

## The Postdoctoral Search: Tips and Advice for the Hunt

Kristy L. Dalrymple and Megan M. Kelly, *Brown Medical School*

Once you are an intern or have completed internship and are looking at potential job opportunities, the question hits you: "Should I apply for a postdoctoral position?" Pursuing a postdoctoral position can be a substantial undertaking and may provide valuable opportunities for career development. In considering your options, it's best to start from the beginning and assess how a postdoctoral position might benefit you, your career, and your life plan.

First, you may want more expertise in a particular area. Whether for research or clinical purposes, you may feel it necessary to obtain additional experience in order to become an "expert" in your chosen field. Postdoctoral training in specific areas (e.g., substance abuse, eating disorders) will enable you to make connections with well-known scholars or clinicians in the field, provide you with the skills necessary for researching or providing treatment for the population you wish to work with, and help you to develop a specialization in your area.

Additionally, if you choose to pursue a research career, you may decide that you need more publications and research experience than you already have. In this case, a postdoctoral research position may enable you to build up your CV and make you more marketable when you apply for academic positions. In addition, you may receive specialized training in research methods of interest to you. Many believe that a postdoctoral position is a good time to gain experience in applying for grant funding that will help you start your independent research career, and subsequently, help you obtain an academic position in a competitive research environment.

Another reason to seek a postdoctoral position is to obtain the clinical experience necessary for licensure. Originally, supervised postdoctoral experiences were intended to provide new graduates with opportunities to hone and practice their clinical skills before obtaining licensure (Clay, 2000). However, today's clinical psychology graduate students receive more supervised predoctoral clinical experience than when the postdoctoral re-

quirement was created. As a result, some have suggested that the licensure requirements for postdoctoral supervision be dropped (Clay, 2000). So far, the postdoctoral requirement is alive and well, and new graduates who wish to obtain licensure have to find the supervised clinical experiences that are required by state licensing boards. A formal or informal postdoctoral position is one way of obtaining these experiences.

Postdoctoral positions can also enhance your job prospects following the completion of your residency or fellowship. For example, if your plan is to obtain a position in a medical school setting, it may be easier to break into the market if you work as a postdoctoral fellow and possibly stay on as a staff or faculty member. In addition, if you have your heart set on a particular geographical area in which you want to settle down, obtaining a postdoctoral position will help you to learn about your community and develop connections. Others seek out temporary positions to allow them the time to consider which career path to take.

Conversely, there are several reasons to forego a postdoctoral position. If you have worked exceedingly hard, established yourself as a researcher, have multiple publications, and have developed a programmatic line of research, it might be best for you to skip the postdoctoral phase and head straight into academia. At the other end of the spectrum, if you've yet to complete your dissertation, and it may take some time for you to finish it, perhaps it would be better to finish your degree before considering a postdoctoral position. Finally, if you are determined to obtain a high salary and generous benefits right now, it might be a good idea to concentrate your job search on career avenues that do not include a postdoctoral assignment. However, if you are still interested in obtaining a postdoctoral position even after considering the downside of postdoctoral work, then read on!

### Types of Postdoctoral Fellowships

So, you've chosen to apply for a postdoctoral position. Now what? First, you have to consider the type of postdoctoral position that suits you and your career goals.

There are many different types of fellowships available, ranging from formal to informal, clinical to research, and anywhere in between. Length of fellowship also varies, ranging from 1 to 2 years. As a general rule, clinical fellowships typically last 1 year, and research fellowships typically last 2 years (to provide ample time to write grants, produce publications, and obtain post-degree clinical hours). The type of fellowship you choose should be related to the type of career path you wish to pursue. For example, if you wish to pursue clinical work either in private practice or a hospital setting, you should apply for postdoctoral positions that require mostly clinical duties, either with a specific population or method (e.g., a particular type of assessment or intervention approach) or a more generalist training. Formal clinical fellowships can be found in the various resources listed below, or you can "create your own" postdoctoral position. For example, some individuals have created a position in a private practice setting where licensed psychologists were willing to provide supervision. However, keep in mind that you may have to pay for supervision if it is not a formal postdoctoral position.

For those who would like to pursue a career in academia, particularly in a university or college psychology department, a fellowship that combines both clinical and research activities may be a better option. These fellowships can include working as a project coordinator for a clinical study or working as a therapist or assessor on a clinical study. Ideally, time also would be available to write manuscripts from the database in order to increase publications. Therefore, you would have the best of both worlds—obtaining clinical hours for licensure as well as producing research and publications. Some fellowships also include seminars on topics such as professional development, research design/methodology, working with a specific population, or using particular assessment or treatment methods. Formal postdoctoral positions that combine clinical and research activities can be found via the resources below. Informal fellowships also exist, often when faculty at a university receive a grant and will pay a fellow to serve as a project coordinator.

Finally, if you wish to pursue a research career at an academic medical center, you will need a fellowship that provides ample opportunities for grant writing experience and manuscript preparation. This can be best accomplished via formal research fellowships, such as NIH training grants (T32s). As part of a T32 fellowship, you would be expected to write a grant by the end of the fellowship, publish papers, attend seminars to gain formal grant writing experience, and conduct research (in many cases clinical research, which will also provide you with supervised clinical hours). The disadvantage is that given the heavy emphasis on research, you may need to moonlight to gain the necessary clinical hours for licensure (or just take longer to obtain those hours). Some individuals even fund their own fellowship by writing an F32 grant. Often this is done by individuals who would like to stay on at their internship site and pursue their own line of research based on their dissertation. Once a researcher is awarded an F32, they may be able to move it to another institution.

### Searching for a Postdoctoral Position

Postdoctoral positions are advertised throughout the year, although most postings start in early fall and continue into late spring. Most interns begin their internships in mid-summer or early fall. Many interns find it difficult to “get in gear” to apply for a postdoctoral slot. After all, you’ve just arrived at your internship. The tendency is for many interns to concentrate on new responsibilities and to let go of those application hassles. As a result, some interns miss out on postdoctoral opportunities that are advertised early in the academic year. However, do not be concerned if you have not been able to find a postdoctoral position by the time spring rolls around. Many postdoctoral positions become available following grant-funding cycles, and new positions may be advertised at those times.

Networking is a valuable tool for finding a postdoctoral position. Often, postdoctoral positions come to potential candidates by word of mouth from those they know. Ask mentors, supervisors, faculty members, former students, and current postdoctoral fellows about positions that they might have heard about. Also, keep in touch with fellow graduate students about postdoctoral opportunities—they might know about positions for which you are a good match. Feel free to contact faculty members that you’ve met during internship interviews or at conferences. They are often very willing to pass along any information about fellowship openings at their site. In addition, the relatively new ABCT listserv (visit [www.abct.org](http://www.abct.org) for information on how to subscribe) offers excellent opportunities to learn about post-

doctoral positions—often well in advance of formal postings elsewhere.

The Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC) offers several resources that might come in handy. On the APPIC Web site, [www.appic.org](http://www.appic.org), many postdoctoral training programs advertise their yearly positions and offer information similar to that advertised for internship programs. However, APPIC accreditation is not as important for postdoctoral fellowships as it is for internships. Many more postdoctoral programs are being added to this list each year, making this site a useful and growing resource for those seeking both clinical and research postdoctoral positions.

In addition to formal postings of postdoctoral programs, APPIC hosts a listserv where postdoctoral positions are posted throughout the year. Information on postdoctoral positions of all kinds can be found, and a search of the listserv archives may reveal additional postings that you may have missed before signing up. There are other important listservs that provide similar information, including those hosted by APA that can be found at <http://www.apa.org/apaps/members/listserv.html>. Other postdoctoral postings can be found in the classified ad section of APA’s *Monitor on Psychology*, as well as through Internet searches for job postings on the APA and APS Web sites, and [psych-watch.com](http://psych-watch.com).

### The Application Process

Once you have found postdoctoral programs that suit your interests and career goals, it is time to gather your materials and apply. Fortunately, this process is much simpler than applying for internship. If you are applying for formal fellowships (e.g., ones listed on the APPIC directory or in the *Monitor*), then there will be specific instructions on what materials are required and the deadline. Often the required materials include a cover letter, curriculum vitae, statement of purpose, and letters of recommendation. Occasionally, sites may require you to complete a separate, but brief, application form. Many of these materials can be adapted from your internship application materials. In addition, some sites (especially those that are more clinically oriented) may require you to submit a sample case conceptualization and test report.

As with internship sites, you should apply to postdoctoral positions in which you already have some experience in the services they provide or research they conduct. However, they also should be able to provide you with further training in your area of specialization. Therefore, your application materials should reflect this balance (i.e., how your previous experience would make you an ideal candidate for the position and how they can contribute

to your career development). Similar to the internship application process, this is a time to sell yourself, so do not be shy! Be sure to emphasize any clinical experiences, research projects, publications, or grants that you have been part of, in order to highlight how well you would fit into their site.

### Interviewing

Your hard work has paid off. You have received multiple interviews. What do you need to know about these sites, and what questions should you ask? As a general rule, you want to know how this site will provide you with the opportunities you need to meet your career goals. If your main goal is to pursue a clinical career, then the site should provide you with enough supervised clinical hours to meet licensure requirements in that state and provide you with clinical training in your area of specialization. As licensure requirements vary from state to state, make sure that the fellowship would fulfill licensure requirements for the state in which you would like to be licensed (especially if it is a state different from the one in which the fellowship is located). Other questions to keep in mind: Who will be conducting the supervision, and how often? Will I have to pay for supervision? Do they provide services for a particular population, or is it a general clinical practice? Are there opportunities to stay on at the site after I receive licensure? Do the existing fellows/employees seem happy, or overworked?

If you are interested in a clinical/research or purely research fellowship, much of the information you need to obtain from the interview pertains to research productivity. For example, how much time per week is devoted to clinical and research activities? Of the time available for research, how much of that time is spent working on existing faculty projects, and how much time is available for you to work on your own research projects? How does this faculty member approach authorship decisions on manuscripts? When choosing a postdoctoral position, it is important to choose a site in which the faculty and current fellows are as productive as you would like to be. Therefore, you may want to ask the following questions: How many publications have previous fellows produced? How many previous fellows have applied for grants, and how many have been funded? How successful are faculty at receiving grants? In order to be productive on fellowship, you also need to be sure that you have adequate facilities—office space, computer access, library access—to carry out this research. If you are concerned about the number of clinical hours offered at a particular site, you may want to ask if there are opportunities to moonlight in order to obtain the necessary clinical hours for licensure.

If you are interested in eventually pursuing a faculty position at a college or university that

is less research-focused, then you may wish to know whether the fellowship provides opportunities to teach or supervise other trainees (e.g., undergraduate research assistants, interns, or graduate students). If no teaching opportunities are available at that particular site, then you may be able to serve as an adjunct professor teaching evening classes at a nearby college. Finally, more general issues to consider when interviewing include stipend, health insurance, whether time can be “set aside” to study for the national state licensure examination in psychology (Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology; EPPP) and start date. One question that often arises is whether you can start a fellowship if you have not yet defended your dissertation. The answer depends on the particular site. Some sites allow you to start your fellowship if you have not yet defended, but your clinical hours will not count toward licensure until you defend. However, other sites will not allow you

to start unless you have defended. Therefore, as a general rule, it is best to have defended before you start your fellowship, especially because you do not want to carry that burden while trying to adjust to a new position.

After you have survived the interview process, there is no ranking as in the internship application process. Therefore, you are free to communicate your interest to sites. As with internship interviews, it is appropriate to send a brief thank-you note or e-mail to express your continued interest in the site. Unlike the internship process, because of the lack of a match system you may receive offers from sites before you have heard back from other ones. Therefore, be aware that you may need to negotiate a time to let them know your decision, or you may need to pass on offers if you are willing to wait to hear back from preferred sites. However, once you have received and accepted an offer, you can negotiate a start date and rest easy knowing you

have secured a position for at least another year!

The postdoctoral search can be exciting and life changing. You will likely meet colleagues and professionals who will remain influences in your career for years to come. Thinking ahead about the particulars involved in the postdoctoral search will allow this process to unfold more smoothly than negotiating the path blindly. With some luck and preparation, you can maximize the likelihood of reaching a place that’s tailor-made for you.

### Reference

Clay, R. A. (2000). The postdoc trap. *Monitor on Psychology, 31*, 20-26.

ADDRESS CORRESPONDENCE TO Kristy Dalrymple (kristy\_dalrymple@brown.edu) or Megan M. Kelly (megan\_kelly@brown.edu).