

Areas of Specialization in Psychology

The psychology major provides its students with both a liberal arts education and the opportunity to explore specific areas of psychology in which they have special interests. Graduate education is a process of further refinement during which students become increasingly proficient and knowledgeable in an area of psychological specialization. Described below are some specialty areas in psychology that require graduate education. (See also APA's Psychology/Careers for the Twenty-first Century: Scientific Problem Solvers.) This is by no means an exhaustive list of specialties in psychology, and if you wish to see a description of a particular area, please feel free to write and ask about it.

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY: Clinical psychologists assess and treat people with psychological problems. They may act as therapists for people experiencing normal psychological crises (e.g., grief) or for individuals suffering from chronic psychiatric disorders. Some clinical psychologists are generalists who work with a wide variety of populations, while others work with specific groups like children, the elderly, or those with specific disorders (e.g., schizophrenia). They are trained in universities or professional schools of psychology. They may be found working in academic settings, hospitals, community health centers, or private practice. (See also Counseling Psychology.)

COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY: Counseling psychologists do many of the same things that clinical psychologists do. However, counseling psychologists tend to focus more on persons with adjustment problems rather than on persons suffering from severe psychological disorders. They may be trained in Psychology Departments or in Schools of Education. Counseling psychologists are employed in academic settings, community mental health centers, and private practice. (See also Clinical Psychology.)

DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY: Developmental psychologists study how we develop intellectually, socially, and emotionally over the lifespan. Some focus on just one period of life (e.g., childhood or adolescence). Developmental psychologists usually do research and teach in academic settings, but many act as consultants to day care centers, schools, or social service agencies.

EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY: Educational psychologists are concerned with the study of human learning. They attempt to understand the basic aspects of learning and then develop materials and strategies for enhancing the learning process. For example, an educational psychologist might study reading and then develop a new technique for teaching reading. They are typically trained in Schools of Education and employed in academic settings. (See also School Psychology.)

EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY: This area includes a diverse group of psychologists who do research in the most basic areas of psychology (e.g., learning, memory, cognition, perception, motivation, and language). Their research may be conducted with animals instead of humans. Most of these psychologists work in academic settings.

FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY: Forensic psychologists are involved in analyzing crime evidence and aiding law enforcement agencies in criminal investigations. See the brochure from the Psychology and Law division of the American Psychological Association, on this site, for useful information.

HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY: Health psychologists are concerned with psychology's contributions to the promotion and maintenance of good health and the prevention and treatment of illness. They may design and conduct programs to help individuals stop smoking, lose weight, manage stress, and stay physically fit. They are employed in hospitals, medical schools, rehabilitation centers, public health agencies, academic settings, and private practice.

HUMAN FACTORS PSYCHOLOGY: Human Factors researchers study the human/machine interface. They may help make appliances such as cameras user-friendly, or they may do studies of safety-related issues in the design of machinery, airplane controls and instrument layouts, or they may do basic research on human perceptual and motor abilities as they relate to the operation of machines, computers, and other mechanical devices.

INDUSTRIAL/ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY: Industrial/organizational psychologists are primarily concerned with the relationships between people and their work environments. They may develop new ways to increase productivity or be involved in personnel selection. They are employed in business, government agencies, and academic settings.

NEUROPSYCHOLOGY: Neuropsychologists are concerned with brain/behavior relationships. They may be involved in clinical work, in the assessment of brain-damaged patients, or in research, such as attempts to relate cognitive activity to brain activity as seen in brain scans.

PHYSIOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY: Physiological psychologists study the physiological correlates of behavior. They study both very basic processes (e.g., how brain cells function) and more readily observable phenomena (e.g., behavioral changes as a function of drug use or the biological/genetic roots of psychiatric disorders). Most are employed in academic settings.

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY: School psychologists are involved in enhancing the development of children in educational settings. They assess children's psychoeducational abilities and recommend actions to facilitate student learning. They are typically trained in Schools of Education and work in public school systems. They often act as consultants to parents, teachers, and administrators to optimize the learning environments of specific students. (See also Educational Psychology.)

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY: Social psychologists study how our beliefs, feelings, and behaviors are affected by other persons. Some topics of interest to social psychologists are attitude formation and change, aggression, prejudice, and interpersonal attraction. Most social psychologists work in academic settings, but some work in federal agencies and businesses doing applied research.