

FIRST  
EDITION



*INTRODUCTION TO*  
**ACADEMIC *AND***  
**CAREER OPPORTUNITIES**  
*IN* **PSYCHOLOGY**

EDITED BY EMILIO ULLOA & KRISTEN COLE

# INTRODUCTION TO ACADEMIC AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES IN PSYCHOLOGY

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Edited by  
Emilio Ulloa and  
Kristen Cole



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# Section One

## Introduction to the Field of Psychology

We, the editors of this collection, firmly believe it to be the responsibility of psychology educators to prepare their students for the application of psychology in both their personal and professional lives. One way to do this is to inform them about academic and career opportunities in psychology. We believe that as psychology majors you will learn, refine, and develop the skills and aptitudes needed to be successful in your personal and professional pursuits. Pursuing a degree in psychology will reward you with expanded knowledge of human behavior, an aptitude in synthesizing and understanding data and statistics, critical thinking and interpersonal skills, and a broad awareness of ethics, all of which will leave you well positioned for the next step in life, whatever it may be. Our aim with this collection is to provide you with information to complement your education in psychology. We bring together web resources, government data, magazine and journal articles, book chapters, and reports. We also provide narratives and professional profiles to help put much of this information in the proper context. This first set of readings is the starting point, and is designed to give the psychology major a basic overview of the discipline and the occupational options available to you. It begins with overview documents from the American Psychological Association, and includes readings that address many of the “myths” that lay people entertain about our discipline. These readings also introduce you to how culture plays a role in our discipline and provide tips for success as a student of psychology.

# What Psychology Is

American Psychological Association

Why people do the things they do is an age-old question. However, psychology—the science concerned with behavior, in both human and nonhuman animals—first appeared in the 1870s. Despite its youth, it is a broad discipline, essentially spanning subject matter from biology to sociology. Psychologists have doctoral degrees. They study the intersection of two critical relationships: one between brain function and behavior, and another between the environment and behavior. As scientists, psychologists follow scientific methods, using careful observation, experimentation, and analysis. But psychologists also need to be creative in the way they apply scientific findings.

Psychologists frequently are innovators, evolving new approaches from established knowledge to meet the changing needs of people, organizations, and societies. They develop theories and test them through their research. As this research yields new information, these findings become part of the body of knowledge that practitioners call on in their work with clients and patients, as well as with organizations and communities. Psychology is a tremendously varied field. Psychologists conduct both basic and applied research, serve as consultants to communities and organizations, diagnose and treat people, and teach future psychologists and those who will pursue

other disciplines. They test intelligence and personality. Many psychologists work as health care providers. They assess behavioral and mental function and well-being, study how human beings relate to each other and also to machines, and work to improve these relationships. And because the United States is undergoing sizable change in its population makeup, psychologists provide important knowledge and skills to help better understand diverse cultures.

Many psychologists work independently and also team up with other professionals—for example, with other scientists, physicians, lawyers, school personnel, computer experts, engineers, policymakers, and managers—to contribute to every area of society. Thus, we find them in laboratories, hospitals, courtrooms, schools and universities, community health centers, prisons, and corporate offices.

Psychologists traditionally study both normal and abnormal functioning and treat individuals with mental and emotional problems. They also concentrate on behaviors that affect the mental and emotional health and mental functioning of healthy human beings. For example, psychologists work with patients to help them change behaviors that are having negative effects on their physical health. They work with business executives, performers, and athletes to reduce stress and improve performance.

Excerpt from *Psychology Scientific Problem Solvers: Careers for the Twenty-First Century*, pp. 1–9. Copyright © 2003 by American Psychological Association (APA). Reprinted with permission.

They advise lawyers on jury selection and collaborate with educators on school reform. Immediately following a disaster, such as a plane crash or bombing, psychologists help victims and bystanders recover from the trauma, or shock, of the event. They team with law enforcement and public health officials to analyze the causes of such events and prevent their recurrence. Involved in all aspects of our fast-paced world, psychologists must keep up with what's happening all around us. When you're a psychologist, your education never ends.

As has long been true, opportunities in psychology for those with graduate degrees will be more plentiful and at a higher level than for those with undergraduate degrees. An undergraduate degree remains excellent preparation for continued graduate work in psychology or in another field, such as business, medicine, or computer science. Many employers are interested in the skills that psychology majors bring to collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data and their experience with statistics and experimental design.

Opportunities for people with advanced degrees in psychology are expanding in number as well as in scope. The move toward preventing illness rather than merely diagnosing and treating it requires people to learn how to make healthy behavior a routine part of living. Indeed, many of the problems facing society today are problems of behavior—for example, chronic health conditions or disease, drug addiction, poor personal relationships, violence at home and in the street, and the harm we do to our environment. Psychologists contribute solutions to problems through careful collection of data, analysis of data, and development of intervention strategies—in other words, by applying scientific principles, the hallmark of psychology.

In addition, an aging America is leading to more research and practice in adapting our homes and workplaces for older people. The promises of the electronic revolution demand more user-friendly technologies and training. More two-career families

in the workplace spur employers to accommodate the needs of families. Psychologists are helping to make the changes that are needed. The diversity in America today calls for psychologists to develop and refine treatments and approaches to meet the unique needs of different racial and ethnic groups. Furthermore, research advances in learning and memory, and the integration of physical and mental health care, make psychology more exciting than ever.

Most psychologists say they love their work. They cite the variety of daily tasks and the flexibility of their schedules. They are thrilled by the exciting changes taking place in the field—from adapting technology to benefit humans, to working as part of primary health care teams. They are endeavoring to provide answers to research questions in such diverse areas as prevention, perception, and learning, and they are using new technology and knowledge to train the next generation. It is an exciting time to be a psychologist.

## Some of the Subfields in Psychology

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Psychologists specialize in a host of different areas within the field and identify themselves by many different labels. A sampling of those focal areas is presented to give you an idea of the breadth of psychology's scholarship and applications.

The field of psychology encompasses both *research*, through which we learn fundamental things about human and animal behavior, and *practice*, through which that knowledge is applied in helping to solve problems and promote healthy human development. In each of the subfields there are psychologists who work primarily as researchers, others who work primarily as practitioners, and many who do both (scientist–practitioners). Indeed, one of psychology's most unique and important characteristics is its coupling of science and practice, which stimulates continual advancement of both. Additionally, many psychologists

teach psychology in academic institutions, from high schools to graduate programs in universities.

**Clinical psychologists** assess and treat mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders. These range from short-term crises, such as difficulties resulting from adolescent rebellion, to more severe, chronic conditions such as schizophrenia. Some clinical psychologists treat specific problems exclusively, such as phobias or clinical depression. Others focus on specific populations—for instance, youths; families or couples; ethnic minority groups; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals; or older people. They also consult with physicians on physical problems that have underlying psychological causes.

**Cognitive and perceptual psychologists** study human perception, thinking, and memory. Cognitive psychologists are interested in questions such as, how the mind represents reality, how people learn, and how people understand and produce language. Cognitive psychologists also study reasoning, judgment, and decision making. Cognitive and perceptual psychologists frequently collaborate with behavioral neuroscientists to understand the biological bases of perception or cognition or with researchers in other areas of psychology to better understand the cognitive biases in the thinking of people with depression, for example.

**Community psychologists** work to strengthen the abilities of communities, settings, organizations, and broader social systems to meet people's needs. They help people access resources and collaborate with others to improve their lives and communities. Instead of helping individuals cope with negative circumstances (e.g., trauma, poverty), community psychologists help empower people to change those circumstances, prevent problems, and develop stronger communities. Examples of community psychology interventions include improving support for hurricane victims, partnering with neighborhoods to prevent crime, collaborating with schools to prevent bullying, and helping change policies to improve health outcomes. Community psychologists blend research

and practice, partnering with diverse citizens to plan and implement community changes, advance social justice, and use research to inform and evaluate this work.

**Counseling psychologists** help people recognize their strengths and resources to cope with everyday problems and serious adversity. They do counseling/psychotherapy, teaching, and scientific research with individuals of all ages, families, and organizations (e.g., schools, hospitals, businesses). Counseling psychologists help people understand and take action on career and work problems. They pay attention to how problems and people differ across the life span, and they have great respect for the influence of differences among people (such as race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability status) on psychological well-being. They believe that behavior is affected by many things, including qualities of the individual (e.g., psychological, physical, or spiritual factors) and factors in the person's environment (e.g., family, society, and cultural groups).

**Developmental psychologists** study the psychological development of the human being that takes place throughout life. Until recently, the primary focus was on childhood and adolescence, the most formative years. But as life expectancy in this country approaches 80 years, developmental psychologists are becoming increasingly interested in aging, especially in researching and developing ways to help older people stay as independent as possible.

**Educational psychologists** concentrate on how effective teaching and learning take place. They consider a variety of factors, such as human abilities, student motivation, and the effect on the classroom of the diverse races, ethnicities, and cultures that makes up America.

**Engineering psychologists** conduct research on how people work best with machines. For example, how can a computer be designed to prevent fatigue and eye strain? What arrangement of an assembly line makes production most efficient? What is a reasonable workload? Most engineering psychologists work in

industry, but some are employed by the government, particularly the Department of Defense. They are often known as human factors specialists.

**Environmental psychologists** study the dynamics of person–environment interactions. They define the term *environment* very broadly, including all that is natural on the planet as well as built environments, social settings, cultural groups, and informational environments. They examine behavior evolving at various scales and from various processes (e.g., localization, globalization). They have a broad and inherently multidisciplinary focus. They recognize the need to be problem oriented, coordination as needed with researchers and practitioners in the other fields of psychology, in related disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, biology, ecology), as well as in the design fields (e.g., regional, urban, and community planning; landscape architecture; architecture; and engineering).

Environmental psychologists explore such issues as common property resource management, the effect of environment stress on human effectiveness and well-being, the characteristics of restorative environments, and human information processing. They also foster conservation behavior, helping people to craft durable behavioral responses to emerging biophysical limits.

**Evolutionary psychologists** study how evolutionary principles such as mutation, adaptation, and selective fitness influence human thought, feeling, and behavior. Because of their focus on genetically shaped behaviors that influence an organism's chances of survival, evolutionary psychologists study mating, aggression, helping behavior, and communication. Evolutionary psychologists are particularly interested in paradoxes and problems of evolution. For example, some behaviors that were highly adaptive in our evolutionary past may no longer be adaptive in the modern world.

**Experimental psychologists** are interested in a wide range of psychological phenomena, including cognitive processes, comparative psychology (cross-species comparisons), and learning and conditioning.

They study both human and nonhuman animals with respect to their abilities to detect what is happening in a particular environment and to acquire and maintain responses to what is happening.

Experimental psychologists work with the empirical method (collecting data) and the manipulation of variables within the laboratory as a way of understanding certain phenomena and advancing scientific knowledge. In addition to working in academic settings, experimental psychologists work in places as diverse as manufacturing settings, zoos, and engineering firms.

**Forensic psychologists** apply psychological principles to legal issues. Their expertise is often essential within the judicial system. They can, for example, help a judge decide which parent should have custody of a child or evaluate a defendant's mental competence to stand trial. Forensic psychologists also conduct research on jury behavior or eyewitness testimony. Some forensic psychologists are trained in both psychology and the law.

**Health psychologists** specialize in how biological, psychological, and social factors affect health and illness. They study how patients handle illness, why some people don't follow medical advice, and the most effective ways to control pain or to change poor health habits. They also develop health care strategies that foster emotional and physical well-being.

Health psychologists team up with other health care professionals in independent practice and in hospitals to provide patients with complete health care. They educate health care professionals about psychological problems that arise from the pain and stress of illness and about symptoms that may seem to be physical in origin but actually have psychological causes. They also investigate issues that affect a large segment of society, and develop and implement programs to deal with these problems. Examples include teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, risky sexual behaviors, smoking, lack of exercise, and poor diet.

**Industrial/organizational (I/O) psychologists** apply psychological principles and research methods

to the work place in the interest of improving productivity, health, and the quality of work life. Many serve as human resources specialists, helping organizations with staffing, training, and employee development. They may provide employers with testing and other valid selection procedures in their hiring and promotion processes. Others work as management consultants in such areas as strategic planning, quality management, and coping with organizational change.

**Neuropsychologists (and behavioral neuropsychologists)** explore the relationships between brain systems and behavior. For example, behavioral neuropsychologists may study the way the brain creates and stores memories, or how various diseases and injuries of the brain affect emotion, perception, and behavior. They design tasks to study normal brain functions with imaging techniques such as positron emission tomography (PET), single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT), and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).

Clinical neuropsychologists also assess and treat people. And with the dramatic increase in the number of survivors of traumatic brain injury, neuropsychologists are working with health care teams to help brain-injured people resume productive lives.

**Quantitative and measurement psychologists** focus on methods and techniques for designing experiments and analyzing psychological data. Some develop new methods for performing analysis; others create research strategies to assess the effect of social and educational programs and psychological treatment. They develop and evaluate mathematical models for psychological tests. They also propose methods for evaluating the quality and fairness of the tests.

**Rehabilitation psychologists** work with stroke and accident victims, people with mental retardation, and those with developmental disabilities caused by such conditions as cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and autism. They help clients adapt to their situation and improve their situation and improve their lives, and

they frequently work with other health care professionals. They deal with issues of personal adjustment, interpersonal relations, the work world, and pain management.

Rehabilitation psychologists are also involved in public health programs to prevent disabilities, including those caused by violence and substance abuse. And they testify in court as expert witnesses about the causes and effects of a disability and a person's rehabilitation needs.

**School psychologists** are engaged in the delivery of comprehensive psychological services to children, adolescents, and families in schools and other applied settings. They assess and counsel students, consult with parents and school staff, and conduct behavioral interventions when appropriate. Most school districts employ psychologists full time.

**Social psychologists** study how a person's mental life and behavior are shaped by interactions with other people. They are interested in all aspects of interpersonal relationships, including both individual and group influences, and seek ways to improve such interactions. For example, their research helps us understand how people form attitudes toward others, and when these are harmful—as in the case of prejudice—suggests ways to change them.

Social psychologists are found in a variety of settings, from academic institutions (where they teach and conduct research), to advertising agencies (where they study consumer attitudes and preferences), to businesses and government agencies (where they help with a variety of problems in organization and management).

**Sports psychologists** help athletes refine their focus on competition goals, become more motivated, and learn to deal with the anxiety and fear of failure that often accompany competition. The field is growing as sports of all kinds become more competitive and attract younger children.