

Undergraduate Perceptions of Graduate School in School Psychology

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Introduction

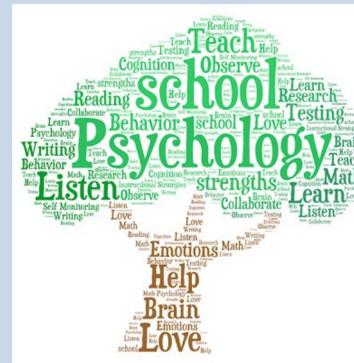
School psychologists provide assessment, consultation, and counseling services to students with academic, social, and emotional deficits. They work alongside families, special education teachers, administrators, and other professionals to create a positive learning environment. The majority of school psychologists work in K-12 settings, with only six percent working in college of university settings (Sulkowski & Joyce, 2012).

The shortage of school psychologists is a growing problem; there are a limited number of training programs in school psychology and universities which do have programs often cannot afford to increase their numbers (Clopton & Haselhuhn, 2009). The number of graduate training programs has only increased nine percent over the past forty years, despite the growth in the student population (NASP Research Summary). Additionally, the field of school psychology appeals to certain groups; 80 percent of school psychology graduate students are women (Clopton & Haselhuhn, 2009) and only nine percent of practicing school psychologists are ethnically or racially diverse (Bocanegra, Newell, & Gubi, 2016). Also, there is declining interest in education careers overall.

Over the last 50 years, researchers at UCLA have examined trends among college Freshman. Eagan et al. (2016) found that there has been a declining interest in majoring in education. Over the last 50 years, the number of first-year students intending to become education majors has dropped from 10.9 percent to 4.3 percent (Eagan et al., 2016).

Undergraduates who pursue a career in School Psychology have more social personalities, according to the Holland Personality Test (Ding et al., 2015). Additionally, many students perceive school psychologists to be the same as school counselors. These misleading perceptions may impact desire to enter the profession (Ding et al., 2015).

The current study is part of an ongoing study of undergraduate interest in various fields of psychology, with a particular interest in school psychology. The following research questions were addressed in this study. 1) How informed are students about the fields of counseling, clinical, and school psychology, and 2) How familiar are students with various fields of psychology?



Research Question 1: How informed are students about the fields of school psychology, counseling, and clinical psychology?

Table 1
Knowledge of School, Counseling, and Clinical Psychology Professions

	School Psych	Counseling Psych	Clinical Psych	ANOVA F
	M(SD)	M(SD)	M(SD)	
Where they work...	3.42 (.98) ^a	3.64 (1.04)	3.15 (1.12) ^a	15.82*
Training requirement...	2.63 (1.08) ^a	3.06 (1.20) ^a	2.74 (1.20)	13.87*
What they do...	3.22 (.90) ^a	3.77 (.94) ^{ab}	3.10 (1.16) ^b	33.27*
Who are their clients...	3.42 (1.03) ^a	3.67 (1.05) ^a	3.12 (1.21) ^a	18.26*
The importance of their profession...	3.63 (1.04) ^a	3.99 (1.01) ^a	3.42 (1.13)	22.47*

* $p < .001$, ^{a,b} $p < .01$

Research Question 2: How familiar are students with the various types of psychologists?

Table 2
Familiarity with Various Types of Psychologists

	M	SD
Mental Health Counselor	3.33	1.27
Marriage and Family Therapist	3.04	1.28
School Psychologist	2.88	1.25
Child Clinical Psychologist	2.30	1.23
Developmental Psychologist	2.24	1.12
Experimental Psychologist	2.11	1.24
Sports Psychologist	1.96	1.27
Forensic Psychologist	1.84	1.15
Neuropsychologist	1.78	1.03

Note. Response options were 1 = Not familiar at all, 2 = Slightly familiar, 3 = Moderately familiar, 4 = Very familiar, 5 = Extremely familiar.

Research Question 3: Where did students learn about the various fields of psychology (family, media, etc.)?

To address this question participants were asked to report how familiar they were with various psychologists and then report how they heard about the profession in an open-ended item. For "School Psychologist," a total of 65 participants wrote a response. The most common responses were "School (21)," "Class/Instructor (15)," and "Childhood visit to Psychologist (5)." Other responses were "Research (4)," "Counselor (4)," and "Family (4)."

Method

- The research team developed a survey assessing undergraduate student perceptions of various areas of graduate training in psychology. A portion of the survey was a modified questionnaire used with permission from Bocanegra, Newell, and Gubi (2016).
- The survey was posted on the SONA research participation site through the CWU Psychology department.
- 139 respondents (Freshman 19%, Sophomores 17%, Juniors 37%, Seniors 22%). 43% Psych majors, 57% other majors. 24% male, 71% female, 1% other. 19% knew their school psychologist in HS, compared to 76% who knew their school counselor.

References

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Discussion

- Throughout the history of school psychology there has been a shortage of school psychologists and the shortage continues to the present day. A lack of familiarity with the field may be contributing to the shortage.
- Some people may confuse school counselors with school psychologists.
- Undergraduates at CWU appeared to be more familiar with the field of counseling psychology compared to school psychology and clinical psychology.
- The highest rated psychologist in terms of familiarity was Mental Health Counselor and lowest was Neuropsychologist. School Psychologist fell towards the top of the list.
- The most frequently mentioned way that students reported hearing about the field of school psychology was "school." This may indicate that efforts to increase the visibility of school psychologists in K-12 settings may be helpful in making students aware of the field. The second most was "Class/Instructor", which may be referring to exposure during the undergraduate psychology degree. Increasing exposure in undergraduate psychology programs is needed.