eye ON PSI CHI

WINTER 2021 | VOL 26 | NO 2

TIPS, TRICKS, & INSIGHTS To Ace Your Interview for Doctoral Psychology Admission

PAGE 36

Ice Cream Does Not Lead to Murder: Association, Correlation, and Causation

PAGE 24

Nature Therapy: Movement and Mental Health for Kids

PAGE 28

TIPS, TRICKS, & INSIGHTS

To Ace Your Interview for Doctoral Psychology Admission

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It is early December, and in the last few weeks, you have finished edits on at least a dozen versions of your personal statement, polished your resumé or CV, entered your information on seemingly hundreds of online screens to submit application forms, and nudged your referees to please (please!) send in their letters of recommendation before the deadlines. You are overwhelmed, exhausted, and perhaps even broke. The application season for doctoral programs in psychology is rigorous, tiresome, and laborious, to be sure. If you are fortunate enough to get an interview, or perhaps more than one, you don't have much time to rest however. Within the next few (i.e., 2–8) weeks, preinterviews, or invitations for (virtual or live) campus visits will begin. This brief article will help you get through the next steps and ensure that you survive graduate school interviews, feeling prepared (maybe even excited!), and hopefully with one or more offers of admission. Let's take this step by step, and I believe you will feel even more prepared than you realized.

For instance, you might not have noticed, but the preparation of your application materials actually gave you great training to assist with your upcoming interviews. In particular, the writing of your personal statement was not just a chore, but an educational aid. A good personal statement isn't meant to merely restate your experiences as an undergraduate student, and perhaps as a postbaccalaureate research assistant, but rather it is meant to help you synthesize your thinking about your general understanding of psychological phenomena and reflect on the experiences that resonated with you the most. Consider the reasons why you have developed interests in a specific area of study, and perhaps even propose a general hypothesis or two related to the type of work you would do as a graduate student. These are very important insights because they are exactly what you will be asked to articulate on your preinterviews and interviews. (*Note.* If you don't feel your personal statement helped you achieve a little clarity in these ways, be sure to keep reading articles in your area of interest, so you will be prepared to discuss your ideas soon).

It doesn't take long to start hearing news after you submit your applications.

Faculty are not necessarily just looking for the person who is the **smartest** or has the **most relevant experience** during the admissions process. The interview for doctoral programs in graduate school is like **speed-dating**, and the result is a mentor–mentee partnership that will **last for the rest of their lives.**

Some faculty may start reading applications as they are submitted or very shortly after the deadline, so they can be among the first to make contact with candidates that seem like a potential fit. You may even feel a bit pressured or confused as the universities to which you applied begin to contact you at seemingly random times, all with different expectations, potentially conflicting interview schedules, and varying levels of information about how the process will proceed. If this feels a bit confusing, or even perhaps a bit uncoordinated, that may be for good reason. Before proceeding to explain what the interview process will look like to you as an applicant, let's discuss what the process is like for those reading your applications and making decisions regarding your fate. This insight may help you understand why the interview process may seem somewhat confusing, and also help you to be maximally prepared for success.

The Faculty Perspective

Faculty who would like to admit a new graduate student are not always permitted to do so. In fact, there may be substantial debate and uncertainty involved on the faculty side, largely having to do with financial matters and where department resources (i.e., to pay for a teaching assistantship) may be allocated. Some faculty may even list on their website an intention to accept a new graduate student, but are not assured they are able to do so until much later in the application process—maybe even after your interview. As you might imagine, faculty thus may be considerably apprehensive throughout the interview process. Will they find a talented new student? Will they be allowed to make an offer? Will that person accept their offer?

Compounding these fears, faculty receive a remarkably large number of applications for admission to their lab, yet it is remarkably difficult to determine who may be a match and/or a candidate likely to accept their offer. Admissions rates are remarkably low for doctoral programs in psychology. Within clinical psychology, for instance, admission rates are about 8% in the United States, with some programs admitting less than 2% of those who apply. This means that there may literally be dozens of extraordinarily bright, successful, and talented students available for a single admission slot. Faculty often report the agonizing difficulty in selecting candidates for formal interviews. Some of this is due to mostly unhelpful information that is included in application packages. Grade point averages are generally poor indicators of academic potential, since grades reflect variability in universities, course selections, and professors' grading styles. Letters of recommendation are uniformly positive, if not glowing, across the entire application pool, and most personal statements are remarkably similar to one other (see my Uncensored Guide for Applying to Graduate School on https://mitch.web.unc.edu/ for tips on writing an

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essay that will stand out). Faculty often read dozens of outstanding applications, but can only select 3–5 applicants for a formal interview. For these reasons, it has become very common for professors to resort to desperate, but perhaps necessary tactics (i.e., using a Google search, reviewing public social media profiles, or backchanneling an applicant's references) to help them make decisions.

By the time interview offers are made, faculty have narrowed their applicant pool from dozens down to only 3–5 applicants whom could potentially fill the available slot in their lab (*Note.* Some graduate programs admit a general class of new students and determine mentor-fit later, but the majority select for a specific lab match during the application process). This is a very small number of students to select from and successfully recruit to accept an offer of admission. This is why the interview process is often less about evaluating the applicants, and more about enticing candidates to accept offers if they receive one. Of course, it will never feel that way to students—interviews are nerve-wracking, unnatural, and students have less power and experience than the faculty. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that faculty are indeed as anxious about the process going well as the students are.

Faculty are not necessarily just looking for the person who is the smartest or has the most relevant experience during the admissions process. The interview for doctoral programs in graduate school is like speed-dating, and the result is a mentor-mentee partnership that will last for the rest of their lives. Perhaps for that reason, the interview experience includes as much discussion about psychology as it does general topics of small-talk interest (i.e., during receptions, lunches, or even drives to and from the psychology department). Faculty are not necessarily wondering whether the applicants are capable enough to succeed at this stage, as they are wondering, "Do I want to have a close, professional relationship, and intense interaction with this person for the next twenty to thirty years?"

By the time interview offers are made, faculty have lost all power, and they must sit and wait to hear whether their selected candidate will accept their offer. It's a difficult period of time for mentors; they cannot and should not pressure applicants to make a decision, they do not want their second choice to feel like well, a second choice, and they may have to wait for months before their applicant makes a decision. Professors have imposter syndrome too, and it never feels good to think that applicants are evaluating them, may be talking about their reputations with others in the field, and comparing them and their labs with those of perhaps more senior or acclaimed professors.

Of course, this is not meant to invoke sympathy among applicants; this process is certainly more stressful and consequential for you than for faculty members. But understanding the perspective of faculty may help you understand a little more about why the interview process can seem so peculiar and uncoordinated. This insight may also help you understand how best to succeed during each of the steps discussed below.

The Preinterview

For instance, because it has become so difficult to narrow the pool of truly outstanding candidates to only 3–5 for a formal interview/campus visit, many faculty have begun to conduct "preinterviews" with candidates at the top of their list. Note that not all faculty conduct preinterviews, so if you don't hear that you were invited to one, don't worry!

A preinterview may be brief, and might occur on short notice. Some may be based on a structured interview designed to assess an applicant's knowledge or interest in the faculty member's area of research. Others may be quite informal, perhaps designed to offer a simple assessment of "fit" between the mentor's style and the social skills of the candidate. These informal meetings may last only 15–30 minutes, or might include opportunities for more extended meetings with faculty members, and perhaps even graduate students from their lab.

There are several ways you may want to prepare for these interviews. First, it

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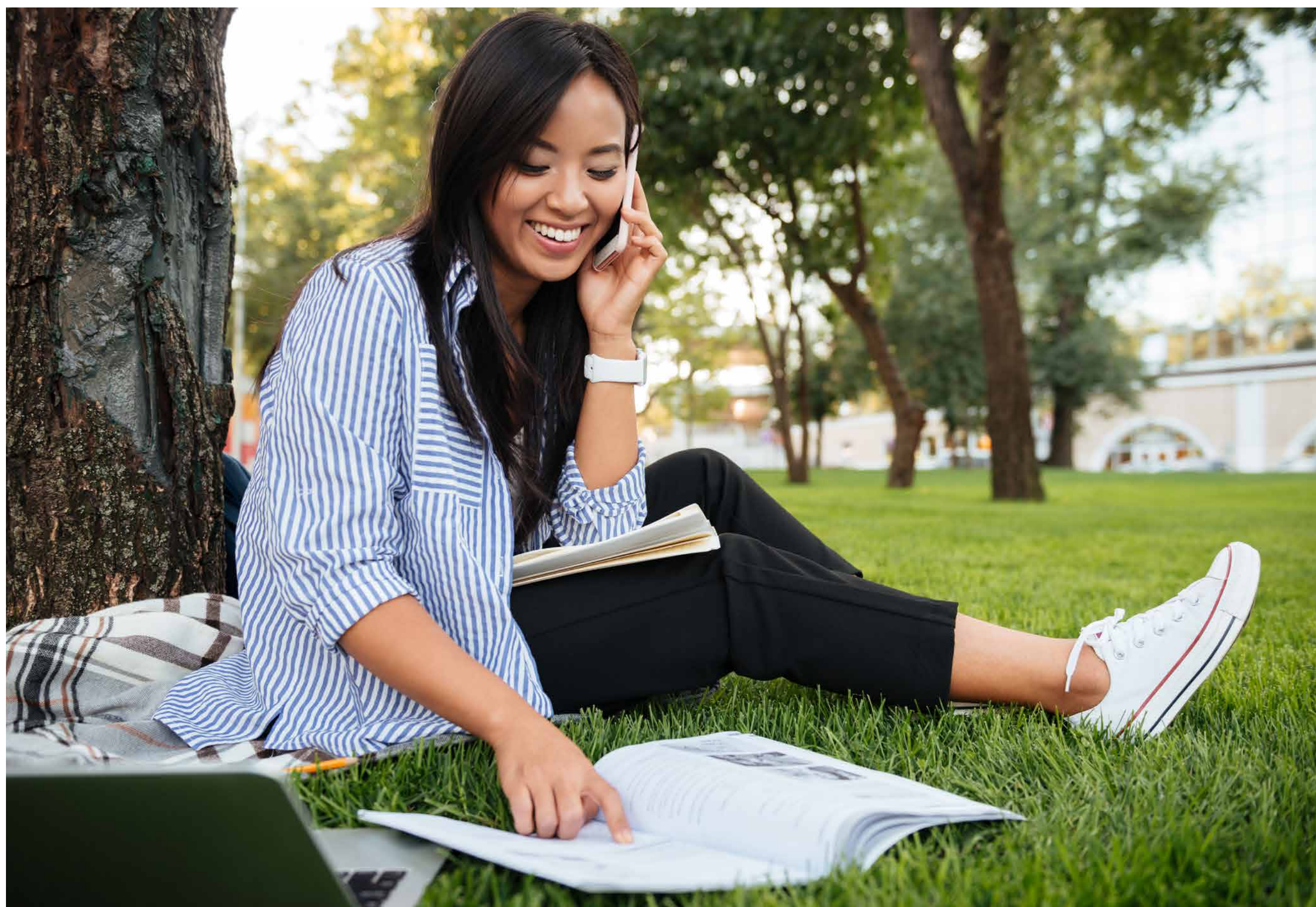

may be useful for you to keep handy a list of the schools, faculty mentors, and areas of research you expressed interest in when you sent in your applications. You may even want to print this list out on actual paper so you can access it very quickly. A faculty mentor who forgets what this experience is like on your end may call your cell phone and introduce themselves by name, then feel dismayed that you forgot who they are or which university they are calling from.

Second, it will be useful for you to develop bullet points (not a verbatim script!) to discuss your general research interests. You will undoubtedly be asked to discuss these on almost every interview. Remember, your interests will likely evolve as you progress through the preinterview and formal interview process. This is a good thing! Meeting with faculty and graduate students and hearing about so many projects across a variety of labs is a unique educational opportunity that is remarkably different from what most students learn in undergraduate psychology classes.

As you learn more about research, and you hear more about projects that make you excited, you should revisit your research interests and rehearse again how you would discuss them with potential mentors. For instance, you might have expressed a general interest in studying romantic relationships in your personal statement, but now have refined those interests to be more focused on health outcomes, or the use of mobile devices to measure relationship quality. Expressing these refined interests will help you seem more sophisticated in your understanding of the literature and better able to adapt to an intellectual environment where new ideas and critiques are flowing continuously. No one will be concerned that your interests sound a little more refined than in your personal statement, and your commitment to honesty will help make each conversation with potential colleagues that much more valuable for your eventual decision-making.

Third, be ready to ask a few questions of your own. There will be more time for this if you get a formal interview (and more discussion of this below), but a few questions convey a general interest in the program and an awareness of what you are "signing up for," which is a marker of professional maturity.

There are several things you cannot prepare to address and that may influence your candidacy. It is really important to remember that these factors are completely and totally out of your control and therefore, you should not blame yourself if you do not progress to the next stage of the selection process. For instance, some faculty mentors like to take someone who has had prior experience that aligns almost perfectly with the types of research questions, instruments, or approaches they rely upon in their lab; others prefer a "blank slate," who will enter their lab fresh so the mentor can teach you their approaches "their way." Some faculty may be looking for someone

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with experience or interests in a new area of their research—perhaps a topic they have never published on, nor have listed as a research area on their website. Others may just be looking for a good student and have no preconceived preferences about the interests of incoming students, beyond a broad match to their lab.

Maddeningly for applicants, there is no way to know what the faculty mentor may be looking for. Moreover, a faculty mentor may be looking for different things in different years. All of this is to say that your success on a preinterview may depend on a range of factors that have little to do with your performance. It may be best to approach this as a "sorting process" wherein great students find their best graduate homes, rather than an evaluation process weeding out brilliant from less brilliant students.

Remember, faculty are **not evaluating you** as much as they are **evaluating fit,** so your ability to **express what you want,** react to the information you hear, ask questions you are generally curious about, **or even diverge into general small talk** that is unrelated to research are all going to help a lot.

The Formal Interview

Whether you had a preinterview or not, you may be invited for a formal interview. In some cases, you may be notified that you already have been accepted and this invitation is more for "recruitment." But in many instances, the interview is indeed designed to help faculty make admissions decisions. Every program conducts interviews in somewhat different ways, but several common features deserve mention.

Social Gatherings. There will be a lot of time during your visit (in person or virtual) dedicated to general socializing. At some programs, you can expect to be picked up at the airport by a member of the graduate program. You may eat many meals together, you may be offered lodging at a graduate student's apartment, there may be a reception to meet the entire graduate program or department community, and/or you may even visit the faculty mentor's home for a meal.

Remember this: Everyone you interact with is part of the decision-making process. The students, their partners, the departmental administrative staff handling your schedule or reimbursement receipts, as well as the faculty (of course)—they are all reporting back on their impressions of you to the faculty mentor who will decide your admissions fate. This isn't meant to freak you out. But it is worth knowing that many people have attended an admissions reception populated only by graduate students, and made choices that they may make at a strictly social event of peers, not realizing that these choices would ultimately be reported back to the faculty to assist in admissions decisions. The same goes for any social media posts about your experiences during interviews. It's all reported back to the faculty.

Program Director Overview. At many interviews, a graduate program director and/or department chair may offer a speech to provide details regarding the program. Assuming you are generally attentive and polite, no one is evaluating your behavior during this speech. However, this is a fantastic opportunity to get important data you may need to decide whether this is the right program for you. Depending on the number of programs from which you received an invitation, or number of years you might have applied, you may feel like you are willing to accept any offer you get.

That would be an awful mistake. A program with an uncomfortable climate, a mentor with whom you do not feel comfortable to grow professionally, or a path that makes you feel "stuck" working on topics outside of your interest will not only lead to an awful five years in graduate school, but also a professional trajectory that could affect your career for years. You have worked so hard, done so well, and have so much potential to make it to this step. You owe it to yourself to go somewhere that will make you feel like you are being supported, educated, and prepared in the best way possible.

So during that speech, listen for signals that the program cares about mentoring, encouraging students toward their own paths, and has students who are happy. Listen for signs that the program is evaluating its own success and seeks input from students on how to be better. Listen for clues that suggest that the program is safe for people with different perspectives, experiences, and points of view. You may find all of these at a "prestigious" program or at a program that is lower on national rankings. In my opinion, it is these qualities that will benefit you more than the external reputation of that program.

Faculty Interviews. Of course, you will meet with several faculty as well. Usually these will last just 30–60 minutes, although conversations can continue during receptions discussed above. There are several ways you can prepare to do well in these interviews. First, look up your mentor's recent work, of course, but keep in mind that what you see published likely reflects work that was completed at least a year or two ago. Instead, look on federal databases (e.g., NIH Reporter) to see if your prospective mentor currently has a grant. If so, read the abstract and you will know what they are working on today.

Second, get as much information as you can from current and former students about your prospective mentor. It is OK to email them before the interview date (respecting their time constraints), or talk with them before your faculty meeting and ask about the mentor's current work, mentoring style, and emerging research

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interests. This will give you a context in which to discuss your own interests and ideas. Be sure you remain authentic to your own interests, but finding "connections" or an understanding of a mentor's current work can help you feel like a better fit to the lab.

Third, be prepared to ask questions. Many of them! Faculty will be happy to discuss their work, their style, the program, etc., and the more you ask them, the more interested and knowledgeable you seem. There are many lists of commonly asked questions available online (including my own website) to help guide you. But it is best if you can make these questions your own by explaining why you are asking them and what you are looking for. Doing so helps turn your interview into a "conversation" rather than what may seem like a pre-taped recording of pat responses that faculty have provided year after year. Remember, faculty are not evaluating you as much as they are evaluating fit, so your ability to express what you want, react to the information you hear, ask questions you are generally curious about, or even diverge into general small talk that is unrelated to research are all going to help a lot.

Nevertheless, it may seem quite intimidating and weird to ask questions, particularly on your first interview. I recommend an easy solution to solve this issue: read two department or graduate program handbooks. You can usually find a graduate program's handbook on the web, and it likely has sections reflecting the program mission, faculty, resources, and expectations. Reading even one of these handbooks, let alone two may seem like an incredibly boring task, and you would not be wrong. But doing so will help you start to notice how programs that generally look the same online actually are different. They have different expectations for program requirements (e.g., What do their comprehensive exams look like? Are there different options for completing the dissertation? How are practicum assignments made?), and different personalities. On your first interview you may likely assume that whatever you hear is standard, so you may not have questions to ask. But after becoming acquainted with several programs (i.e., by reviewing a handbook or two) you will start to notice important differences between programs that allow you to ask informed questions and get answers that will help you make your decisions.

Most programs plan to convene the faculty within a week or two after interviews have been completed, but may not be able to extend offers until funding or department permission has been secured. This gives you some time to send a "thank-you email," which can be addressed to one person or several at once to convey your appreciation for the remarkable amount of time and effort it takes to organize interview days. These notes also give you a chance to express your interest in the program in clear terms, which may, in fact, influence faculty mentors' decisions. It is probably best not to be desperate in such communication, but rather to recognize that you are a very talented student with a fantastic career ahead of you. Where you get to begin that career is the question at hand, and this is truly your decision as much as anyone else's.

I wish you good luck in the interview process. Remember that just getting to this stage is a huge accomplishment and an amazing learning opportunity. This advice, coupled with our own terrific instincts, and experience you amass as you visit different places, will hopefully land you an offer. But more importantly, it will hopefully allow you to find a site that will give you great training that fits your goals and allows you to be happy.

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