The Debate between Getting a Doctorate of Philosophy or a Doctorate of Psychology

John L. Miles

Longwood University

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Ever since the introduction of the Doctorate of Psychology, many psychologists have questioned which degree they should earn while in graduate school. There’s the Ph.D which is a research and practical based degree where a person has their own research projects which they can use to influence the ways that they practice their brand of psychology. Then there is the Psy.D, a degree based solely on practice and expertise in psychology. With this degree, a person can better focus themselves on how they can use current techniques and methods to help their patients and clients to a better life.

Now that there are two degrees available for graduate students to pursue, a sort of rivalry has been made to fight over which degree is better for psychologists. To better define the Ph.D and what it stands for, a group of professionals got together to define what it was to obtain a Ph.D. In retaliation of this decision, a rival group of professionals got together about twenty years later and made a new type of degree to directly combat the Ph.D. This opened up a whole new world for psychologists; they now had a choice as to how they wanted to work what they loved after they graduated from grad school. They could either choose to do research to improve themselves in the field, or they could become a highly trained professional in modern techniques. With each passing day, new techniques are developed that people can use in the field. Although these two movements were mostly meant for clinical psychologists, a person can get a Ph.D without becoming a clinician; they could choose a specialization in another field in psychology. A Psy.D, however, is mostly meant for clinical psychologists. Even today this is still a hot topic of debate between psychologists, that is to say, how we should train people to become knowledgeable professionals in the world of psychology.

**The Ph.D**

Students in psychology started getting Doctorates of Philosophy from Wilhelm Wundt; considered the father of psychology. A Doctorate of Philosophy is a researched based degree obtained usually after four to eight years after obtaining a bachelor’s and master’s degree, respectively. Students under consideration for a Ph.D. have to go through three phases before they get their degree. The first phase is usually research in the student’s field of work. The second phase entails an examination on everything the student has learned throughout their research. The third and final phase is an oral presentation followed by a panel of professors including the professor leading the student’s research asking questions to the student. These questions can be about the research itself or just general questions about psychology.

A person with a Ph.D. usually chooses a specialization that he or she does work in. This work is usually done in a university or college. Most people with Ph.D.’s become professors and teach students what they know based on their specialization. An example of this would be someone who obtained a Ph.D. in clinical/counseling psychology teaching a class on abnormal psychology.

The other half of people who obtain Ph.D.’s go into the field of clinical/counseling psychology. This often entails someone joining an official practice with many other psychologists who also have Ph.D.’s, or they can open up their own business and just be a single doctor. A clinical/counseling psychologist helps out people with mental illnesses. They are, however, not allowed to prescribe medications to their patients. That is a job left up to a psychiatrist, which another type of job entirely. A counselor may, however, refer their patients to a psychiatrist if the counselor believes the patients are in need of medication.

**The Boulder Model**

The Boulder Model, also known as the scientist-practitioner model was developed to guide students in clinical psychology to be a competent scientist and researcher (Frank, 1984). This school of thought is paired with getting a Ph.D. in psychology. This model was created during the Boulder Conference on Graduate Education in Clinical Psychology in 1949 at Boulder, Colorado. The purpose of this conference was to create a system of training in clinical psychologists follow guidelines on how to conduct their jobs. These guidelines make sure that psychologists adhere to scientific methods, research, and procedures in their practices (Frank). There are some core tenets which provide the guidelines that clinicians should follow. Clinicians should deliver psychological testing and procedures in accordance with scientific protocols; clinicians should assess and integrate their scientific findings to inform their healthcare decisions. They should also frame and test hypotheses to inform healthcare decisions; clinicians should build and maintain relationships with other clinicians so that they mat support one another in their research. They should contribute to research and development of new techniques to improve the quality and effectiveness of psychological healthcare (Frank).

Many professionals question the effectiveness of the Boulder Model because of how it limits clinical psychologists in today’s field. Clinicians are finding it difficult to complete their practical duties while trying following the tenets. Completion of research is also a big concern with psychologists under this model; most of the research goes unfunded. It is also difficult for many to keep up with current practices and technologies in the field of psychological health care. Psychologists who do adhere to the scientist-practitioner model will more than likely use techniques that have been validated through extensive research; or use treatments that have been empirically supported as opposed to using an unknown treatment for the first time (Huber, 2007).

**The Psy.D**

The Doctor of Psychology degree is intended to prepare students for practice in psychology after graduation. It was originally intended only for clinical psychologists, but now it can be awarded to students in business, organizational development, counseling, and school psychology. The American Psychological Association formed a committee in 1964 called the Clark Committee with the aim to study the scientific and professional aspects of psychology. The conclusion of the committee was that, although related, the science and practice of psychology was not the same thing. Realizing that the education and training required for research and practice were different, the committee decided that the main thing they should do is develop a new graduate program to prepare people for practice in clinical psychology (Peterson, 1997). The APA confirmed that the Psy.D was a credential that certified the attainment of knowledge and skill necessary to pursue clinical psychology as a profession. The Psy.D also followed the requirements of both the Association of American Universities and Council of Graduate schools: the Psy.D acting like the M.D.; being awarded for professional practice, where the Ph.D. is awarded for research in addition to clinical practice (Peterson).

The practice of clinical psychology is based on the understanding of both behavioral science and the scientific method. The main focus of the Psy.D training model is the application of this knowledge clinical intervention and mental healthcare. The diagnosis and treatment of mental illnesses, along with cognitive and emotional impairments, is an example of an application of skill. Doctor of Psychology programs may take as long four to seven years to complete where students receive a broad education based on scientific psychology and evidence-based treatments. Students also receive hands on learning experiences where they may work in community mental health hospitals and college counseling centers with direct supervision from a licensed psychologist. Students must demonstrate competency in many areas; such as knowledge through passing comprehensive exams and skill from completing clinical internship program (Peterson).

**The Vail Model**

After the Boulder Model in 1949, psychologists did not think that it was doing the right job. In 1973, the Vail Conference on Professional Training in Psychology was held in Vail, Colorado. It was at this conference that a new model of training was created; the practitioner-scholar model or the Vail Model. Psychologists had noticed that Boulder model was falling short in training psychologists in research and practice at the same time. This model is mainly focused on clinical training rather than research, and according to it, a psychologist is a scholar, and a highly trained professional who applies knowledge and techniques to solve the problems of clients. This model had some different features than the Boulder Model had; for example, admission to a Psy.D program may place more emphasis on the personal qualities of the applicants or focusing on clinical related work experience. It offered a diversity of training programs, credit for nonacademic experiences, and flexibility in dissertation design. It also allowed for a recruitment of more minority groups as opposed to the rigidity of Ph.D programs at the time. There was an emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches to learning and no training programs were allowed without evaluation from an already established professional in psychology (Fretz, 1974). Typically Psy.D programs accepted more applicants than Ph.D programs did at the time to ensure that every student was highly trained in psychology. Even though the Vail Model had just been introduced, the Boulder Model was still being used and following the already established idea of emphasizing on research for graduates.

**Ph.D versus Psy.D**

There is a clear difference between the two types of degrees and their programs. There are some distinct alternatives that the practitioner-scholar model, the Psy.D, has that the scientist-practitioner model, the Ph.D, does not have. The practitioner-scholar model typically is in smaller universities. The model tries to bridge the gap between practice and science,

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