Many psychology students wish to become therapists. But with the many graduate degrees that qualify people to work in the field of mental health, the choices can be confusing. The other difficulty is that there is frequently no clear distinction between the type of work that those with different degrees do. Clinical psychologists, social workers, and counseling psychologists frequently do similar types of work with similar client groups. How does a student decide which type of graduate study to pursue? The following pages are meant to help students with that decision by providing information about the different degrees that qualify one to work as a therapist.

But first, a definition.

A psychotherapist, frequently called simply a therapist, works closely with troubled individuals, families, or groups of individuals to promote change. People seek therapists because of problems with living, including depression, substance abuse, unhappiness, relationship problems, or any of the problems in living that human beings confront. Different types of therapists may specialize in specific problems. For example, school psychologists or school counselors work primarily with children and their families in school settings while psychiatrists often work with people with serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia, in hospital settings. However, all therapists share the goal of trying to promote change for people who are experiencing emotional pain. Many different graduate degrees in mental health train people to be therapists.

Different types of therapists:

A psychologist is usually someone with a Ph.D. or Psy.D. in clinical psychology. A social worker is someone with a Masters Degree in Social Work (M.S.W.). A counselor or counseling psychologist is usually someone with a Master’s degree, Ph.D., or Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.) in counseling, whose focus is often on working with generally emotionally healthy people who are dealing with everyday sorts of problems relating to work or relationships. A psychiatrist is a medical doctor (an M.D.) who often works with individuals with serious mental or emotional problems for whom drug therapy is appropriate. A psychiatrist is the only type of therapist who may prescribe drugs, such as anti-depressants or anti-psychotics, for his or her clients.

Graduate Degrees That Lead to Professional Work in the Mental Health Field:

Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology. The Ph.D. in clinical psychology typically takes five to six years to earn and includes a year of internship. Graduate programs in clinical psychology include training in therapy, teaching and research, usually with a heavy emphasis on research. Clinical psychologists work with varied client groups, often depending on what they specialize in during graduate school. These can include individuals with depression, anxiety, psychosis, personality disorders, mental retardation, addiction learning disabilities, and criminal offenders, to name but a few. Clinical psychologists also teach in colleges and universities and well as conduct research. Ph.D. programs in clinical psychology are extremely competitive, and accept, on average, about 6 percent of their applicants. To be accepted in a clinical psychology Ph.D. program, students must generally have high GPA’s, research experience (helping in a research lab or even with a publication or presentation at a conference), practical experience in the mental health field, good GRE scores, and strong letters of recommendation. Usually after completing a dissertation, clinical psychology students must again compete for yearlong internships, which is the final step in their training. Not all graduate students receive internships, which can affect their eligibility for licensing. Most clinical psychologists apply for a license to practice independently in their state, which includes a lengthy testing procedure.
Psy.D. (a Doctorate in Psychology). This is a relatively new degree that emphasizes clinical skills and de-emphasizes research. These are usually 3 to 5 year programs that also include a year of internship. Those with Psy.D.’s also become licensed practitioners and work with the same types of individuals as do clinical psychologists. Those with Psy.D. degrees are generally not eligible to teach in colleges and universities and do relatively little research.

Psy.D. programs are also highly competitive, though perhaps slightly less so than clinical psychology programs. Still, students seeking the Psy.D. must have a high GPA, excellent practical experience, good GRE scores, and strong letters of recommendation. Strong research experience is helpful, but not as critical as in Ph.D. programs.

M.S.W. (a Master’s Degree in Social Work). An M.S.W. is a professional degree that also trains individuals to work with a varied client group, as do clinical psychologist and Psy.D.’s. The field of social work has changed dramatically in the last 20 years. Most M.S.W.’s are professional therapists and many have private practices, similar to clinical psychologists and Psy.D.’s. In the past, social workers tended to focus on the social forces that contributed to a client’s difficulties in addition to examining an individual’s internal conflicts. Now, however, there is often more overlap than difference between the clinical approaches of M.S.W.’s and most clinical psychologists. Social workers do, however, tend to become more involved in the everyday lives of their clients. They are more likely to visit clients at their homes, schools, or workplace and their roles tend to be active. They may work more closely with their clients than the typical clinical psychologists, who would see most clients in an office or other formal setting.

M.S.W. programs are two-year programs that include extensive internships as part of the graduate training. Social workers are licensed in many states and all are eligible to request licensing through the National Association of Social Workers. Licensed social workers are referred to as L.C.S.W.’s (Licensed Clinical Social Worker) and may be licensed at two levels (I or II), depending on experience. Many graduate programs in Social Work offer a D.S.W. degree (Doctor of Social Work). Individuals with D.S.W. degrees may teach and do research in social work graduate programs. M.S.W. programs are competitive, but easier to get into than Ph.D. or Psy.D. programs. Since they are two-year programs, students begin their careers sooner than if pursuing other degrees. M.S.W. programs prefer applicants with extensive experience. GPA is important, as are test scores, but practical experience is weighted quite heavily in applications.

M.A., Ed.D., or Ph.D. in Counseling. The activities of the counseling psychologist overlap considerably with those of the therapists described above. As a rough rule, however, counseling psychologists tend to work with more normal populations than do clinical psychologists (whether Ph.D. or Psy. D.) and social workers. Counseling degrees are often offered through Schools of Education rather than Psychology graduate programs. Some programs are specifically crafted for individuals who want to work in school settings, either elementary, high school or colleges. Other Master’s programs provide specialists such as Marriage and Family counseling or Substance Abuse counseling.

These programs are often easier to get into than clinical psychology or social work programs. There are many of these programs across the country, which makes them more available. Research experience is relatively unimportant compared to good practical experience and a solid GPA and test scores.

M.D. Degree in Psychiatry. A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who specializes in mental health during a three year residency which follows his or her standard medical training. Thus, a psychiatrist may actually have less training in therapy and mental health treatment than a clinical psychologist or a social worker who has practiced for a year. Because of their medical training, psychiatrists are the only therapists who
are qualified to prescribe medications. Thus, they often end up working with people with serious illnesses that require medications, such as psychosis, depression or other serious disorders.

To become a psychiatrist, one must attend medical school, which remains highly competitive. Students interested in this field should take all the premed requirements and plan to be eligible, in terms of GPA, MCAT scores and research experience, for entrance into medical school.

Where do therapists work?

In terms of shaping your career, what matters at least as much as the degree you obtain is the client group with whom you choose to work. Many programs train graduate students to work as generalists, with a variety of types of clients. However, many therapists find that they enjoy working with certain types of individuals or in certain settings. While the list is extensive, some of the most common specialists are described below.

**Hospital and Health settings:** The field of health psychology is growing rapidly. Health psychologists focus on the prevention of disease and maintenance of health. Health psychologists may develop programs to help clients lose weight, stop smoking, change unhealthy life styles, or cope with life threatening illnesses. Health psychologists come from a variety of backgrounds and may be clinical or counseling psychologists or even social workers. Medical social work may include, in addition, helping families cope with the life changes that result from serious illness of family members. Medical social workers play important roles in medical settings and hospice.

**Schools:** Psychologists and social workers play important, and sometimes overlapping, roles in school settings (elementary, secondary and college). School psychologists with degrees in clinical or counseling psychology frequently assess and diagnose students with behavior or learning problems and may develop programs for teachers and families to help these students. School social workers, in addition to behavior assessment, often work with families and students to change problem behaviors at home and in the classroom. In colleges, psychologists and social workers serve as therapists in student health centers or help students make career choices.

**Criminal Justice System:** Psychologists and social workers can also be found in the criminal justice system, working with adults, children or adolescents. They may work with criminal offenders, developing therapy and behavior changing programs, or work with the victims of crime as victim advocates. Psychologists with Ph.D.’s are more likely to provide assessments of children who are, for example, in danger of being removed from their homes because of abuse or neglect, while social workers and Master’s level psychologists are likely to work directly with children and families to help prevent or facilitate such actions.

**Mental Health Clinics:** Many social workers and psychologists work in mental health clinics, where their work can be remarkably varied. Therapists may serve in any one of the many different health care “teams” that clinics provide. Thus, they may work with substance abusers, with the chronically mentally ill, children and families at risk for abuse, adolescents involved with the criminal system, women who have experienced physical or sexual assault and so on. Many students develop special interests in serving particular client groups and seek internships that will allow them to develop their skills with these particular problems and individuals.

**Private Practice:** Private practice seems to remain the ideal for many students seeking training as therapists. Students should be warned, however, that changes in the health care system make this career route increasingly difficult. Insurance companies limit the number of visits a client is covered for and the
cost of private therapy may be prohibited for many. Many therapists develop part-time practices, in addition to their work in other settings.

When applying to graduate school, it is helpful if you know what special population you would like to work with. That way, you can choose a program that provides the training you want and the graduate school knows they are selecting a student who will fit well in their program.

Other Helpful Information

Ph.D. graduate level programs (in Clinical psychology or any other field of psychology) usually provide financial support to their students in the form of teaching or research assistantships. Other graduate programs such as Psy.D, M.S.W., or other Master’s programs do not provide such assistance (although the students may still be eligible for financial aid in the form of loans or grants) and can be expensive.

No matter what sort of graduate program you wish to apply for, it will require letters of recommendation from your professors. Therefore, it is vital that you get to know your professors! Stop by and talk with them about your career plans during office hours; work on a research project; attend talks that they give. Not only will this help your chances for acceptance to graduate school, but it will also make your education richer and more interesting.

Sources to Help You Choose a Graduate Program

The following sources may help you get information about careers in Mental Health. They are available in the C.U. Bookstore. They are also in the Psychology Advising Center, Muenzing D243, and may be used in that office.

American Psychological Association. Graduate Study in Psychology. 2008 Edition. This book lists the many specialties in Psychology and the graduate schools that train in these specialty areas. It describes programs in both clinical and counseling psychology and school psychology, to name just a few.

Buskist and Burke. Preparing for Graduate Study in Psychology: 101 Questions and Answers. 2007 Edition. Answers common questions students have about getting into graduate school in Psychology.


(This information was compiled, in part, from Phares, E.J. & Trull, T.J., Clinical Psychology: Concepts, Methods and Profession. 1996, Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole.)