

HOW TO BECOME A PSYCHOLOGIST

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“Without dreams, there is no need to work. Without work, there is no need to dream.” Anonymous

Becoming a Psychologist

Many years ago, when I dreamed I could change the world, I wanted to be a doctor, a teacher, a theologian. I had never even heard of being a psychologist. That was something I discovered when I began taking my first college courses in biology, theology, and introductory psychology. Later, when I changed my college major from pre-medicine to psychology, my father almost threatened to cut off my funding because I was wasting my time studying atheism rather than medicine. In retrospect, it was my first experience in learning how to live with managed care: I diversified my career by finding alternative funding sources, earning money as a fitness trainer in a gym at night, coaching a swim team in the summer, working in a hospital lab on weekends, and studying psychology in my spare time. It was my first lesson in learning how to finance a career in psychology.

Forty years have come and gone, and I am still finding new ways of funding my career in psychology. I sometimes laugh when I realize that I earned more money training dogs than I did when providing emergency mental health services to multi-million dollar corporations. It is still a curious but profitable paradox to me that corporate officers paid cash for my executive coaching services, rather than tarnishing their sterling self-images by having a diagnostic code on a mental health insurance form. I earned more money advising hospital administrators how to do things right than I used to earn listening to their patients tell me what they were doing wrong. I have learned from my lawyer how to make money doing that which I do best—writing long neuropsychological reports—as well as doing that which I do most—talking on the phone.

It has been even more enjoyable to work for free. It is a paradox that I now charge for the services that I used to do for free, so that I can give away for free the services for which I used to charge. It is rewarding to hear the dreams of adolescents whose futures have no bounds, and to listen freely to the childhood stories of nursing home residents who have no memory of yesterday. It is enriching to witness the miracles of lives transformed as my psychotherapy clients confide in me. It is satisfying to provide pro bono consultations to religious organizations trying to develop counseling centers. It is even more satisfying to give my time freely teaching minority students who are young enough to be my children. Best of all, it is gratifying to provide Sunday lunches to the generous poor preacher who paid my college tuition.

In retrospect, as one of my colleagues kindly pointed out to me, I have had less of a career and more of a calling. A career is about serving ourselves, whereas a calling is about serving others.

Many years ago, when I dreamed I could change the world, I wanted to be a doctor, a teacher, a theologian. Now, when I still struggle to change myself, I discover that I am all of these and more: I have become a psychologist.

At the 2002 convention of the American Psychological Association, an Atlanta psychologist named Steven Walfish reported results from a career survey of psychologists. Dr. Walfish identified a total of 180 areas of profession practice, including a dozen of the activities which are woven into my own narrative.

Footnote

Here is a list of 25 career activities suggested in the editorial: (1) majoring in psychology (2) teaching graduate and undergraduate psychology courses; (3) contracting with managed care companies; (3) conducting motivational counseling, seminars, and workshops; (4) providing sports psychology services; (5) conducting research and laboratory experiments; (6) training animals such as dogs, dolphins, and primates; (7) providing critical incident debriefing; (8) providing executive coaching; (9) providing peer review and case management; (10) consulting with medical directors and hospital administrators; (11) providing organizational and management psychology services; (12) conducting inpatient hospital consultations; (13) providing forensic services, expert testimony, and consultation; (14) writing reports, articles, and books; (15) providing telephone consultations, Internet counseling, and video-conferencing, (16) assisting in pet therapy and pet-assisted activities; (17) performing cognitive testing, neuropsychological evaluations, and neuropsychological rehabilitation; (18) teaching and consulting in geropsychology; (19) providing hospice care and nursing home consultations; (20) consulting with religious organizations; (21) practicing community psychology; (22) working in public mental health centers; (23) teaching and tutoring private students; (24) leading a support group; and (25) providing volunteer work and pro bono consultations.

About the Author

Dr. Doverspike is an Adjunct Professor in the doctoral clinical training program of the Department of Psychology at Emory University. He is also Adjunct Clinical Associate Professor in the Mercer University College of Health Professions in Atlanta. He is Adjunct Professor in the counseling program at Richmond Graduate University. He earned board certification Diplomates in Clinical Psychology (ABPP) and Neuropsychology (ABPN). He was President (2003-2004) of the Georgia Psychological Association (GPA), Editor of the *Georgia Psychologist* magazine (1997-2008), member of the GPA Executive Committee (1997-2008), and member of the GPA Ethics Committee (1995-2008). He has served as a member of the State Board of Examiners of Psychologists (2008-2020), which is the Georgia Board of Psychology. He maintains a private practice at the Atlanta Counseling Center.

References

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