

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGY?

Every profession has its stereotypes. If you introduce an English teacher at a party, people say, "I'd better watch my grammar!" If you introduce a medical doctor, people describe an ailment and ask for free advice. If you introduce a psychologist, people say, "Oh-oh, you might analyze me!" or "My brother-in-law should talk to you..." This reveals a common assumption: that psychologists are therapists waiting to analyze people.

What is a common assumption about psychologists? What are some non-therapy activities of psychologists? In actuality, many psychologists are not therapists. Some are researchers in laboratories, some are full-time teachers and researchers, and some are consultants to business and industry. Many have never done therapy in their lives. They may work with animals rather than humans. They may be experts in highly abstract or detailed theories about psychological processes. One of the things you will learn in this course is that psychologists do an amazing number of different things...and not all psychologists are therapists.

The popular notion that psychologists "help people" is more than half true, however, if you go by the numbers. Slightly over half of all psychologists are involved in psychology as a helping profession. That phrase psychology as a helping profession is useful because it covers more than therapy. It may mean community involvement in Help Lines, crisis centers, shelters for the homeless, or it may mean testing students who need special help, designing special educational programs, or providing assistance to the courts. Or it may mean therapy, such as marriage counseling, addiction counseling, or helping people cope with terminal illness.

How many psychologists are involved in psychology as a helping profession? What sorts of activities are included in that phrase?

A common definition of psychology is the science of mind and behavior. When department chairs at the University of Michigan were asked in 1989, "Which one or two questions from your discipline do you wish every liberal arts graduate could answer?" the suggestion from the psychology department was the following question:

The field of psychology has been defined somewhat differently at different times in this century. In one sentence, what is a good current definition of the field?

What was a definition of psychology, circa 1989?

The suggested answer was:

"Psychology is the science of behavior and mental processes." ("What do you know?", 1989)

SPECIALTIES WITHIN PSYCHOLOGY

To give you some idea of the broad range of interests and activities within the field of psychology, the following table lists some of the different types. Percentages are approximate and vary widely in different countries.

Title of Specialty	Typical Professional Activities	
Clinical Psychology	Therapy, research, teaching, writing, helping people with behavioral or mental disorders.	55%
Counseling Psychology	Helping people with problems of everyday life (such as marital problems, school problems, family crises)	14%
Educational Psychology	Teaching and research on teaching and learning and educational systems, mostly in academic settings (colleges and universities)	10%
School Psychology and Psychometrics	Testing and diagnosing gifted and learning disabled students, mostly in school settings	8%
Social Psychology	Teaching and research about social influences on individuals	8%
Industrial/Organizational (I/O)	Teaching, research, or program design concerning business and industry	8%
Experimental and Cognitive Psychology	Teaching and research on human information processing such as perception, language, and memory	7%
Human Factors Psychology and Engineering Psychology	Theory and research about interactions between humans and tools, equipment, and systems.	6%
Community Psychology	Activities undertaken in the community to benefit the community.	5%
Developmental Psychology, including Child Psychology, Adolescent Psychology, the Psychology of Aging	The study of development from conception to death	4%
Physiological Psychology, Psychobiology, Neuroscience	Biological Approaches to Psychology	3%
Health Psychology, Medical Psychology, Behavioral Medicine, Rehabilitation Psychology, Psychiatric Rehabilitation	Psychology relating to health and medicine or taking place in hospitals	2%
Comparative and Animal Psychology	Psychology involving the analysis of animal behavior and the comparison of different species	2%
Forensic Psychology, Prison Psychology, Psychology and the Law	Psychology involved with the legal system, prisons, and court system	2%
Methodologists and Statistical Consultants	Psychology involved in setting up experiments and analyzing data	2%

The boundaries between these sub-disciplines are fluid: for example, a developmental psychologist might also be a clinical psychologist. A forensic psychologist is usually a clinical psychologist first, specializing in forensic psychology later. This is also why the percentages add up to more than 100%.

The undergraduate (bachelor's) degree in psychology is very useful because it is flexible. Students with a psychology degree may obtain graduate degrees in fields like business, law, and social work in addition to psychology. Other psychology majors elect not to attend graduate school, and they go to work in other fields. A graduate degree is needed, in almost every case, to be employed as a psychologist. In the field of psychology itself, there are three common graduate degrees: the Masters degree (MA or MS), the Doctor of Psychology degree (PsyD) and the PhD in Psychology degree (PhD). By convention, these degrees are written without punctuation, although are all abbreviations

What is the difference between a PsyD and a PhD?

The PsyD (Doctor of Psychology) degree is clinically-oriented. It is specifically for people entering psychology as a helping profession. By contrast, the PhD in Psychology (Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology) is a research-oriented degree, and a PhD student must do original research which is documented in a PhD dissertation. The PhD in psychology (Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology) is a research-oriented degree, and a PhD student must do original research which is documented in a PhD dissertation.

A PhD in Clinical Psychology requires both a research dissertation and supervised clinical experience, while the PsyD requires only the clinical training. For this reason a clinical PhD typically requires an extra year for a total of five years of graduate school at minimum. The PsyD is a therapy-oriented degree so the research requirement is absent and most students finish the degree in four years. The starting salary for a PsyD is likely to be higher than that of a Masters Degree holder but lower than that of a PhD. Research expertise is valued in academia, so many universities will hire only PhD psychologists for faculty positions.

What is the largest single branch of psychology?

Clinical psychology is the largest single branch of psychology. A slight majority of all psychologists are clinical psychologists, if the phrase is defined broadly to include all those who work in or teach about psychology as a helping profession. Many clinical psychologists do not work in a clinic such as a mental health clinic or school clinic, nor do they always do therapy. A third of all clinical psychologists are employed in academic settings. A third work in hospitals or clinics. A sixth has private practices. The rest do things like consulting for business and industry.

What are differences between psychologists and psychiatrists? How do they often cooperate at mental health centers?

One thing every psychology student should know is that psychologists are not the same as psychiatrists. Psychiatrists are MDs; most clinical psychologists are PhDs or PsyDs. Psychiatrists go through medical school, like any medical doctor, then they specialize in psychiatry the way other MDs specialize in cardiology or internal medicine. Psychologists do not go through medical school; they go to graduate programs in psychology. One important consequence is that psychiatrists can prescribe drugs, while psychologists in the United States usually cannot, except in a small number of states in the U.S. where legislators have given them permission to do so. In other states, psychologists who work at a mental health center maintain professional ties with one or more psychiatrists who visit periodically and prescribe medications when necessary.

What are some common erroneous assumptions of psychology majors?

Psychology majors often make erroneous assumptions about the discipline. For example, many students are unaware that a PhD is required for many entry positions in psychology. Masters degree holders can usually find work in a psychological clinic or other group setting, but they typically do not work as independent therapists or professors. Students tend to overestimate minority participation in psychology, which is still rather low, around 8% by some estimates. Minority students who persist to obtain a PhD may find that several schools are competing for them, because most psychology departments value diversity.

Finally, students tended to overestimate salaries in the field. As of 2007 a salary of \$34,000 would be good for a Masters Degree holder starting out in a rural mental health clinic, while \$42,000 might be a starting salary for a Doctoral degree holder at a medium sized state university. Salaries vary with geographical location and the prestige of the hiring institution. Where the cost of living is high (for example, in culturally desirable cities) salaries are correspondingly high, but the jobs there are harder to get because more people compete for them.

FOUR APPROACHES TO PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Modern psychologists use several distinct approaches to the scientific study of behavior and mental processes:

What are four basic approaches used by psychologists?

Biological explanations are based on knowledge of living cells and organic systems. Brain scanning technologies have revolutionized research of this type. Scientists have increasingly detailed knowledge of cell interactions, chemical influences on the nervous system, and brain/behavior relationships.

Behavioral explanations emphasize relationships between the organism and its environment plus the organism's history of learning. The "environment" is conceived as stimulation that can be measured. The organism responds with behaviors that also can be measured. Behaviorists once confined their attention to exterior, observable behavior. Now most consider thoughts and emotions as "hidden behavior" which can be measured and manipulated almost like observable behavior.

Cognitive approaches stress information processing. Cognitive psychologists study the mental representation of thoughts, images, knowledge, and emotions. The word "representation" refers to the brain's storage of memories, images, perceptions, thoughts, and other mental contents.

What is phenomenology?

Subjective approaches to psychology describe unique thoughts, feelings, and experiences of individuals. Subjective approaches include phenomenology (phe-NOM-in-OL-o-gy), which takes the individual's experience as a starting point. If we ask you to report how it feels to be reading this text, for example, that is an investigation of phenomenology.

How is psychology "by nature an integrative science"?

One might argue that all four perspectives are relevant to almost all areas of psychology. Anxiety, for example, can be studied as a biological response, a behavior, a thought process, or an experience. Psychology is by nature a very integrative science, employing a variety of perspectives on the same phenomena.

SUMMARY: WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGY?

Psychology has been defined in many ways over the years. One definition, still current, is the science of behavior and mental processes. Slightly over half of all psychologists are engaged in psychology as a helping profession (some form of counseling or consultation aimed at helping people with their problems). Other psychologists perform a wide variety of different professional activities.

Students often have misconceptions about the field of psychology. Often they fail to distinguish between psychology and psychiatry. Many do not realize a PhD is required for most jobs in psychology. Students in the United States tend to overestimate typical starting salaries.

At least four distinct approaches to the subject matter of psychology can be identified. One, the biological perspective, concentrates on the nervous system and its components, especially the brain. Another perspective, the cognitive approach, emphasizes information processing involved in mental processes. The behavioral approach studies measurable activity of the organism and how it reflects stimuli in the environment plus the organism's history of learning. The fourth perspective, the subjective or phenomenological approach, is the study of things as they appear to people.