Applying to Graduate School in Psychology

A Survival Guide for Students

Nick Bremner, M.Sc.  
June 15th, 2013
Overview

- Presentation
- Discussion with graduate student panel
Quick Introduction

Who I am:
- Currently study Industrial/Organizational Psychology
- Hold an M.Sc. in Management Science
- I’ve gone through this process twice!

Who you are:
- Year of study?
- Major?
- Goals?
Today’s Presentation

- General Information, Definitions, and Statistics
- Getting Ready to Apply
- The Application Process
- Choosing a Potential Supervisor
- Pros and Cons
- Surviving and Thriving
General Info and Stats

- Psychology has highest undergraduate enrollment in Canada next to business/commerce and general liberal arts and sciences (Simner, 2009).

- Less than 10% actually enroll in postgraduate education (Rajecki & Anderson, 2004).
  - But... getting into graduate schools in psychology is getting more competitive!

- Therefore, careful preparation and hard work are required to succeed!
General Info and Stats

- Over 45 psychology departments in Canada (CPA, 2011)
- Application costs vary widely
  - $55 to $150 per program
  - Higher for international students
- Tuition: $4,000 – $8,000 per year
  - M = $4,790 (Statistics Canada, 2012)
Definitions:
What kind of degree do I want?

- M.A. = Master of Arts
- M.Sc. = Master of Science
- M. Ed. = Master of Education
- Ph.D. = Doctor of Philosophy
- Psy.D. = Doctor of Psychology
- 2 years + 3 to 5 years
- CPA accreditation (CPA, 2013); APA accreditation (APA, 2013)

M.A./M.Sc. then Ph.D versus Streamlined Ph.D
# Subfields of Psychology

## 13 main subfields (Simner, 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subfield</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clinical</strong></td>
<td>- Psychopathology&lt;br&gt;- Assessment and intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Counseling</strong></td>
<td>- &quot;Everyday&quot; problems; personal growth&lt;br&gt;- Educational settings</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Industrial/Organizational</strong></td>
<td>- Workplace behaviour&lt;br&gt;- Agencies and businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neuropsychology</strong></td>
<td>- Explore relationships between brain and behaviour&lt;br&gt;- Academic or clinical settings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Experimental</strong></td>
<td>- Theory testing and research&lt;br&gt;- Academic settings</td>
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Acceptance Rates

O **In Canada:** (CPA, 2009)
  O *Experimental:* 5 to 40% (M = 24%)
  O *Clinical:* 0.74 to 17% (M = 9%)
  O *Counseling:* 8 to 27% (M = 21%)

O **In USA:** (Norcross, et al., 2010; Norcross et al., 2003)
  O *Experimental:* 37.6%
  O *Clinical:*
    O Practice-oriented: M = 16%
    O Research-oriented: M = 7%
    O *Psy.D:* 26 to 50%
Getting Ready to Apply
Set the Ground Work…

- Know what you want
  - Area of psychology
  - Specific research interests
  - Is grad school for me?

- Prepare yourself
  - Take *relevant* classes
  - Get to know your professors and university staff
  - Acquire research experience (in your area of interest if possible!)

- *Start early!!*
Is Grad School for me?

Ask yourself...

- Am I avoiding anything by going to graduate school?
- What am I gaining by going to graduate school?
- Who am I going to graduate school for?
- Do my career goals require a graduate degree?

- Do I have the...
  - time, money, stamina, maturity, ability, patience, dedication,
  - curiosity, organizational skills, ability to function on 2 hours of sleep, perseverance, and interest?
Getting Professional and Research Experience

- Many psychology programs are research intensive – research experience is a good way to differentiate yourself.

- Potential sources of research experience
  - Research assistantships
  - Volunteer experience in research lab
  - Honours thesis

- Acquiring other forms of professional experience shows that you are proactive and invested in your career choice
  - Volunteer as CPA campus rep, or on CPA executive
Join our team!

Do you speak English and French?
We are looking for a new Francophone Affairs Officer.

Responsibilities:
• Translates of all section materials
• Engages in outreach activities to francophone students and psychology programs in Canada
• Represents francophone communities across Canada

Contact Justin Feeney: jfeeney@uwo.ca, or speak with any member of the Section for Students executive.

Joignez-vous à notre équipe!

Parlez-vous français et anglais?
Nous sommes à la recherche d’un nouvel agent des affaires francophones.

Responsabilités:
• Traduire toutes les communications de la Section
• Entreprendre des initiatives pour communiquer avec les étudiants francophones et les programmes francophones au Canada
• Représenter les communautés francophones à travers le Canada

Contactez Justin Feeney: jfeeney@uwo.ca, ou parlez à un membre de notre équipe.
The Application Process
What programs should I apply to?

Apply to programs that...

✓ Have an emphasis that is in line with your personal goals
  E.g., Research- vs. Practice-oriented

✓ Have faculty with research interests in line with your own

✓ Are feasible to attend
  ✓ Geographically
  ✓ Financially
Typical requirements…

✓ Transcripts
✓ GRE scores
✓ Statement/letter of intent
✓ 2-3 reference letters (sometimes four!)
✓ Curriculum Vitae (CV)
  ✓ Education, Honours/Awards, Publications, Presentations, Relevant Experience, Professional Memberships
✓ Application fee
A note about organization...

- Good organization is absolutely crucial for success

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<tr>
<th>University of Western Ontario</th>
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<th>Scientist-Practitioner Model</th>
<th>Meyer Allen</th>
<th>- Statement of Interest - Writing sample (optional)</th>
<th>Jan 8th $95CDN</th>
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- Keep track of program requirements
- Keep track of what you have completed
- Make sure you have enough time to create strong applications for each school
Grades/Transcripts

- What grades are typically required?
  - Minimum B+, but this varies by program

- Official transcripts must be mailed to every university you apply to
Graduate Record Examination (GRE)

- Standardized test used around the world as criteria to evaluate who will be admitted into graduate school programs

- Required for a variety of different graduate programs (e.g., Engineering, Humanities, Business, Psychology)
GRE: For Psychology Students

- You may be required to write up to two forms of the GRE

- **Revised General Test**
  - Verbal Reasoning
  - Quantitative Reasoning
  - Analytical Writing

- **Psychology Subject Test (~205 MC questions)**
  - Experimental – 40%
  - Social – 43%
  - Other – 17%
    - General (4-6%)
    - Measurement/Methodology (11-13%)
What you learn from the GRE…

Before studying for GRE Verbal:

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

After studying for GRE Verbal:

Exclusive dedication to necessitous vocational pursuits without interludes of hedonistic diversion renders Jack a hebetudinous fellow.
GRE: Fees

- General Test: $185
- Psychology Test: $150
- Additional score reports (first four are free): $25

Test preparation:
- POWERPREP II, and associated ETS prep material: Free
- Textbooks: $50-100
- Courses: Kaplan: ~$1,100; Oxford Seminars: ~ $565
GRE: Where and When

- **General Test:** Computer-based only in Canada
  - Where: Any ETS testing center (visit ETS website)
  - When: Year-round (subject to availability)

- **Psychology Test:** Paper-based only
  - Where:
  - When:
    - September 28th, 2013 (register by Aug 16, 2013)
    - October 19th, 2013 (register by Sept 6, 2013)
    - April 5th, 2014 (register by Feb 21, 2014)
Applying for Funding: Federal

- Tri-Council Funding
  - SSHRC (www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca)
    - Most psychology research falls under their jurisdiction
  - CIHR (www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca)
    - Some Clinical and Health Psychology research
  - NSERC (www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca)
    - Cognitive/Neuropsychology
Applying for Funding: Provincial

- A few examples...
  - Ontario – Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS)
    - See websites of Ontario universities you plan to attend
  - Québec – Fonds de recherche:
    - Société et culture (www.fqrsc.gouv.qc.ca)
    - Nature et technologies (www.fqrnt.gouv.qc.ca)
    - Santé (www.frsq.gouv.qc.ca)

- Check on the websites of the universities you apply to

- Two additional resources:
  - www.scholarshipscanada.com
  - www.studentawards.com
Letter of Intent

- Essentially a short (1-2 page) description of:
  - Your research interests
  - Why you want to go to grad school
  - Why you will succeed
- **Very** important part of your application
- Your chance to differentiate yourself from the competition
Letter of Intent

- **Tips:** (Buskist & Burke, 2007; Hill, 2008)
  - Be clear and professional (humour can be dangerous)
  - Follow directions
  - Do not include irrelevant details
  - Consult with professors and graduate students
  - Tailor the letter to each program
  - Apply to potential advisors; know of, and intelligently discuss, their research

- Many more resources online:
  - Search “letter of intent” or “statement of purpose”
Reference Letters

Most schools require a minimum of two reference letters from professors.

The best reference letters are written by professors who know you and your work.

Not enough to say: “Katie Keener received a mark of 99.9% in my class”

The committee will see this on your transcript anyway!
Reference Letters

Supply your referees with:

✓ A(n) (unofficial) transcript of your grades

✓ Your letter of intent (ideally 2\textsuperscript{nd} or 3\textsuperscript{rd} draft)

✓ GRE scores

✓ Specific instructions for writing reference letters for each school (especially the deadline!)

✓ Addressed envelopes
“Kisses of Death”

1. Damaging personal statement
2. Harmful letters of recommendation
3. Lack of program information
4. Poor writing skills
5. Misfired attempts to impress

(Appleby & Appleby, 2006)
Notes about Applying

- Application deadlines vary from December 1\textsuperscript{st} to March 1\textsuperscript{st}
- Admissions decisions typically by made by April 1\textsuperscript{st}
- Accepted applications typically have until April 15\textsuperscript{th} to respond

- Don’t feel pressured; consider all options (CPA, 2010)
Summary: Checklist

- Professional experiences
- Transcripts
- GRE scores
- Funding opportunities
- Curriculum Vitae (CV)
- Contact potential advisors
- Reference letters
- Personal statements

- Breath and treat yourself
- Wait!
Summary: Timeline

A route to success...

- **Sept**: GREs; Prepare funding applications
- **Oct**: Determine programs; visit if possible; Funding applications due
- **Nov**: Transcript requests; Letters of recommendation
- **Dec**: Finalize statements; mail applications
- **Jan**: Finalize statements; mail applications
- **Mar**: Accept and decline offers
- **Apr**: Celebrate or regroup

(APA, 2007)
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transcript</td>
<td>$10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>$85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General GRE</td>
<td>$185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psych GRE</td>
<td>$150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplies and postage</td>
<td>$100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL (1 application)</strong></td>
<td><strong>$530</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 applications</td>
<td><strong>$615</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 applications</td>
<td><strong>$700</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 applications</td>
<td><strong>$785</strong></td>
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Choosing a Supervisor
Why this is an important decision:

- Your supervisor will be your boss for many years
- Your supervisor heavily influences your graduate experience
Factors to Consider

- Area of expertise
- Style, personality, standards
- Ability to collaborate
- Track record
- Ability to guide beyond the program
- Availability

(Datta, et al., 2009; Ray, 2007)
Where to Look for Potential Advisors

- Visit faculty and lab websites
- Consult graduate studies office
- Review CVs and publications
- Ask
How to Contact a Potential Advisor

- Carefully evaluate prospective supervisors on the basis of objective criteria
- Begin initial contact by indicating that you are inquiring about options and not necessarily ready to make a decision
- Outline your ideas or objectives and relate it to their current work
- Indicate you would like to discuss this further
- Create an opportunity to meet the professor in person, if possible, visit the laboratory
Pros and Cons
# Pros and Cons of Grad School

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You get to research a topic that you enjoy!</td>
<td>You will have less time to do other things you enjoy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You get paid to research that topic you enjoy!</td>
<td>You don’t get paid much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your schedule is flexible</td>
<td>You’re often overscheduled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have the opportunity to discuss ideas, concepts, and theories with people who are passionate about the same subject</td>
<td>You have to discover what you’re actually interested in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You may travel to exotic locations for conferences</td>
<td>You have to write something to get published for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are independent</td>
<td>You may have too much independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You have a broad range of career opportunities</td>
<td>It will take you at least 5 years to graduate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Surviving and Thriving

TO MAKE PROGRESS, I EXPECT ALL MY STUDENTS TO BE AT WORK FROM 9 TO 5.

YOU MEAN "AM" OR "PM"?

BOTH.

MATHEMATICALLY, THAT STILL LEAVES YOU 8 HOURS TO SLEEP.

MATHEMATICALLY, I WOULDN'T HAVE A LIFE.

MATH IS HARD.
Surviving and Thriving

- Time management
- Identify your strengths and weaknesses
- Make a list of your responsibilities
  - Prioritize them
- Break projects into smaller steps or goals
  - You must become your own “project manager”
- Don’t spread yourself too thin
  - Seize opportunities, but also need to learn to say “no”
Surviving and Thriving

- Clarify what is expected of you by your supervisor
- Look out for yourself
  - Research
  - Teaching assistantships
- Show initiative
  - You acquire the most important skills outside of the classroom
Surviving and Thriving

- Seek mentorship
- Get involved: your grad school experience is what you make it
  - Attend department events, volunteer
- Network!
Thank you!

Nick Bremner
nbremner@uwo.ca
Graduate Student Panel

Nick Bremner, PhD student, Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Western University

Helen Lee, PhD student, Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Western University

Meredith Rocchi, PhD student, Experimental Psychology, University of Ottawa

Missy Teatero, PhD student, Clinical Psychology, Lakehead University

Karen Zhang, PhD student, Clinical Psychology, Western University
Graduate Student Panel

- How early should I start preparing for graduate school?
- Should I include personal information in my statement of intent?
- What if I mess up on the GREs?
- What are some GRE study tips?
- What's the best program for X?
- Can I take maternity/paternity leave while in graduate school?
- Will I be able to get a job after graduate school?
Additional Resources

- Resources for students offered by CPA:
  - http://www.cpa.ca/students/resources/

- Openings for American Schools (as of 15/04/2013):

- Graduate Study in Psychology (2013 edition; APA, 2013)