

SUBFIELDS IN PSYCHOLOGY

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The American Psychological Association (APA), the largest organization of American psychologists, is affiliated with nearly 50 special interest groups called “divisions.” These divisions represent the major subfields in psychology.

To help you understand the variety of careers in psychology, the following are brief descriptions of just some of the subfields in psychology.

1. Clinical Psychologists

The clinical psychologist is interested in the diagnosis, causes, and treatment of mental disorders (such as depression, personality disorders, or schizophrenia). Clinical psychologists may function as professors, researchers, consultants, administrators, or supervisors. They may work in clinics, community mental health centers, hospitals, and/or in private practice.

2. Cognitive and Psycholinguistic Psychologists

These psychologists are research oriented and often study mental processes: thinking, knowing, feeling, learning, etc. They believe that mental processes can be examined scientifically through the conduct of experiments. Thus, cognitive psychologists are especially interested in the ways in which people perceive, interpret, and store information, while psycholinguists are interested in the development, structure, and meaning of language. These psychologists are usually found in academic settings, research laboratories, or in technical and information-processing agencies.

3. Community Psychologists

Community psychologists focus on ordinary behavior in settings such as the home, the community, and the workplace. These psychologists are interested in human behavior and the reciprocal relationships between individuals and their community. Community psychologists conduct research on such relationships and often use their research findings in designing and implementing community-based programs and interventions. Community psychologists can be found working in community health centers, universities, independent research facilities, and/or in social service organizations.

4. Counseling Psychologists

Counseling psychologists, like clinical psychologists, are interested in the treatment of mental disorders. The main difference between the two 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. Counseling psychologists may also conduct research and may seek to find answers to questions such as: Are there sex differences in the way people cope with difficulties? What is the psychological impact of exposure to a major disaster? These psychologists often work in academic settings, community mental health centers, hospitals, or private clinics.

5. Developmental Psychologists

These psychologists study how people change over time and the developmental stages across the human lifespan (i.e., birth to death). These psychologists are interested in such topics as emotional development, language acquisition, common traits among age groups, aging, and gender differences among infants. Developmental psychologists are often employed in academic settings, clinics, hospitals, and public school systems and as day care center directors.

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6. Educational and School Psychologists

Educational psychologists study the processes of learning, remembering, and thinking and then apply that knowledge to educational procedures, test development, and curriculum design. School psychologists are interested in the emotional or learning problems of students. Both educational and school psychologists are often employed by universities and school districts. Also, educational psychologists work at companies that design and analyze student tests, and school psychologists may work in a private practice.

7. Environmental Psychologists

The environmental psychologist is interested in the relationship between human behavior and physical environments. These environments range from homes and offices to urban areas and regions. Environmental psychology is primarily research oriented and can be used in designing urban areas or work spaces that promote positive human behavior. Environmental psychologists may work for government or private environmental agencies or other agencies and corporations.

8. Experimental Psychologists

Experimental psychologists investigate such basic processes as learning, memory, sensation, perception, cognition, motivation, and emotion. They might also research the physiological processes underlying such behaviors as eating, reading, and problem solving. Experimental psychologists may be employed at research institutions, businesses, industries, government, and academic settings.

9. Forensic Psychologists

Forensic psychology involves applying psychology to the field of criminal investigation and the law. The popularity of forensic psychology has grown phenomenally in recent years, partly due to sensationalized portrayals of the field in movies and television—which are not always accurate. Forensic psychologists are often depicted as criminal profilers who are able to almost psychically deduce a killer’s next move. In reality, these professionals practice psychology as a science within the criminal justice system and civil courts.

10. Geropsychologists

Geropsychologists are psychologists that utilize sociology, biology, psychology, and other disciplines to study the factors associated with adult development and aging. Geropsychologists find employment in academic settings, research centers, industry, health care organizations, mental health clinics, and agencies serving the elderly. Others are engaged in private practice as consultants on the design and evaluation of programs for the elderly.

11. Health Psychologists

Health psychologists are interested in the promotion and maintenance of good health as well as the prevention and treatment of illness. They investigate issues concerning why people do not engage in healthful practices and then design programs to assist individuals. They may design programs to help people stop smoking, lose weight, manage stress, prevent cavities, or stay physically fit. Medical centers, hospitals, health maintenance organizations, rehabilitation centers, public health agencies, and private practices are possible employment settings for health psychologists.

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12. Industrial/Organizational Psychologists

Industrial/organizational psychologists are concerned with the relationship between people and organizational structures. Their main focus is on the study of people in the workforce. Such psychologists focus on organizational change, workers' productivity and job satisfaction, consumer behavior, and the interaction between humans and machines. Industrial/organizational psychologists work in government, industries, businesses, and in colleges and universities.

13. Biological and Neuropsychologists

Neuropsychologists and psychobiologists investigate the relationship between physical (body) systems and behavior. These psychologists may study chemical and physical changes that occur in the body when one experiences different emotions. Or they may study the effect of specific biochemical mechanisms in the brain to behavior, and the relation of brain structure to function. Neuropsychologists may also diagnose and treat disorders related to the central nervous system. These psychologists work in academic settings where they conduct research and train others. They might also work in hospitals and clinics.

14. Psychometric and Quantitative Psychologists

Psychometric and quantitative psychologists are concerned with mathematical or numerical methods and techniques used in psychology. These psychologists are well trained in mathematics, statistics, and computer programming. They often utilize these skills to revise old (or create new) intelligence, personality, and aptitude tests. They are also qualified to interpret experimental results and design new techniques for analyzing information. Psychometricians and quantitative psychologists are mainly employed by universities and colleges, testing companies, private research firms, and government agencies.

15. Social Psychologists

Social psychologists study how people interact with one another and how they are affected by their social environments. These psychologists will often study individuals as well as groups, observable behaviors, and private thoughts. Social psychologists can be found in academic settings, advertising agencies, corporations, hospitals, and survey (polling) firms.

16. Sports Psychologists

Sports Psychologists help athletes refine their focus on competition goals, become more motivated, and learn to deal with the anxiety and fear of failure that often accompany competition. The field is growing as sports of all kinds become more and more competitive and attract younger children than ever.

17. Engineering Psychologists

Engineering psychologists conduct research on how people work best with machines. For example, how can a computer be designed to prevent fatigue and eye strain? What arrangement of an assembly line makes production most efficient? What is a reasonable workload? Most engineering psychologists work in industry, but some are employed by the government, particularly the Department of Defense. They are often known as human factors specialists.