demonstrating physical endurance? (Fishbach & Labroo, 2007).
- How are reading skills in elementary school students impacted by a summer reading intervention? (Kim, 2007).
- In what ways is physical health affected by antigay discrimination? (Huebner & Davis, 2007).
- Do husbands and wives differ in their problem solving behaviors within their marriage? (Vogel, Murphy, Werner-Wilson, Cutrona & Seeman, 2007).
- What is the best way to measure a person's racial or ethnic identity? (Helms, 2007).

If you think these research questions are interesting, then you may be suited to a career in psychology. In this module, we will further consider what it is that psychologists actually do and what educational pathways lead to work in the field of psychology.

## What Do Psychologists Do?

When most people think of psychologists, they typically conjure up images of a therapist writing furiously on a notepad while listening to a client perched on the office couch. While clinical psychologists do comprise the largest subfield in psychology, this image not only provides a skewed understanding of the field of psychology, but also misrepresents the totality of the work of clinical psychologists.

In general, the work of psychologists can be divided into three major activities: research, applied work, and teaching. While many psychologists would consider themselves either experimental or applied psychologists, research and applied work are not mutually exclusive. For example, a clinical psychologist may conduct research about the effectiveness of different therapeutic approaches used in his practice, while a social psychologist may extend her research to develop an intervention for school bullying. ● Table 1 includes a short description of different types of psychologists and the focus of their work. As you read through this



“Sure I’m Alfred the Great now, but in high school I couldn’t get a date.”

© Charles Barsotti/cartoonbank.com

list, note that many of the topic areas lend themselves to both basic research and applied practice. In terms of teaching, professors in all subfields of psychology are devoted to training individuals in the field.

### Research

Approximately one-third of psychologists would describe themselves as experimental psychologists. Experimental psychologists are involved in basic research; they gather information to help us understand behaviors, emotions, or thoughts. Experimental psychologists consider research to be their primary focus and usually conduct research within a specific topic area. For example, a biopsychologist conducts research to understand the relationship between behavior and brain function or activity, while a developmental psychologist conducts research to understand patterns of behavior and behavioral changes across the lifespan.

Conducting research involves many activities, including 1) keeping up to date on current research in the field; 2) developing a research question and designing a study to address the question; 3) collecting and analyzing data and; 4) sharing the results of the research. Some researchers also write grants to cover research expenses. Federal grants may come through the National Science Foundation or the National Institutes of Health. The APA sets ethical guidelines and standards for research; these guidelines are geared toward protecting the rights of research participants.

Each university or organization that is involved in research has a committee that reviews research proposals. Research activities that involve human participants must be approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon

● **Table 1**

Focus of Study and Practice for Psychologists: Most Common Subfields of Psychology

Type of Psychologist	Focus
Bio-psychologist	Studies the relationship between the brain and behavior
Clinical psychologist	Diagnoses and treats individuals with mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders
Cognitive psychologist	Studies internal mental processes such as perception, memory, problem solving, and thought
Counseling psychologist	Helps individuals adjust to change, or make changes in lifestyle
Developmental psychologist	Studies patterns of behavioral change across the lifespan
Educational psychologist	Studies effective teaching and learning practices
Forensic psychologist	Studies criminal behavior and treatment and/or works directly within the court system
Industrial-Organizational psychologist	Studies the relationship between people and organizational structure
School psychologist	Works with school system to help students with emotional, social, and academic issues
Social psychologist	Studies how people interact with one another or are impacted by social environment

receiving IRB approval, a researcher can begin to recruit participants and collect data. Once the data is analyzed, the research findings can be shared through a presentation at a professional conference or through publication in a peer-reviewed journal. This final step in disseminating research findings is important for advancing the scientific field forward. For the individual researcher, publishing is important because it marks his/her contribution to the field and is a way to document research activities for career advancement.

### **Applied Work**

Many psychologists work in applied settings as clinicians, counselors, and consultants. Applied psychologists use their skills to apply the knowledge base of psychology to a practical setting or problem. Many of these psychologists serve as therapists and may provide service in either one-on-one or group settings. Clinical psychologists work specifically with individuals with mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders such as schizophrenia, phobias, or clinical depression. Counseling psychologists, on the other hand, work with non-clinical populations. Counseling psychologists help individuals who are dealing with change (such as adjusting to college or loss of a loved one) or who are trying to change their behavior (such as stopping smoking). Clinical and counseling psychologists may have private practices, although many work in community centers and rehabilitation centers, as well as at colleges and universities.

Other applied fields of specialization include school psychology, forensic psychology, and industrial-organizational psychology. These professionals can be found in applied settings such as schools, the legal and court system, police departments, businesses, and local and federal government. Applied psychologists may be on the payroll for a particular company or organization or may do contract work as independent consultants. Just as there are standards for experimental psychologists geared toward protecting research participants, the APA also provides ethical standards and codes of conduct for the purpose of protecting the rights of clients working with applied psychologists.

### **Teaching**

Both experimental and applied psychologists can use their knowledge and skills as teachers. Many psychologists pursue academic careers teaching in institutions of higher education. These psychologists view teaching as one of their primary functions. However, teaching responsibilities extend far beyond lecturing in the classroom. Teaching activities



Bill Bachmann/Photo Researchers, Inc.

Psychologists must be able to convey their research findings to a wide audience.



AP Photo/M. Spenser Green

include continually updating course content to keep in line with new research, holding office hours, advising students, mentoring graduate students, teaching independent research classes, and writing letters of recommendation for



© David Frazier/The Image Works

students. Psychologists pursuing an academic career must also balance their teaching responsibilities with research and service expectations.

### Educational Pathways to a Career in Psychology

As with most careers, the level of education you receive within the field of psychology (along with practical work experience) will determine the career opportunities available to you. The title of psychologist is reserved for someone with a doctoral degree in psychology. According to the American Association of Psychology, approximately 74,000 bachelor's degrees, 15,000 master's degrees, and 4,000 doctoral degrees are awarded in psychology annually. It is clear that the majority of psychology majors do not continue on to graduate school to become psychologists. Many, however, remain in psychology or in psychology-related fields. It is useful, then, to review undergraduate and graduate education in psychology in relation to career

opportunities at each level. It is also important to understand the role of undergraduate and graduate education in the process of becoming a psychologist.

### Undergraduate Education

We have seen that there are many specialty areas in the field of psychology. However, an undergraduate degree in psychology is a broad based liberal arts degree that does not easily translate into a specific job description post graduation. A Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) or Bachelor of Science (B.S.) degree in psychology provides education within the field, but does not offer specific job training. Undergraduate majors in psychology generally receive a broad background in the field of psychology and, likewise, find employment in a range of occupations. Securing a job with an undergraduate degree in psychology requires graduates to be able to articulate the knowledge and skills gained in earning a psychology degree and relate those to the qualities and skills desired by prospective employers. In order to understand what is gained in earning a psychology degree, it is useful to consider the guidelines set by the APA for the undergraduate psychology major (2006; see ● Table 2).

The APA learning goals and outcomes for undergraduate psychology majors are grouped into two categories and address knowledge, skills, and values that are 1) consistent with the science and application of psychology; and 2) consistent with liberal arts education and are further developed in psychology. As you can see, the emphasis in these learning outcomes is not to become a psychologist (something that requires graduate education), but to develop knowledge, skills, and values consistent with the field of psychology.

The learning outcomes put forth by the APA help psychology departments to set curricular guidelines and requirements for major courses. Importantly, these learn-

● **Table 2**  
Undergraduate Psychology Major: Learning Goals and Outcomes

Knowledge, Skills, and Values Consistent with the Science and Application of Psychology	Knowledge, Skills, and Values Consistent with Liberal Arts Education that are Further Developed in Psychology
Knowledge base of psychology	Information and technological literacy
Research methods in psychology	Communication skills
Critical thinking skills in psychology	Sociocultural and international awareness
Application of psychology	Personal development
Values in psychology	Career planning and development

Based on a 2002 report of the Task Force on Undergraduate Psychology Major Competencies appointed by the American Psychological Association's Board of Educational Affairs.

ing outcomes also relate nicely to skills and competencies desired in the general job market. ● Table 3 provides the results of a 2006 survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) and lists the top ten qualities and skills that employers seek in potential employees. Among the top ten qualities are communication skills, analytical skills, interpersonal skills, and computer skills, all of which are emphasized in the undergraduate curriculum for psychology majors.

While some undergraduate psychology majors continue with graduate study in the field of psychology, the vast majority of students enter the workforce. These students find employment in various fields including education, business, and human services. ● Table 4 lists some common entry-level positions obtained by psychology majors post graduation. It is clear that communication skills, analytical skills, and interpersonal skills, for example, would be important skills for successful and meaningful

employment as a parent and family educator (education), a public relations officer (business), or a substance abuse counselor (human services). Can you think of other ways that the learning outcomes set for psychology majors may relate to skills needed for the entry level positions listed in Table 4? How could psychology majors talk about these skills to a potential employer in order to show that their education prepared them for the challenges of these jobs?

### Making the Most of Your Undergraduate Education in Psychology: Beyond the Degree

Completing the requirements for an undergraduate degree in psychology is just the starting point for building your resume for either post-graduation employment or graduate school. Pursuing research experience is one of the most important ways you can strengthen your skill set while

● **Table 3**  
Top Ten Qualities/Skills Employers Want

Personal Qualities	Description
Communication skills	Verbal and written skills
Honesty / Integrity	Ethics, personal responsibility
Interpersonal skills	Relates well to others, social skills
Strong work ethic	Hard working, conscientious
Teamwork skills	Ability to work well with others
Analytical skills	Reasoning and thinking abilities
Motivation / Initiative	Commitment to lifelong learning, ability to meet challenges
Flexibility / Adaptability	Can cope with change and tolerate stress
Computer skills	Computer and internet skills
Detail oriented	Attention to detail and accuracy of work

Based on a 2006 survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE).

● **Table 4**  
Common Entry-Level Positions Obtained by Psychology Majors

Education	Business	Human Services
Admissions recruiter	Administrative assistant	Behavioral specialist
Administration	Advertising agent	Case worker
Affirmative action officer	Affirmative action officer	Child protection worker
Child care worker	Community relations officer	Crisis intervention counselor
College admissions counselor	Human resource specialist	Corrections officer
Data management	Loan office	Community relations
Family education counselor	Manager	Disability life skill counselor
Laboratory assistant	Marketing and sales	Employment counselor
Parent & family educator	Program development officer	Probation officer
Pre-school teacher	Public relations officer	Program manager
Research assistant	Researcher	Residential counselor
Teaching assistant	Store manager	Social service director
	Staff training & development	Substance abuse counselor
	Technical writer	Youth Counselor

Sources: DeGalan & Lambert 1995; Kuther, 2006; and Lloyd, 1997



© Laura Dwight/PhotoEdit

earning a degree in psychology. Students can gain research experience through independent studies courses or by working as a research assistant for a faculty member. Being involved in research will allow you to determine whether you have the aptitude or interest in conducting psychological research, will help you better understand the research process, and will help you better understand basic psychological literature.

Because many subfields in psychology are applied, there are opportunities for psychology majors to obtain out-of-classroom experiences through internship or work opportunities in applied settings. These experiences will help you better gauge whether you have the aptitude or interest in working in an applied field, will provide a context for learning new skills, and will provide you with contacts outside of your college or university that may prove helpful once you graduate. Obtaining research and/or applied experiences in psychology is important for exploring your interests in the field. It is also important to help make yourself competitive for the next step in your career—employment or graduate education. Becoming involved in psychology organizations, such as your campus psychology club or local chapter of Psi Chi, the National Honor Society for Psychology, can also demonstrate your commitment to psychology. Employers (NACE, 2007) consider leadership experience, involvement in extracurricular activities, and volunteer work when making competitive employment decisions. Graduate schools will also consider similar experiences as demonstrating motivation to pursue a career in psychology and when seeking evidence that a candidate for continued study is well rounded.



Stewart Cohen/Pam Ostrow/Getty Images

Volunteering is a great way to gain hands-on experience in psychology within an applied setting.

## Graduate Education

Some form of graduate education is necessary to become trained as a psychologist. Sometimes individuals enter graduate school immediately upon receiving an undergraduate degree, and others return to graduate school after working for several years. Whereas undergraduate education tends to be broad-based, covering the wide range of topics that makes up the field of psychology, graduate education gives students the ability to specialize, usually by choosing a specific subfield of study. Graduate education also explicitly emphasizes skill building through hands-on research and/or applied experiences. In addition to course work, a research-based graduate degree often requires that a student completes an independent research project—either a thesis at the master's level or a dissertation at the doctoral level. Applied programs may require a supervised internship as part of the program requirement. There are several types of graduate degrees in the field of psychology and each type leads to different career opportunities.

### Master's Level Degrees

A Master of Arts (M.A.) or Master of Science (M.S.) degree in psychology is usually a two- or three-year degree. Master's degrees can be earned in experimental psychology, industrial/organizational psychology, clinical psychology, counseling psychology, and school psychology, among others. Although master's degrees in psychology incorporate more specialized training than do undergraduate degrees, graduates find employment opportunities in a wide range of settings (see ● Table 5).

● **Table 5**  
Employment Setting for Master's Level  
Graduates in Psychology

Private For-Profit Organizations	25 %
Private Not-For-Profit Organizations	14 %
Federal Government	2 %
Local Government	13 %
Self Employed	8 %
Four Year University/College	7 %
Other Educational Institution	31 %

Source: National Science Foundation, Science Resources Statistics, Division, 1999 SESTAT (Science and Engineers Statistical Data System). Retrieved from [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org).

In some states master's level students in psychology may have the opportunity to obtain a state license for practice. A license ensures that practitioners meet state-determined standards of education, training, and ethical conduct and is granted after a candidate meets basic educational standards and passes a licensing exam. These licenses, however, do not qualify individuals as “psychologists” (a title reserved for those with doctoral degrees). Instead, some state licenses qualify individuals as marriage and family therapy (MFT) counselors or as licensed professional counselors (LPC). Although these licenses make it possible to start an independent practice, only a small percentage of the total number of master's level graduates are self-employed (see ● Table 5).

Students should carefully investigate whether completion of a master's degree program matches their career goals prior to enrolling. This is true for any educational program, but it is particularly true in psychology—master's programs differ widely in curriculum and purpose, and licensing opportunities relevant to master's level programs differ from state to state. Many people regard their master's degrees as “terminal degrees” or the endpoint to their education in psychology. Others may continue with their education and pursue a doctoral degree.

### **Doctoral Degrees**

We have explored the various career options in education, business, and human services available to undergraduate and master's level students in psychology. However, a doctoral degree is usually the minimal degree required for an

academic career, to hold senior research or management positions as a psychologist within the business world, or to be recognized as an independent licensed psychologist. Students can enter a doctoral program after completing a terminal master's program. However, many students enter immediately following completion of a bachelor's degree. Within the field of psychology there are two basic types of doctoral degrees which reflect the dual focus in psychology on research and application.

**Ph.D.** A doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.) degree is the traditional doctoral degree in psychology. A Ph.D. in Psychology usually designates a particular specialization within psychology—for example, you can earn a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, a Ph.D. in developmental psychology, or a Ph.D. in experimental psychology. Generally, a Ph.D. in psychology is regarded as a research degree; completion of the degree is dependent upon the completion of a set of course requirements as well as a research-based dissertation. Because this degree emphasizes skills related to becoming a competent researcher, and because an academic career usually includes participation in research, a Ph.D. is usually the preferred doctoral degree for academics in psychology. Ph.D. degrees can also be awarded for individuals in applied fields such as clinical and counseling psychology, and those individuals have flexibility in pursuing research, academic, or applied career tracks. Of all the doctoral level degrees awarded in Psychology, approximately 75% of these are Ph.D. degrees (American Psychological Association, 2007).

Because a few psychology departments are housed within colleges of education, some doctoral level degrees in psychology may actually be granted as a doctor of education (Ed.D.) degree. In general, these programs are regarded as less rigorous with regard to research and the preference for academic positions in psychology departments continues to be for individuals with a Ph.D. On the other hand, individuals with an Ed.D. can practice therapy just as those with a Ph.D. Many of these professionals have specialties in child development or school psychology and can be found working in the field of education as school superintendents or principals.

**Psy.D.** A doctor of psychology (Psy.D.) is a newer professional degree in psychology awarded specifically in clinical or counseling psychology. Psy.D. programs focus on preparation for professional practice with less extensive focus on research training. While a doctoral dissertation may be required, this work can be theoretical in nature and may not involve conducting original research. Individuals



Annabella Bluesky/Photo Researchers, Inc.

with a Psy.D. are less likely to be represented in academic departments, but can be found in various applied work settings.

**Licensing.** While master’s level graduates can be licensed as marriage and family counselors or licensed professional counselors in some states, you must have a Ph.D. to be a psychologist. Licensing requirements for psychologists differ across states and are regulated by the Association for State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPPB). In addition to holding a doctoral degree, licensing usually requires completion of supervised professional experience and passing a licensing exam.

**Career Paths for Psychologists**

By now it should be clear that career opportunities in the field of psychology change with educational level. In general, the higher the degree obtained in the field of psychology, the more autonomy and flexibility one can expect in terms of career path. Obviously, with that comes increased earning potential and career prestige. ● Table 6 includes

● **Table 6**

Examples of the Progression of Career Opportunities in Psychology According to Educational Background

	Education	Business	Human Services
<b>B.A.</b>	Child care teacher	Human resource specialist	Residential counselor
<b>M.A.</b>	2-year college professor	Research analyst	Psychological assistant
<b>Ph.D./Psy.D.</b>	University psychology professor	Organizational psychologist	Practicing clinical psychologist

examples of the progression of career opportunities in the field of psychology according to education level.

It is clear that majoring in psychology can be a starting point for many different career paths. For individuals just beginning to think about their careers, this can be as exciting as it is overwhelming. However, if you take the time to become aware of the range of options available to you and the educational steps necessary to achieve your career goals, your pathway to a career in psychology will be more easily navigated. The following are some resources to help you navigate your way to your career goals.

**Professional Organizations in Psychology and Psychology-Related Fields**

- American Psychology Association (APA)
- Association for Psychological Science (APS)
- American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT)
- National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC)

**Web Resources for Students**

- APA’s Student Community (APAGS)
- APS Student Caucus (APSSC)
- Psi Beta: National Honor Society in Psychology for Community & Junior Colleges
- Psi Chi: The National Honor Society for Psychology

**Web Resources for Job Seekers**

- APA Career Resource Center
- APS Observer
- The Chronicle of Higher Education
- National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE-Web)

## References

- American Psychological Association. (2006). APA guidelines for the undergraduate major. Retrieved September 24, 2007, from [http://www.apa.org/ed/psymajor\\_guideline.pdf](http://www.apa.org/ed/psymajor_guideline.pdf)
- American Psychological Association. (2007). Graduate education: Frequently asked questions. Retrieved September 24, 2007, from <http://www.apa.org>
- Bernolet, S., Hartsuiker, R. J. & Pickering, M. J. (2007). Shared syntactic representations in bilinguals: Evidence for the role of word-order repetition. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 33(5) 931-949.
- DeGalan, J. & Lambert, S. E. (1995). *Great jobs for psychology majors*. Chicago: VGM Career Horizons.
- Del Giudice, M. & Colle, L. (2007). Differences between children and adults in the recognition of enjoyment smiles. *Developmental Psychology*, 43(3), 796-803.
- Fishbach, A. & Labroo, A. A. (2007). Be better or be merry: How mood affects self-control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93(2), 158-173.
- Germeijs, V., Verschueren, K., & Soenens, B. (2007). Indecisiveness and high school students' career decision-making process: Longitudinal associations and the mediational role of anxiety. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53(4), 397-410.
- Helms, J. E. (2007). Some better practices for measuring racial and ethnic identity constructs. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 54(4), 235-246.
- Huebner, D. M. & Davis, M. C. (2007). Perceived antigay discrimination and physical health outcomes. *Health Psychology*, 26(5), 627-634.
- Kim, J. S. (2007). The effects of a voluntary summer reading intervention on reading activities and reading achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99(3), 505-515.
- Kuther, T. L. (2006). *The psychology major's handbook*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Lloyd, M.A. (1997). Entry level positions obtained by psychology majors. Retrieved September 24, 2007, <http://www.psywww.com/careers/entry.htm>
- National Association of Colleges and Employers (2007). Career development and job search advice for graduates. Retrieved September 24, 2007, from <http://www.jobweb.com/joboutlook/2007/student4.htm>
- National Association of Colleges and Employers (2006). Top 10 qualities / skills employers want. Retrieved September 24, 2007, from <http://www.jobweb.com/joboutlook/2006/2.htm>
- Raskauskas, J. & Stoltz, A. D. (2007). Involvement in traditional and electronic bullying among adolescents. *Developmental Psychology*, 43(3), 564-575.
- Sternberg, R. J. (2007). Career paths in Psychology: Where your degree can take you.
- van Steenbergen, E. F., Ellemers, N. & Mooijaart, A. (2007). How work and family can facilitate each other: Distinct types of work-family facilitation and outcomes for women and men. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 12(3), 279-300.
- Vogel, D. L., Murphy, M. J., Werner-Wilson, R. J., Cutrona, C. E. & Seeman, J. (2007). Sex differences in the use of demand and withdraw behavior in marriage: Examining the social structure hypothesis. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 54(2), 165-177.