

Subfields Of Psychology

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With So Many Subfields of Psychology, Where Do I Fit?

There are many subfields of psychology and, for prospective students; it can be difficult to determine which subfield is “the best fit.” While researching the various available subfields and graduate programs in psychology, students are often confronted with contradictory information between pop-culture definitions and specific graduate student program definitions of the same subfield(s) of psychology. This often leaves students wondering if they really understand the differences between the subfields of psychology; and, more importantly, the various available definitions and descriptions of subfields often leaves prospective students wondering which type of psychology best fits their interests and future career plans.

Within the field of psychology, there is a division between “professional” (or practice-oriented) psychology and non-practice-oriented psychology. The term “professional psychology” is somewhat misleading. While there are professionals who practice in all subfields of psychology, the term “professional psychology” is often used to refer specifically to those psychologists who practice psychology by providing psychotherapy and psychological testing services. The three subfields of professional psychology are: Clinical Psychology, Counseling Psychology, and School Psychology.

In general, there is significant overlap among the training received by students in all three professional psychology subfields. For example, regardless of whether a student enters a Clinical, Counseling, or School Psychology program, he or she will be required to learn basic research methods, intelligence and personality assessment, and therapy interventions. How these skills are applied, however, may vary considerably. Broad descriptions can be helpful in understanding the differences among the practice-oriented subfields of psychology. The American Psychological Association (APA), the largest professional association of psychologists in the U.S., offers brief descriptions of 14 various subfields of psychology [here](#). According to the APA:

- **Clinical Psychologists** are “interested in the diagnosis, causes, and treatment of mental disorders (such as depression, personality disorders, or schizophrenia).”
- **Counseling Psychologists** are “interested in the treatment of mental disorders. The main difference between [clinical and counseling psychologists] is that Counseling Psychologists are concerned

primarily with ‘normal’ problems of adjustment or challenge, such as choosing a career, experiencing academic stress, or coping with marital problems.”

- **School Psychologists** are “interested in the emotional or learning problems of students.” School Psychologists often engage in psychoeducational testing to diagnose learning disorders and develop educational interventions to assist schools and teachers to help students learn.

While these descriptions are helpful in understanding the differences among the various subfields in psychology, these descriptions are really generalizations. Prospective students are encouraged to learn more about specific programs in deciding which program best fits their needs and interests. For example, while multicultural and diversity issues are often most salient in Counseling Psychology programs and personality assessment is generally associated with Clinical Psychology training (Price, 2009), not all Counseling Psychology programs provide in depth training in multicultural and diversity issues and not all Clinical Psychology programs emphasize personality assessment.

While broad descriptions are helpful, they are not absolute. What may be more important than the actual program is the quality of the training students receive and how well the training aligns with a student’s career plans and interests. So, those interested in pursuing advanced training in psychology are best advised to learn about the philosophy and culture of the training programs in which he or she is interested. Prospective students can learn more about how to assess a program’s fit by reviewing these [brief tips from the APA](#).



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References

Price, M. (2009). Counseling vs. clinical programs: Similarities abound. *gradPSYCH*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2009/03/similarities.aspx>