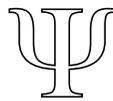


GRADUATE STUDY
IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY:
A PRIMER



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GRADUATE STUDY IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY: A PRIMER

This handout was written by Psychology Department faculty to provide information for students who are thinking about applying for graduate study in clinical psychology and related fields (e.g., counseling psychology, social work). Applying to graduate school is a difficult, expensive, time-consuming process. The competition is great because of the large numbers of students who apply (hundreds) and the relatively small number of places in a particular program (a dozen, give or take a few). This handout is designed to guide your thinking about applying to graduate school and to provide some nuts and bolts advice on the application process. We strongly suggest that you read this handout before talking to your advisor. It will probably answer many of your questions and will definitely improve your discussions with your advisor.

Clinical Psychology is a rapidly changing profession. Keep this in mind as you consider various options for graduate school. A broad, well-rounded doctoral education in a high-caliber department of psychology is, in our opinion, the very best way of preparing for a professional career. Whether your future work as a clinical psychologist will focus on psychotherapy, research, consulting, or some combination of these and other activities, broad training in the scientist/practitioner model will prepare you for future professional challenges. However, some considerations may tip the balance in favor of other forms of professional training. We discuss these below.

Preliminary Questions

Should I apply to graduate school during my senior year or wait until after graduation?

We're tackling this question first, because it will guide some of your other decisions. In many cases, one to two years of clinical, service-related and/or research experience after college strengthens an application. In fact, a growing number of doctoral programs in clinical psychology prefer not to take applicants directly out of college. These programs strongly believe that a year or two of working in the real world is a prerequisite for clinical training. More important, it gives you a clearer sense of what psychologists do, and what type of psychology you're interested in. This clarity could help inform your choice of professional training, add to your maturity when starting your training, and reduce some of the ambivalence you may have about your choice. Since many of the training options (but particularly doctoral programs) require long years of delayed gratification, you may be well served by arriving at your decision with greater clarity, information, maturity, and resolve.

Can I apply to graduate school in clinical psychology if I didn't major in psychology as an undergraduate?

Of course — though to be honest, it's going to take you at least a year or two to build up your credentials and to put yourself in a competitive position. The preparation we describe later on in this handout doesn't all have to occur during college. In terms of the academic preparation, most programs require some background coursework in psychology, to familiarize yourself with the field and to give the programs some sense of your interest and ability in psychology. This can be done by taking masters level courses as a non-matriculating student or by completing an M.A. in general psychology or a particular sub-field, such as personality, social or developmental psychology.

Do I really want a Ph.D. in clinical psychology?

Before beginning the application process, you need to think about your career goals, and the professional activities you want to do on a daily basis. Do you want to provide direct service (therapy) to clients? Are you particularly interested in testing and assessment? Is clinical research your primary interest? Do you want to mix clinical work with research or program development? Do you prefer to work with large organizations or groups rather than individuals?

Depending on your answers to these difficult questions, various options are open to you. There is a wide range of programs that offer clinical and clinical-related practice and research skills. Instead of a doctoral program in clinical psychology, you might choose a doctoral program in **counseling** psychology (if you prefer to work with healthy people in times of transition or crisis, including rehabilitation and vocational guidance), **developmental** psychology (if you wish to conduct research on normative development), **school** psychology (if you want to work with special needs of children in an educational setting), **community** psychology (if you want to consult to organizations on public policy and community mental health issues), **health** psychology (if you want to work with ill people in a medical setting) or **organizational** psychology (if you're interested in personnel selection and management). Or, if you don't want to spend 6-8 years earning a doctorate, you may decide to obtain a master's degree in **social work**, which is a two-year clinical practice degree. The career options for a social worker overlap partly with those for a psychologist, but may also differ from them in important respects. Clinical social workers (who hold an MSW degree) tend to be trained more thoroughly in systemic approaches that attend to an individual's family, culture, and environment. In contrast, clinical psychologists often receive more rigorous research training, and have "exclusivity" over the areas of assessment and testing. Try to imagine your future! (By the way, there's a contact file in the Career Services office which has names and addresses of Barnard alumnae who are mental health professionals with various training, and who are willing to talk with students.)

What about Psy.D. versus Ph.D. programs?

Psy.D. or Doctor of Psychology programs are an innovation of the past 30 years or so, designed to provide training similar to clinical Ph.D. training, but with a greater emphasis on clinical practice. Psy.D. programs often take a little less time to complete (5-7 instead of 6-8), and tend to provide little training and even less experience in conducting research. The Psy.D. degree is often seen as second-best, and having a Psy.D. instead of a Ph.D. may preclude certain jobs (e.g., teaching, research). There are many Psy.D. programs in the country, some affiliated with universities; others are unaffiliated programs, at times given through for-profit "Professional Schools of Psychology". Not all programs are accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA). If you receive the Psy.D. from a program which is not APA-accredited, you may also face problems in receiving a license to practice in some states. Therefore, it is best to investigate a non-APA approved program very carefully before deciding that it's the best choice for you. If you have the option, you should probably choose a Ph.D. program.

What is the course of studies in a Ph.D. or a Psy.D. program?

Graduate students in clinical psychology spend 4-5 years (for Ph.D.) or 3-4 years (for Psy.D) in their graduate program, followed by at least 1 year of internship and (usually) 1-2 years of post-doctoral training.

During the 4-5 years of a residency in the program, you will be taking graduate classes, conducting research, teaching, and getting practical clinical training. **Classes:** Classes are usually taken only in the first 3-4 years of the program, and sometimes only in the first two. They include classes on psychopathology, psychotherapy and assessment, statistics and research methods, as well as additional classes for breadth (e.g., social psychology, neuropsychology) and depth (e.g., advanced seminars in your area of research). **Research:** To varying degrees, you will be expected to become involved in research activities from the beginning of your graduate training. In science-oriented programs, you will be carrying out research projects, writing up at least one Master's and one Dissertation project (and often many more research reports), and will be encouraged to develop both the interest and the skills of an independent researcher-practitioner. In programs that are more practice-oriented, this component may be less emphasized, but you will still be expected to complete at least one major research thesis. **Teaching:** Often you will need to (or will wish to) be a TA or an instructor in courses of your own. Gaining experience in college-level teaching is more common in PhD than in PsyD programs. **Clinical practical training:** Starting in your second year (and in some programs, earlier than that) you will participate in clinical practicum (or "externship") sequences, often switching from one practicum to another every year. Some

programs have in-house clinics, and will have their students conduct assessment and therapy mostly in these clinics. Others place their students in hospitals or other agencies in the community. Still others leave it up to the student to find, apply, and be accepted to these practica sites. Typically, a student will have at least 3 years of practicum training, usually consisting of 16-20 hour commitments each week. Good programs find a balance between sufficient concentration with a particular client population (e.g., eating disorders, sex offenders, externalizing childhood behaviors, etc.) or a particular area of therapy or assessment (e.g., neuropsychological assessment, cognitive behavioral therapy, interpersonal therapy, etc.), together with a sufficient breadth of experiences with different modalities (individual, group, family) and with clients of different age, ethnic background, and symptom severity.

What preparation do I need in order to apply?

We suggest that you think of the preparation for graduate study in three domains: coursework, research experience and clinical experience.

Coursework: There is no precise formula, but in general, the following coursework constitutes a core minimum: Introductory Psychology, Statistics, Abnormal Psychology, and a course in laboratory and/or field research methods. In addition, two or more advanced courses in areas of psychology which are of most interest to you can demonstrate to graduate programs your ability to handle doctoral-level courses. For Barnard students, these requirements are easily met within the guidelines for the psychology major. In addition to coursework in psychology, many other areas of study can enhance your scholarly preparation for graduate study. For example, there are aspects of psychology that overlap considerably with biology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, mathematics, and computer science. A major in one of these fields and a minor in psychology (including the core minimum of courses described above) would also constitute adequate course preparation.

Research Experience: Because a Ph.D. degree is a research degree, it is highly advisable to garner some research experience outside of laboratory courses before applying for admission. This can be done in many ways. The easiest way is to conduct research with a Barnard faculty member. The handout "Choosing an Advisor in the Psychology Department" describes research interests of faculty members. Decide which professor's interests seem most agreeable and make an appointment to discuss the possibility of research work or an independent study project. Alternatively, you can approach a research psychologist outside of Barnard. The New York State Psychiatric Institute (at Columbia College of Physicians & Surgeons) and Bank Street College of Education (Research Division, 610 West 112th St.) are two good bets. (Barnard professors know research scientists at these and other research institutions in New York and will be happy to introduce you to them.)

Within the Barnard curriculum you can get academic credit for an independent research project (BC3599, Individual Projects/Research; BC3465, Fieldwork and Research Seminar; Barnard College Toddler Center; BC3591, 3592 Senior Research Seminar). In addition there are research assistant positions that pay you for research work. These jobs may require some basic research experience and a greater time commitment. Check the Psychology Department bulletin boards for notices of research opportunities, both within and outside of the college, and see the handout "Opportunities for Research and Field Work in Psychology" for more details.

Clinical Experience: Clinical or service-related experience can be extremely advantageous, especially in applying to the practitioner-oriented programs. It can also help you assess whether a helping profession is right for you. Though you do not need to work with psychiatric patients to bolster your application, it is important to have systematic and supervised experience providing services to any population, under circumstances that require skillful social interaction. Such experiences can come in the form of paid jobs, volunteer jobs, and field placements for course credit. Ideally, you want to demonstrate both breadth and depth of clinical/service experience; therefore, it is optimal to have at least one long-term experience (beyond one semester or one summer) and one or two other briefer placements.

Again, you can gain clinical experience both through coursework (e.g., BC3465, Fieldwork and Research Seminar; Barnard Toddler Center; BC3473, Fieldwork and Seminar in

Psychological Services and Counseling; BC3498, Individual Projects/Field Work; Experimental Studies) and in clinical placements which you find yourself. Dr. Sandra Stingle, who teaches BC3473, keeps an updated list of settings in the New York area which offer volunteer clinical/service placements. In addition, a student can identify clinical settings of particular interest to her and can inquire directly about paid or voluntary positions. The quality of clinical services provided to clients and the quality of supervision you'll receive can vary from setting to setting. In general, our advice is to choose a setting in which you are intrigued by the client group and likely to receive quality supervision. Those are the two critical ingredients to a successful clinical/service placement.

Choosing a School

Where do I apply?

There is a wide choice of schools offering clinical training; try to match the programs with your career interests. Most programs are theoretically eclectic, though some may have a particular orientation (e.g., cognitive-behavioral, psychodynamic). Even programs that describe themselves as eclectic often lean toward one approach or another. Some programs emphasize research more than practice; others will have the opposite emphasis. Many APA-accredited programs subscribe to the *Clinical Science Model* (<http://psych.arizona.edu/apcs/apcs.html>) or to *Boulder model* of clinical training (so named because the conference which developed the model was held in Boulder, Colorado). The Boulder model is that of *scientist/practitioner* and emphasizes both research and practice. These tend to be very selective programs, and value students of strong caliber and good preparation typical of Barnard graduates.

How do you know if a program is a Boulder model program? The specific orientation of a program and its faculty members can often be gleaned from the program's literature. Another invaluable way of learning what a program is really like is through discussions with graduate students in that program. Ask what graduates from the last five years are doing now; if a program professes to train researchers but all its graduates are in private practice (or vice versa), then something is amiss.

If you're not sure exactly about your professional plans or if you simply want to leave your options open, we recommend Boulder model programs. During the five or more years of doctoral study, you may change in your career goals and interests, and societal needs may change as well. For example, no one in the 1950's foresaw the "graying of America" and the current need for clinical gero-psychologists specializing in aging. If you attend a clinical program in a psychology department that is affiliated with other psychology programs on that campus (e.g., social or developmental psychology), you will be solidly trained to respond to future demands in this rapidly changing field.

As we indicated earlier, we strongly advise you to apply to APA-accredited programs. Approval by the American Psychological Association provides a standard of the quality and breadth of the education — and on the practical side, makes you a stronger candidate for APA-accredited clinical internships during graduate school, and for professional licensing after graduate school. The *Guide to Graduate Study in Psychology* lists APA-accredited programs.

How many programs should I apply to?

Because admission to clinical psychology graduate school is very competitive, some people advise students to apply to a dozen programs or more, to improve the chances of acceptance. We are not convinced that this strategy is always productive. There are other means of making your application attractive to the graduate admissions committee. First, get the appropriate academic preparation; demonstrate your resolve with research and clinical experience; choose a program consistent with your orientation; and, to some extent, you will fare better if you apply to programs outside the New York metropolitan area.

All other things being equal, the more your clinical and research experience and the farther away the school you apply to, the higher are your chances of acceptance. Instead of applying to

large numbers of schools, we suggest that you apply to a range of schools, using your credentials (grades, GRE scores, experience) as a guide.

How will my application be evaluated?

The four main components of an application are, in order of importance: 1) Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores; 2) grades, 3) letters of recommendation and 4) evaluation of your background and likelihood of success as a clinical psychologist. The last criterion is the most subjective, and is based on your vita (what you've done), your personal essay, and, for some schools, a personal interview. The combination of these components are vital to an outstanding application.

For most doctoral programs in clinical psychology, high grades (a GPA of 3.5 or higher, especially in psychology courses) and high GRE scores are vital. Most schools weigh the Math score more than the Verbal score, but neither should be much lower than the 80th percentile.

Letters of recommendation should be obtained from faculty members, research supervisors, and mental health professionals who know your work well and can evaluate your qualifications in detail. Recommendations from faculty members are especially important, though adding one letter from a mental health professional who supervised your clinical work is helpful. Faculty members in the best position to recommend you are those who have supervised you individually in research or with whom you studied in a small class or seminar. A letter that reads, "Monica was a student in my Abnormal Psychology class two years ago and got an A" and nothing more will not boost your application, and may even hurt your chances of acceptance.

Some graduate programs will ask you for a personal interview, but only after you have made what is called the *first cut*, based on GRE scores, grades, and recommendations. Other schools have eliminated the personal interview because of cost or because it has been proven to be unreliable. In any case, it's a "don't call us, we'll call you" phenomenon. Our sources tell us that in the Metropolitan area, at least, schools will interview 80-100 applicants out of the 300-500 that apply. If a school does conduct interviews, the interview is a major decision factor, and often doctoral students, as well as faculty, interview you.

Nuts and Bolts

When do I file my applications?

Most schools have deadlines of mid-December to mid-February for all application materials to be received. Therefore, you should start the process of applying to graduate schools in the summer of the year before you plan to matriculate (for undergraduates, this is the summer after your junior year). During that summer, you should use the American Psychological Association's (APA) *Guide to Graduate Study in Psychology*, as well as other sources of information available online, to find programs that are compatible with your interest. (Two copies of the *Guide* are kept on the reference shelf in 415 Milbank for your use). Write to programs, or look online for their literature and application forms; many clinical programs prepare a short brochure describing their approach, including faculty coursework, research opportunities, field placements and degree requirements. During the fall you will want to take the GRE exams, to write your personal essay (these take a lot of time), to communicate with prospective advisors, to obtain letters of recommendation, and to complete the application forms (these take a lot of time, too!)

GRE: The GRE exam should be taken by December at the latest, but we have learned from students' experience that those who take them earlier can make more informed choices about which programs to apply to. Without this information, you just don't know whether you meet the criteria of specific programs. Many programs require the Advanced GRE Test in Psychology as well as the regular GRE; examine each program's application carefully. Our advice for studying is to read one (or several) comprehensive introductory text(s), particularly in those topic areas you're least familiar with. Studying class notes is less advisable, since course curricula vary by professor.

Personal essay: This is a central part of your application, and you should plan to write several drafts. Ask friends and faculty to comment on early drafts, and start early. Though essay

requirements vary by school, most will be asking you to integrate your academic, research and clinical experience in psychology, and to describe your ideas for future research and practice. They will want to know why you are interested in doctoral training in clinical psychology, why your training and experience make you a good candidate for admission, and why you and the program are a good match for each other. The personal essay should not read like a resume. You should be clear, concise, and informative, but you need not respond in a stereotyped fashion. This is your chance to express your individuality. At the same time, this essay is quite different from the one you wrote for college admissions.

Contact with specific prospective advisors [for some PhD programs]. In many of the more research-oriented PhD programs, your application will be evaluated not just generically, but with an eye towards a specific fit between your interests and those of one or more of the faculty. Thus, in each program in which you are interested, identify 2-3 professors whose work is of particular interest for you. Look at their webpages, read some of their abstracts, and try to find out if they are mentoring graduate students. A polite email expressing your interest in working with them, inquiring about their recent work (e.g., asking for pre-prints of recent articles), and initiating contact, can make all the difference. Consider making such contact – be polite, cordial, and consult with others before doing it, but do it. It would be wise to let your letter writers (below) know about such contact. In the ideal situation, your prospective advisor would be active in the research field in which you have gotten some research experience. Therefore, your letter writers (or at least your research supervisors) may have some useful ideas about how to communicate with a prospective advisor, or they may know her or him personally, making the introduction easier!

Letters of recommendation: Ask faculty members to write letters of recommendation early in the fall of the year before you plan to matriculate and, at the very least, a month before they are due. Writing a good and personal letter takes time. This will also permit you to find other recommenders if a particular faculty member feels that he or she can't write an outstanding letter for you. Most faculty members find it helpful if you provide them with a copy of your vita (listing all your clinical and research experience), a draft of your personal essay (describing your own personal reasons for applying to graduate school in clinical psychology) and a tentative list of programs to which you plan to apply. Since your letter writers are busy people who are often occupied with a number of projects, a tactful reminder a week or so before the due date is appropriate and often appreciated.

What about financial support during graduate school?

Graduate school is expensive and becoming more so every year. In addition, recent trends in federal budgets have reduced some traditional sources of financial support for graduate study. Nonetheless, if you wish to go to graduate school in clinical psychology, we believe that finances don't have to stand in your way.

Beyond support from family or savings, there are a number of sources of aid which applicants should look into. In almost all cases, these funds are for doctoral students and not for students enrolled in master's programs. Support is often in the form of a stipend (salary) and/or tuition remission. Some sources are administered by the graduate departments themselves. Although they've been reduced in recent years, some departments still receive grants from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) to provide training fellowships to doctoral candidates. In addition, some programs receive funds from their university to support clinical training for doctoral students. Most graduate programs connected with undergraduate programs are able to offer teaching fellowships. Finally, some departments with a large number of research grants are able to offer research fellowships. Graduate programs vary considerably in the number and type of available graduate fellowships (training, teaching, or research). PhD programs tend to have much better support for their students than do PsyD programs, but not all PhD students admitted to a clinical program receive fellowships. Inquire specifically about the number and type of fellowships offered to incoming students in the last several years, and the number and type which will be offered in the next few years.

Increasingly, students are supporting their own graduate study. The main mechanisms here are loan programs administered by universities (like NDSL and FISL) and private banks (like

GILP). The financial aid office of the graduate school to which you are applying can provide you with the details. Finally, many doctoral students, especially in more practice-oriented programs, work their way through graduate school. Some students develop research projects or serve as consultants to organizations. Remember, however, that for the first three years of graduate school, most programs expect you to be a full-time student. Financing a graduate education is tough, but we believe that where there's a will, there are many ways.

What if I'm not accepted at any school?

Try, try again. Don't hesitate to ask faculty members about any gaps in your training and experience. Obtaining more research and clinical experience never hurt anyone. At some schools, outstanding research and/or clinical experience can greatly improve the chances of acceptance for students with lower grades or GRE scores. Some people recommend pursuing an M.A. in psychology. This is especially useful for students with relatively poor grades. The M.A. is a sign that you can handle graduate level coursework. Though an M.A. may help you get into a Ph.D. program, it is rare a for Ph.D. program to accept its own M.A. candidates. Don't give up; some well-known clinical psychologists have confessed to us that it took them several tries to get into a doctoral program, and even then, not their top choice.

Postscript

Once those applications are postmarked, settle back and enjoy some of the books that we think depict the therapeutic process and profession in realistic detail:

In Session by Deborah Lott (about women in therapy)
August by Judith Rossner (about a Barnard student, no less!)
Ordinary People by Judith Guest
Is There Anyplace on Earth for Me? by Susan Sheehan
The Impossible Profession by Janet Malcolm
Doing Psychotherapy by Michael Franz Basch

