

A need for trained generalists in psychology?

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Psychological research continues to be parsed into an evergrowing number of sub-disciplines including personality, social, neuroscience, health, cognitive, and industrial-organizational, just to name a few. Although breadth requirements require undergraduate psychology students to take at least introductory level courses in a variety of sub-disciplines, current graduate degree programs in psychological research emphasize specialization. However, it may be time that this trend toward specialization was tempered by an appreciation for the potential benefits of a generalist perspective in psychology.

Specialization by its very nature imposes limits on ideas, if not through direct means, then through the limitation of data and experience upon which one may draw. I would propose that psychology needs more generalists; individuals who have been trained to have a broader perspective and advanced knowledge of each of the sub-disciplines. Although many psychological researchers do take an interest in a variety of subdisciplines, researchers with true knowledge of the breadth and depth of psychology as a whole appear to be few and far between. A true generalist, however, might be able to perceive research gaps or over-lapping concepts between fields that specialists are unable to recognize. Further, a generalist, familiar with the language of each of the sub-disciplines, could foster

communication and collaboration amongst researchers. Research costs could potentially be reduced as related studies from different fields combined their efforts and resources.

A psychological generalist could also function as a bridge between researchers and the public, facilitating knowledge translation. One possessed with a broad understanding of the wealth of knowledge that psychology has to offer might be uniquely equipped to draw together relevant strings of research and find meaningful applications. For example, a generalist could draw on a combination of health, social, cognitive, environmental and industrial-organizational psychologies to offer tailored health-care reforms.

Training a true generalist would require an alternate model for graduate work, emphasizing breadth of knowledge, communication skills, and coursework in place of research training. However, the development of such a program may be well worth the effort. Complementing the profound knowledge of the specialist with the connective and communicative advantages of the generalist could enrich future research and enhance the role of psychology in society. Given such vast potential benefits, can the discipline of psychology afford not to consider balancing its trend toward specialization with a little generalism?