

APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

A gentle introduction

Jessica Schleider, PhD
Stony Brook University
June 2019

BUT FIRST...



Remember:

- You are not alone!
- People want to help!
- You have lots of options!

DISCLAIMERS

- This session represents one person's impressions – collect many perspectives as you prepare for your grad school journey!
- My personal bias is **towards research**, but I want to support you in pursuing whatever career you'd like!

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Imagine yourself in your ‘dream’ career – doing *exactly* what energizes you most.

Try to picture your daily tasks, responsibilities, colleagues, and roles.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

- **RESEARCH?**

- Running a lab? Working on a large research team?

- **TEACHING?**

- Teaching undergraduates? Graduate students? High schoolers?

- **CLINICAL PRACTICE?**

- What populations (kids, adults, both)? What types of problems? What setting(s)?

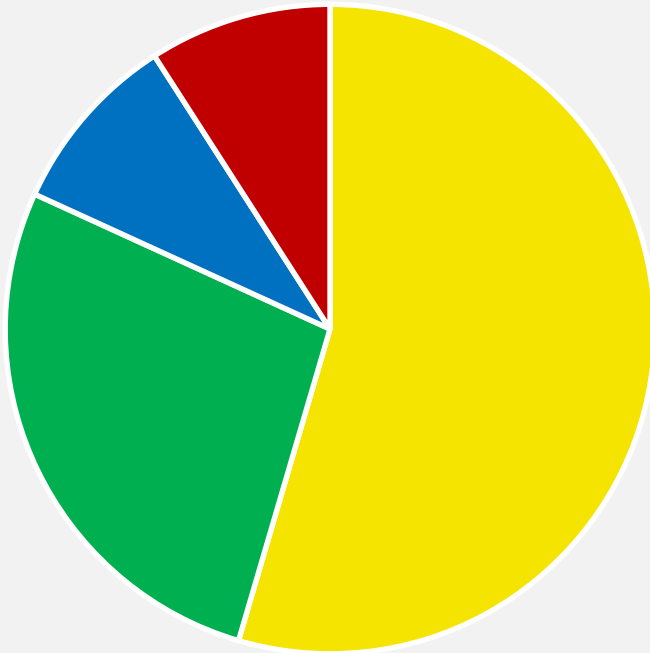
- **ADMINISTRATION?**

- A ‘behind the scenes’ role? Program/clinic management? Systems-level work?

Are you doing more than one of the above? If so, what *balance* do you envision?

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

What type of “career pie” would feel most meaningful and exciting to you?



■ Research ■ Teaching ■ Admin ■ Practice

*“Career Pie” for someone interested in a research-focused career. **Yours could look very different!***

- Your career pie slices may **shift in size** over time
- It can be hard to know how large each slice will be without first-hand experiences in an area (e.g., research)
- Be honest with yourself and open to possible change
- Informational interviews with professionals (and not just your professors) are a great place to start!

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Degree	PhD or PsyD
Length of Time	PhD: 5-7 years (full time), including 1-year clinical internship PsyD: 5-6 years (full time), including 1-year clinical internship
Part-time/distance options?	Very rarely
Leads to clinical licensure?	Yes
Scholarships available?	PhD: Strong programs offer full tuition remission & living stipend PsyD: Very few offer financial support – can be <u>very</u> costly

- One of the most diverse degrees available!
 - **Clinical psychologists** with a Ph.D. can work as clinicians, professors, researchers, consultants, supervisors, and/or administrators.
 - Those with a Psy.D. may pursue many of the same options, but relatively few pursue careers in research, teaching, or academia. If you think you *might* have interests in these areas, I would advise against limiting your future self!

COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY

Degree	PhD or PsyD
Length of Time	PhD: 5-7 years (full time), including 1-year clinical internship PsyD: 5-6 years (full time), including 1-year clinical internship
Part-time/distance options?	Rarely
Leads to clinical licensure?	Yes
Scholarships available?	PhD: Strong programs offer full tuition remission & living stipend PsyD: Very few offer financial support – can be <u>very</u> costly

- Much closer to ‘clinical psychology’ than ‘counseling’
- Boundary between clinical and counseling psychology is fuzzy
- Generally, counseling psychology PhD/PsyD programs have more faculty/coursework focused on diversity, social justice, community-level and systems-level issues
- If there is a faculty member in a Counseling Psych program who is an excellent fit for your research interests, definitely consider applying – even if Clinical Psychology is your general focus.

CLINICAL & COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY

Program types vary *widely* – pay attention to program's stated training approach!

- ***Clinical Scientist programs*** focus on training researchers who are also skilled clinicians (still eligible for licensure, but often pursue careers in research)
- ***Scientist-Practitioner programs*** focus on training students as balanced practitioners and researchers
- ***Practitioner-Scholar programs*** focus on training practitioners who can consume and apply research in work with patients

Ph.D. programs tend to follow **Clinical Scientist** or **Scientist-Practitioner** models.
Psy.D. Programs tend to follow the **Practitioner-Scholar** model.

But this is not always the case – look at programs' websites and descriptions for the full story!

CLINICAL & COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY

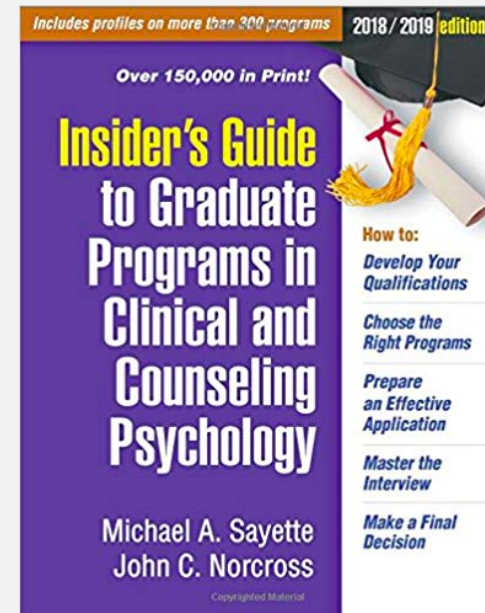
Regardless of what type of program you pursue, **research training is a core part of doctoral-level work in clinical and counseling psychology.**

A research-based thesis and dissertation/capstone project is required in virtually all high-quality doctoral programs (both Ph.D. and Psy.D.)

If research is a **small or negligible part of your ‘career pie,’** other graduate degrees should be strongly considered, if not prioritized!

→ **Strongly recommended resource!! Available [HERE](#)**

(This book rates all clinical & counseling programs on how heavily they weight research versus clinical training)



WHAT ARE GRAD PROGRAMS LOOKING FOR?

First, some basics...

- Doctoral programs in clinical and counseling psychology are extremely competitive.
 - PhD programs: 200-600 applicants compete for 3-8 slots (2-10% admissions rate)
 - Admissions decisions are based on many factors, including educational background/test scores, general match to a program's values/training opportunities, and specific fit to a professor's research (for mentorship-based doctoral programs)
 - Personal statement can be used to address the 'fit' questions
- **In most APA-accredited PhD programs...**
 - You will NOT pay tuition and you WILL be given a living stipend, usually in exchange for serving as a teaching assistant or research assistant (range from \$10-33k annually)
- **In most APA-accredited PsyD programs...**
 - You will be expected to self-fund much or all of your tuition and living expenses

WHAT ARE GRAD PROGRAMS LOOKING FOR?

Evidence of Ability

- GPA
 - Typical requirements
 - ≥ 3.5 for most Ph.D. programs and fully-funded Psy.D. programs
 - ≥ 3.2 for many Psy.D. programs
- What if your undergraduate GPA is low?
 - Stress stronger GPA in upper-level & psychology major courses (or hard science courses if you are pursuing a medical or nursing degree)
 - Complete a General Psychology MA program
 - NB: You do not need a Master's to apply to PhD programs. In most cases, getting a Master's won't shorten your time-to-degree...and you will get another MA degree 'en route' to your PhD, after defending your Master's thesis!

WHAT ARE GRAD PROGRAMS LOOKING FOR?

Evidence of Ability

- Standardized Tests
 - **GRE** (www.ets.org)
 - Programs may not have strict cut-offs – check program websites for expectations
 - PhD, PsyD programs often want to see scores >70%ile in all sections (quantitative, verbal, analytical writing), but strict cut-offs are rare, and other factors usually matter more
 - **Psychology GRE** (for some PhD, PsyD programs, but not all)
 - Offered 3x/year; 205-question multiple choice exam
 - Rarely plays a major role in admissions

WHAT ARE GRAD PROGRAMS LOOKING FOR?

Research Experience (for doctoral programs)

- Once you have a within-range GPA and GRE score, **research experience is perhaps the most critical factor** in doctoral program admissions
- Certain types of research experiences are **especially valuable**. These include...
 - **Senior thesis/honors thesis**
 - **Independent research project(s)** supervised by a faculty member
 - **Full-time research assistant position** (post-bacc job, usually 2 years) that involves advanced knowledge and skills

WHY? Clinical/counseling psychology programs train students to be *independent researchers*. Experiences that show your readiness for this work are incredibly helpful—both for you (towards developing your research interests, and thinking of questions you would like to pursue in graduate school) and for the admissions committee (in evaluating your potential for success in the program).

WHAT ARE GRAD PROGRAMS LOOKING FOR?

Clinical experience

May be personally rewarding, but clinically-oriented experiences **tend not to make a large difference** in clinical/counseling psychology programs' admissions decisions

- *Might* make more positive impact for admission to PsyD programs
- **WHY?** The types of clinical experiences you can accrue as an undergrad/post-bacc do not closely resemble the work that psychologists do in practice.
- However, **getting *clinical research experience* – working with clinical populations through your work on a research study – can be very *valuable*** when applying for doctoral programs in clinical/counseling psychology.
 - Can help you learn about the *interplay* between clinical research and clinical practice!

MY TWO CENTS...

Personal perspective: What makes applicants most competitive for research-oriented doctoral programs in clinical psychology?**

***speaking only for myself, as a faculty member in a clinical science oriented PhD program!*

- **Strong independent research experience** (ideally with the types of populations my lab works with)
- **Goodness-of-fit with my lab** (in my case—interests in brief interventions and youth depression and anxiety treatment, as expressed in Personal Statement)
- **High intrinsic motivation** to pursue clinical research and evidence-based practice
- **Reflective about *what s/he learned* from past research experiences**, and how those experiences may direct future research and clinical questions
- **Strong writing skills, clear idea organization, ideas for new projects** (as demonstrated in Personal Statement)
- **Promise as an effective clinician** (necessary but not sufficient for admission)
- **Strong letters of recommendation** from research supervisors
- **Personal fit** (this should be a criterion for *you*, too!)
- *And finally, but less importantly: GPA/GRE scores*

“AM I READY TO APPLY?!”

How do you know if you're ready? (An highly unofficial checklist)

- ☐ **Do I *really, really* like psychological science?** Do I want to spend LOTS of time solving problems related to psychopathology and/or treatment using the scientific method?
- ☐ **Do I have specific research interests within clinical psychology?** Do I know, with some certainty, what types of questions I want to study (e.g., what populations are of interest to me, what methods I want to use or learn, whether I want to do treatment or basic research)? Can I summarize my interests in two to three sentences in a way that “feels right”?
- ☐ **Do I have enough (high-quality!) research experience?** Do I have experience contributing research that is similar (in one or many ways) to the work I hope to do in graduate school (e.g., with clinical populations? With children? Intervention research)?
- ☐ **Do I feel ready to do independent research (with guidance/support)?** Do you have experience working on a research study from start to finish (conceptualizing a project, helping with analyses, interpreting results, thinking through a discussion)?
- ☐ **Is my CV competitive?** Have I presented posters at conferences? Do I have a few different research experiences to list? Do I meet the minimum criteria in terms of GPA, GRE?
- ☐ **Have I spoken to PhD students and faculty to see if this path fits what I want to do?**

“AM I READY TO APPLY?!”

Remember – if you don’t feel ready now, you can *greatly* strengthen your application by next year’s cycle!

You can do a LOT in a year!

APPLICATION STEPS & TIMELINE

Step 1	Decide what type of program(s) you want to apply to	July - August
Step 2	Develop 'long' list of schools/advisors (15-20)	August - September
Step 3	Prepare for and take the Psychology and General GRE exams	As early as you can (NB – Psych GRE offered 3x/year)
Step 4	Develop organizational system for applications	August - September
Step 5	Contact 'long list' advisors; narrow list based on whether people are taking students, other program-related factors	September - October
Step 6	Ask for <u>strong</u> rec letters ('faint' praise can hurt you); give letter writers CV, personal statement, program list, deadlines	September - October
Step 7	Order transcripts from all schools attended post-high-school; have them sent to programs to which you are applying	Check Registrar's policy
Step 8	Draft (and re-draft) personal statement(s)	August, Sept, Oct, Nov
Step 9	When you're ready, submit your materials!	October, November, December
Step 10	Phone & in-person interview offers come in	December, January, February, early March
Step 11	Go on interviews	January, February, March
Step 12	Hear back from schools	January, February, March, April
Step 13	Make your decision!!	Whenever you're ready

THOUGHTS ON WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A PHD ADVISOR

- **Research fit is paramount** – way more important than University prestige!!
 - You will be working with person for YEARS. Maybe decades (especially if they're early in their career)
 - Aim to work with someone whose research you love, who strongly prioritizes her/his graduate students, and ideally, someone you like and get along with (you can gauge this at the interview)
 - Questions to consider about prospective advisors:
 - Are they actively publishing (i.e., in the past 1-2 years)?
 - Are they publishing in strong journals? (Ask faculty/grad students if not sure)
 - Are their mentees and students co-authors on publications with them?
 - What's going on in their lab now? What will be going on in the next few years?
 - Reach out to their students. Do they seem happy? Do they like working with their mentor?
 - What career stage is the faculty member in (assistant, associate, full)?
**pros and cons to all career stages!*

THOUGHTS ON WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A PHD PROGRAM

- **Quality of the program matters** (U.S. News rankings provide an extremely general sense of this – e.g., top 20, top 50, etc...but research fit with advisor may matter more)
- **Quality of your life outside of school matters** (it is 4-6 years, after all!)
 - Some people might suggest that you disregard location...I think that's unrealistic.
- **Student funding** (how long is it guaranteed; what is the stipend relative to cost of living; is summer funding available; how are students funded – TAs, RAships, faculty grants, other – this matters because your funding source dictates how your time is spent; are there opportunities for students to obtain conference and/or research funding; etc)
- **Internship match rates** (should be close to 90-100% in recent years – all programs are required to report match rates!)
- **Where do I look for programs?**
 - **US News:** <https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-health-schools/clinical-psychology-rankings>
 - **PCSAS programs** (all strong clinical science-oriented programs):
<https://www.pcsas.org/accreditation/accredited-programs/>