PREDICTORAL PSYCHOLOGY INTERN SELECTION:
DOES PROGRAM TYPE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not the type of program (school psychology, clinical psychology or counseling psychology) is a factor in the predoctoral psychology internship selection process. Simulated application materials describing a prospective intern, identical in all respects except for the doctoral program type, were randomly sent to 535 directors of Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC) internship sites. One-third of the sites each received application materials that indicated that the student's training was in an APA-accredited clinical psychology program, an APA-accredited counseling psychology program, or an APA-accredited school psychology program. Internship directors or intern selection committee members from 302 APPIC-listed internship sites responded, resulting in a 58% response rate.

There is a pattern of greater acceptance for students from clinical psychology programs, with students from counseling psychology programs accepted somewhat less frequently, and students from school psychology programs being most often rejected. The results suggest that internship selectors may use a judgment heuristic that clinical psychology students are more suited to internships than are counseling and—especially—school psychology students during initial screening of internship applicants, even though there is no empirical evidence to support the heuristic. Internship selectors are advised to become more aware of potential biases toward students from counseling and school psychology programs.

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Intern Selection

Doctoral training for psychologists who wish to provide health services requires both a prescribed academic course of study and supervised practice that includes a predoctoral internship experience. The internship is not only an essential culminating component of doctoral training for professional psychologists, but is also a requirement of licensure for independent practice (Prus & Mittelmeir, 1995). Because interns are more likely to obtain employment in a setting similar to their internship site, internships are also an important link in doctoral students' career paths (American Psychological Association, 1999; Swerdlik & French, 2000).

A significant number of students, however, are left without internships following the internship selection process (Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers [APPIC], 1995; Dixon & Thorn, 2000; Keilin, Thorn, Rodolfa, Constantine, & Kaslow, 2000; Lopez, Draper, & Reynolds, 2001; Murray, 1996). Oehlert and Lopez (1998) also identified an imbalance in the number of American Psychological Association (APA) accredited internship sites compared to the number of students enrolled in APA-accredited doctoral programs. Applicants who were unmatched on match day had fewer APA-accredited or APPIC-approved sites available to them. Non-APA-approved sites are viewed as less prestigious than APA-approved sites (Kramer, Conoley, Bischoff, & Benes, 1991), and accreditation is important because of the connection between accredited internship sites and credentialing (Swerdlik & French, 2000). Lopez et al. (2001) found mixed outcomes for doctoral students in obtaining placements after notification day, with negative emotional effects for some students as a result of nonplacement.

The supply of predoctoral interns has outweighed the number of available internships as a result of a confluence of factors, including changes in the number and diversity of graduates applying for positions and health care budget cuts that reduced the number of internship slots available (Gloria & Robinson, 1994; Murray, 1996). The changing supply and demand came during a time of transition for school psychology doctoral students. While students from clinical psychology programs traditionally applied to internships in settings such as community mental-health centers, medical schools, and Veterans' Affairs Medical Centers, students from school psychology programs applied to — and obtained internships in — schools (Holder & Dodge, 1987; Phillips, 1981). Schools began to be less viable as internship sites as few were APA-accredited and there was often less availability of doctoral-level supervision (Hyman, Rosenfeld, & Olbrich, 1994). The increasing relevance of school psychologists' skills outside of schools led a greater number of doctoral school psychology students to aspire to internships in nonschool settings. During this same time counseling psychology also underwent similar changes in training programs, employment sites and demand for predoctoral internship sites (Gelso & Fretz, 1992; Watkins &
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The intern selection process is similar to the process used for selecting any employee. The process is predicated on the assumption that some potential employees will be better suited for the job than others (Muchinsky, 1997). Selection becomes an especially relevant concern when there are many more applicants than positions to be filled (Cascio, 1998). The selection process is reductionistic, reducing a relatively large pool of applicants down to one person who is going to be the best for the job (Berry, 1998). These decisions are made by putting applicants through a series of steps in the selection process and eliminating some applicants from consideration at each step. For intern selection the first hurdle is the review of the application materials. If an applicant does not pass through this step then he or she will not be considered for the internship position.

Internship selectors cite applicants' clinical experience, performance during interviews, letters of recommendation, and academic credentials as the most relevant factors to their choice of applicants (Lopez, Oehlert, & Moberly, 1996). Program characteristics, such as academic prestige (Petzel & Berndt, 1980) and accreditation status of an applicant's doctoral program (Sturgis, Vestegen, Randolph, & Gavin, 1980) have also been found to be important factors for intern selection. Nonexperimental evidence suggests that program type may be a factor in selection; intern selectors consider and employ applicants from clinical psychology programs most frequently, while applicants from counseling and school psychology programs are of second and third preference, respectively (Eggert et al., 1987; Gloria, Castillo, Choi-Pearson, & Rangel, 1997; Kurz, Fuchs, Dabek, Kurtz, & Helfrich, 1982; Sturgis et al., 1980).

The purpose of this study was to identify whether or not type of doctoral program is a factor in intern selection. This study is unique in that it relies on an experimental strategy utilizing analogue techniques rather than survey or personal opinion data.

**METHOD**

An experimental analogue study was devised using three sets of simulated internship application materials that were identical in all respects except for the type of doctoral program that the student was designated as attending. The application materials were mailed in business envelopes to internship directors. Each packet included a printed cover letter in which participants were addressed by name and title along with a stamped, addressed return envelope. The materials included a page of instructions, a demographic questionnaire, and space for written feedback. The letters and surveys did not identify the project title, university affiliation, or program type of the investigators in order to decrease the likeli-
hood of introducing unintentional biases based on the program type or identity of the investigators.

The case studies were randomly sent in equal numbers to directors of 534 internship sites. One-third of the sites received application materials designating that the student was in an APA-accredited clinical psychology program, one-third received application materials designating the student as attending an APA-accredited counseling psychology program, and one-third received application materials indicating that the student was enrolled in an APA-accredited school psychology program. An individually addressed reminder postcard was sent after one week and a follow-up mailing was sent to nonrespondents after three weeks. The internship directors were asked to complete the demographic data form, read the application materials for the prospective intern, and rate the prospective intern as accept, hold, or reject for their internship site. As there was a greater than 50% response rate, neither a third mailing nor a phone interview of random nonrespondents was undertaken.

RESULTS

The participants who responded were internship directors or intern selection committee members from 302 internship sites, resulting in a 58% response rate. The respondents were distributed relatively evenly across a variety of internship setting types and geographic regions. Two-thirds of respondents graduated from clinical psychology programs, 21% graduated from counseling psychology programs, 9% attended combined/other types of doctoral programs and 3% of respondents graduated from school psychology programs. The demographic characteristics of the respondents across a range of demographic variables including site types and geographic locations were consistent with demographic information about internship directors available in the APPIC directory. The sample in this study is therefore likely to be representative of the entire population of intern selectors.

The data were placed in a 3 X 3 matrix of program type and selection decision (see Table 1). A chi-square analysis found that doctoral program type of the candidate significantly influenced acceptability for employment $\chi^2 = 97.21, p<.00001$. The Cramer's V of .40 translates into a moderate level of practical significance (Fallik & Brown, 1983). Therefore, not only do differences in acceptability exist based on doctoral program type, but also this difference is not likely to be due to chance. Patterns within the matrix were analyzed through inspection and standardized residual analysis (Hays, 1994). Both procedures indicated a clear pattern of greater acceptance first for students from clinical psychology programs and second for students from counseling psychology programs. Students from school psychology programs were most often rejected. The find-
TABLE 1
CHI-SQUARE ANALYSIS OF PROGRAM TYPE BY ACCEPTABILITY RATINGS FOR ENTIRE SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Applicant</th>
<th>Accept</th>
<th>Hold</th>
<th>Reject</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentage of total returned for each doctoral program type.
Numbers in bold have standardized residuals which exceed |2.78| and contributed to significant overall $\chi^2$.

Note. Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.

ings were consistent across a variety of rater characteristics and site variables. There is a tangible difference in the preference patterns of intern selectors and the relationship between doctoral program type and acceptability for internship employment.

DISCUSSION

These patterns are consistent with previous nonempirical discussions and survey research which indicated that applicants from clinical programs were most often, and applicants from school programs were least often, considered or offered internships (Dahbany, 1994; Eggert et al., 1987; Gayer & Gridley, 1995; Guerrero, 2000; Kurz et al., 1982; Sturges et al., 1980). The sheer magnitude of the preference patterns indicates that intern selectors are using a type of group-based judgment heuristic rather than screening candidates based on their individual materials. This heuristic is likely to be that clinical psychology students are more suited to internships than are counseling and – especially – school psychology students.

One issue raised by a few participants as a potential limitation of this study was that the lack of information on which they have regularly relied to make selection decisions, such as letters of recommendation and interviews, made it difficult or impossible for them to make a decision on the sample applicant materials sent in this study. The lack of availability to raters of this type of information is a limitation of analogue research. This is not, however, unlike the position that intern selectors are actually in when they make the initial decision about
whom to give further consideration in the selection process. Therefore, it seems likely that the results of this study are reflective of the initial screening of application materials that typically occurs before invitations for interviews are extended.

One reason that applicants from clinical psychology programs may have an advantage in initial selection is that the majority of internship selectors have themselves attended clinical psychology doctoral programs, and previous research suggests that employers tend to offer positions to people with background characteristics similar their own (Ross & Altmairer, 1989). Perhaps internship directors were responding to this in their initial screening of applicants, when a judgment of whether or not to retain an applicant for further consideration is based on relatively little information. To test this proposition the percentage of clinical psychology trained interns selected was computed for clinical trained directors and nonclinical psychology trained directors. A test for significant difference of percentages revealed no significant difference between the percentage of clinical psychology trained interns accepted by the clinical psychology trained directors (67% accepted) and nonclinical trained directors (65% accepted). Therefore, it appears that it is not the directors' training in clinical psychology per se that influences their choice of interns with clinical psychology training.

Clinical judgment literature identifies another factor that may explain the results of this study. Persons responsible for selecting a small number of applicants from a large pool of applicants may be susceptible to committing cognitive errors during the applicant screening process. These errors might include judgment heuristics, or decisions made without considering all of the information available, and attribution errors, in which applicants are evaluated based on the selectors' preconceived notions instead of on information conveyed by the applicant (Sleek, 1996). It is conceivable that persons who select interns may opt to look for screening variables in order to simplify the selection process and to reduce the amount of application material which it is necessary to critically review (Ross & Altmairer, 1989). Doctoral program type may therefore serve as a screening variable in the intern selection process, allowing selectors to pare down the number of applicants for consideration.

Perceptions of the historical differences in the preparation or practice settings of graduates from the three programs are likely to account for the differential perception of the applicants. Reschly and Wilson (1997) note, however, that the practice of school psychology and clinical child psychology has evolved in similar directions, and traditional differences in the knowledge base and practice competencies among the specialties of clinical child psychology, pediatric psychology, and school psychology have diminished significantly. There is substantial overlap in curriculum requirements between child-clinical and school psy-
chology programs (Minke & Brown, 1996) and clinical and counseling psychology (Brems & Johnson, 1996).

As the training experiences of students in APA-accredited clinical, counseling, and school psychologists are likely to be similar, eliminating otherwise qualified counseling and school psychology students from consideration for an internship based on program type does not seem warranted. Internship directors and members of selection committees have a professional obligation to ensure that the selection of interns is based, as much as possible, on objective information. Judgment is an integral part of most selection procedures, but it is important that this point of subjectivity in selection decisions be recognized and understood by selectors (Guion, 1991). Changes in interviewer attitudes and behavior have occurred as a result of training and increased awareness (Berry, 1998). Internship selectors can reduce bias by keeping familiar with the research on the curriculum of each health service provider field. Having an open discussion about the effects of potential biases on selection may also minimize the use of judgment heuristics that can result in biased selection outcomes.

A major task of the internship director is to help the program staff identify the desired characteristics of interns and make the criteria for selection explicit (Zeiss, 1999). The behavioral consistency method (McDaniel, Schmidt, & Hunter, 1988) has shown promise in enhancing the validity of judgments made about training and experience. This method requires that the internship selectors identify those behavioral dimensions that differentiate successful and unsuccessful interns and have the applicants describe their major achievements in these areas. The internship selectors can thereby make a rating of the applicant's achievements based on a structured process. The accomplishment record method (Hough, 1984) is a similar method that involves developing a set of critical incidents that identify important components of the internship. Scales or rating principles are then developed to rate each applicant on how well the applicant meets the requirements of the particular internship. These two systems serve to make the initial screening based less on informal heuristics and more on objective or systematic criteria.

There have been few outcome studies comparing the knowledge and skills of preinternship students from APA-accredited clinical, counseling and school psychology programs (Gaddy, Charlot-Swille, Nelson, & Reichl, 1995; Rosenfeld, Shimberg, & Thornton, 1983). Future research efforts should address the question of whether there are relevant differences in the knowledge, skills and abilities of students from different applied psychology programs. Until research establishes that there are significantly different outcomes across APA-accredited doctoral program types for preinternship students that mirror preference patterns obtained in this study, it is likely that a selection bias based on doctoral program type is in effect in the intern selection process.
REFERENCES


consortium in professional psychology. School Psychology Review, 20, 551-564.