



# Psychologists' Motivations to Pursue Their Career

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## Introduction

Individuals' motivations to pursue a career in psychology has been researched, however, little research has been conducted on the impact of motivating factors on the choice of psychological subdivision (Hill et al., 2013; Murphy & Halgin, 1995; DiCaccavo, 2002). Past research has focused on dynamics of psychologists' families of origin (Racusin et al., 1981) or early childhood experiences (Fussell & Bonney, 1990; Nikcevic et al., 2007), and have not explored other potential motivating factors.

Elliot and Guy (1993) found that compared to people employed in other fields, people working within mental health fields were more likely to have dealt with family or personal issues, such as dysfunctional families, a past of physical or sexual abuse, alcoholism, and physical or psychological illness (Elliot & Guy, 1993). Further, Rosin and Knudson (1986) studied the impact of life experiences on clinical psychologists' theoretical orientations. Psychodynamic therapists compared to behavioral therapists reported more family members having mental illness experienced significantly more conflict within their families, and presented more personal explanations as an influence of what brought them to their career. Despite these differences, both groups expressed that experience with clinical work was influential in the development of their theoretical orientations (Rosin & Knudson, 1986).

There are also differences in experiences of clinical versus social psychologists towards their careers (Murphy & Halgin, 1995). Clinical psychologists were more likely influenced by past experiences, their determination to ameliorate personal issues, desire for professional progression, and the desire to understand people and help individuals personally. Social psychologists were more inclined to want to help society, were motivated to satisfy curiosities for personal satisfaction, and had a greater desire to be involved with research and teaching. Both clinical and social psychologists mentioned wanting to have personal growth within their careers, and mentioned the significance of having a role model or mentor on their career choice (Murphy & Halgin, 1995).

## Methods

The study was approved by the University of New Haven's Institutional Review Board (IRB # 2018-040).

### Participants

382 participants from six divisions agreed to participate in this study, division: 10: Society for the Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts, 13: Society of Consulting Psychology, 17: Society of Counseling Psychology, 33: Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities/Autism Spectrum Disorder, 41: American Psychology – Law Society, and 44: Society for the Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity.

### Procedures

A survey was adapted to assess motivations and experiences that influenced participants' pursuit in choosing their psychological subfield (Murphy & Halgin, 1995). A series of statements were presented on a 7 point Likert scale addressing participant's motivations and experiences which may have influenced them in their pursuit of a career in psychology. Participants were offered incentive to be entered into an optional raffle at the conclusion of the study for chances to win Amazon gift cards.

Requests for participation with a brief description of the study and link to participate were sent to a division either through listserv or email list. Surveys were administered through Qualtrics and data were analyzed through Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

## Results

Statements of motivating factors were divided into variables including: Professional Altruism, Vocational Achievement and Opportunity, Personal Growth and Inquisitiveness, and Personal Problem Resolution. Statements of past experiences were categorized into the Experience of Personal Problems, Troubled Family Experiences, Troubled Friend Experiences, and Experiences of Strong Interpersonal Alliances.

The multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to analyze the importance of motivating factors and past experiences between different APA divisions. The multivariate effect of Wilks' Lambda was significant by APA division,  $F(48, 1696.69) = 1.95, p < .01, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04$ .

Tukey HSD test showed a significant difference in Professional Altruism as a motivator for Division 10 ( $M = 23.40, SD = 2.88$ ) compared to Division 13 ( $M = 33.95, SD = 4.95$ ), Division 17 ( $M = 33.52, SD = 5.10$ ), Division 33 ( $M = 33.38, SD = 3.48$ ), Division 41 ( $M = 31.79, SD = 5.80$ ), and Division 44 ( $M = 35.27, SD = 2.57$ ). There was a significant difference in Experience of Personal Problems between Division 33 ( $M = 18.14, SD = 8.70$ ) and 44 ( $M = 31.46, SD = 15.46$ ). There was also a significant difference in Experiences of Strong Interpersonal Alliances among Division 10 ( $M = 4.60, SD = 2.30$ ) and Division 17 ( $M = 11.90, SD = 5.00$ ).

Professional Altruism		
Division	Mean	Standard Deviation
Division 10	23.40	2.88
Division 13	33.95	4.95
Division 17	33.52	5.10
Division 33	33.38	3.48
Division 41	31.79	5.80
Division 44	35.27	2.57

Experience of Personal Problems		
Division	Mean	Standard Deviation
Division 10	11.40	5.37
Division 13	23.21	11.82
Division 17	25.84	12.18
Division 33	18.14	8.70
Division 41	22.39	13.03
Division 44	31.45	15.46

Experience of Strong Interpersonal Alliances		
Division	Mean	Standard Deviation
Division 10	4.60	2.30
Division 13	10.42	5.34
Division 17	11.90	5.00
Division 33	9.52	4.93
Division 41	9.33	5.00
Division 44	8.55	4.41

## Discussion

Professional Altruism consisted of statements that reflected on participants' desire to help others on a personal or social level. Professional Altruism was not a motivating factor for members of the Society for the Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts (Division 10), however it was a motivating factor for all other divisions in the study. One reason for the difference may be due to Division 10's stated commitment to interdisciplinary scholarship, which is unique compared to the aims of the other divisions.

Members specializing in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities/Autism Spectrum Disorder (Division 33) noted that problems, painful events, or experiences during youth that were relevant in their choice of career was not a motivator in the choice of their career. This was different from those who were in the Society for the Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity (Division 44), who had a much larger range when answering such questions. It is possible that people belonging to Division 44 have both a personal and professional identify related to their subfield, which may not be the case for those in Division 33. There was also a large standard deviation among Division 44 members and the impact of personal experiences on their career. Some members may have strongly agreed to past personal problems having an impact on their career, whereas these factors may have not been influential in the choice of other's careers.

On average, Division 10 noted that having a positive relationship with people either in or outside of their family, and previous experience as a therapy client as an influence in their career choice was not a motivation for their career choice, which was different from members of the Society of Counseling Psychology (Division 17), who, on average, did not agree nor disagree that this was a motivator. This may have been due to the fact that a minority of those within Division 17 were influenced by such motivators, as there was also a moderately large standard deviation. As supported by previous research, counseling psychology students reported high rates of self-efficacy towards helping others, parentification, control from parents, along with less care from parents (DiCaccavo, 2002). This could explain why members of Division 17 were not influenced by strong, positive, familial, and other connections in their career choice.

### Limitations

The study only included a sample of 6 out of the 54 APA divisions. If more divisions were involved in the study, distinct differences or similarities in motivations could be analyzed. Additionally, there was an unequal representation of members from the divisions, which could have an effect on the analysis. Further, the survey was adapted to include additional questions, which may decrease the efficacy of the factors used. Finally, an online survey methodology was used, which resulted in some incomplete responses which could not be used in the analysis, which could have skewed some of the data.

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