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PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

BECOMING A PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENTIST: A SERIES TO SUCCESSFULLY APPLY TO GRAD SCHOOL AND HELP DIVERSIFY THE FIELD:

SESSION 3: INTERVIEWING WITH CONFIDENCE (PRE-SESSION VIDEO)

TRANSCRIPT

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Dr. Mitch Prinstein: Hi, I'm Mitch Prinstein, the American Psychological Association's Chief Science Officer and welcome to our next video in the series on how to become a psychological scientist applying to graduate school. This is a series where we're helping to diversify the field and walk you through step by step all of the aspects of the application process to doctoral programs in psychological science. Please look for our prior videos on top things to know as you apply to graduate school and how to write a compelling application essay.

In this video, we're going to be talking about interviewing with confidence. We're using a flipped format for these videos. First, you can watch these very brief videos to get an overview of the process with some specific tips. Then if you're interested, you can join us for a live Q&A session. Today's topic is going to be interviewing. In a very brief video, we're going to talk with you about the pre-interview process, how to schedule your interviews, and be prepared for a variety of different types of interviewing experiences, what it is that they're looking for from you on the interview experience and how to ask questions to maximize your ability to succeed.

Talk to you a little bit about what happens in the few hours after the interview is over and some things that you can do to help your chances. Let's dive right in by talking a little bit about the pre-interview. There are a remarkably large number of applications that get submitted to any one mentor to make a decision about her or his lab and which graduate student they want to take. Very often someone is only able to take one single graduate student for that year, but they may have dozens, if not hundreds of applications coming in to work in that lab.

If you have been contacted after you submitted your application, congratulations. That means that you have passed through the initial screen suggesting that your academic qualifications and your experiences are sufficient to make you seem like someone who will succeed as a doctoral-level student. You also have gotten through the shortlist indicating that your essay and your discussion of your research interests looks like a unique fit to what it is that the advisor is really interested in for having a graduate student come into their lab.

However, it's sometimes really, really hard to figure out as a faculty member which three students should be invited for an interview because you might even have a dozen or more people who have made it through that initial screen and that shortlist. Sometimes what faculty might do is schedule just a quick 5 to 15-minute Zoom call with you just to get a quick initial impression so they can decide which of maybe 10 or 12 people that seem like a good fit are the three that they should invite for an interview.

Be prepared for a pre-interview. Hopefully, you'll be given some heads up, although some advisors might just give you a phone call and ask you to talk right off the cuff. Hopefully, you'll be asked to schedule a time just for a few minutes to have a very brief Zoom interview with your faculty mentor or perhaps a graduate student in their lab. What's the purpose of this? Well, a pre-interview is just to make sure that what they're reading, and their personal statement is a good fit based on what you tell them on this pre-interview.

In other words, they might ask you, "Tell me just a little bit more about the kinds of research that you're interested in doing in graduate school or tell me how you see a fit to my lab." They might just be looking for some general social skills. Don't worry, it's okay if you're nervous. Everyone expects that, but just to make sure that they feel that you have a good fit and a good personality match. This is a good thing for you as well as for them. Remember that your graduate school mentor will not only be someone in your life every day for the next five years or so as a doctoral student but hopefully, also somebody that you're in touch with every single step of your career for the next 30 to 40 years.

Making a decision about that kind of relationship is really hard to do on just a brief interview so getting this extra data in a pre-interview or trying to get a sense of whether it seems like you blend well together is sometimes part of the goal. Yes, it is also the case that folks might ask their students to see whether there's anything else they can learn about you. Nothing intrusive invading your privacy, of course, but if you have public social media accounts, it would not be unusual for someone to discover or take a quick peek at what it is that you might be posting there to just get a general sense of first impressions about you. For that reason, you might want to think about whether to keep your settings public or private during this part of the application process.

It's really a good idea to be familiar with each advisor's work and because they might call you off the cuff, you might want to have a cheat sheet or something nearby just to remember a little bit about what their lab is doing and what some of the projects they might be engaging in that seem like a good fit for your interests. It's a really good idea to make sure that you're conveying that you're really excited about potentially working at that university and more importantly, in that faculty member's lab. Do keep an open mind because they might tell you about brand-new projects that haven't even been posted to their website and you want to react to those in a very authentic way if you do feel excited about those potential opportunities.

Now, if you are invited for an interview again, it might just be you and two other people who are now in the running for that one graduate student slot. If you are invited to come to an in-person interview, this is a pretty expensive process, you want to try and be there for the whole time. If you have many different interview invitations, congratulations, that's great but do keep in mind that it's hard to juggle all of those. If it's possible to be there for the entire day or if there's an event happening the next morning or the night before the main interview day, try and be there the whole time if you can.

There are formal interview times. Sometimes there might be a brunch or a dinner beforehand or a get-together among graduate students after the interview day, and those are important times as well. This can be really expensive so it's okay to ask explicitly about whether there are any ways that the program or the graduate school might offer reimbursements. Very often, the graduate school has those available, but you won't find them on the psychology department website. You need to ask about them or visit the graduate school of that university, where you might find some ways that you can get some of your expenses reimbursed.

Also, it's very common that you'll be invited to stay at a graduate student's house to sleep on a futon in their living room or something like that. If that's something you're comfortable with and that can save you some costs but if you're not comfortable with that, it's perfectly okay. No one is going to think that it's peculiar that you declined that opportunity. You need to do what makes you feel most comfortable and allows you to feel most prepared for the interview process.

Now, when you start the interview day, whether it's on Zoom or whether it's in-person, as I mentioned, there will be different types of interviews. Of course, you're going to meet with the primary mentor, and in that meeting you're really going to be talking probably at a fairly detailed level about which projects they have going on and exactly which kinds of research questions you might be interested in. It's okay, you don't have to have the title of your dissertation ready to go at the time of that interview, but you might want to be able to reflect specifically on what kinds of projects or ideas might seem of interest right now.

No one's going to hold you to it. When you get to graduate school months later if you've changed your mind a little bit or you have a little bit of a different sense of the areas that you're most interested in, that's okay but you want to demonstrate your ability to think scientifically in this interview with your primary mentor and show a connection to exactly the kinds of variables and questions that they're asking in their lab. Now, during your master's thesis period, you might find a very close match between your interests and what they're doing but if by the time you got to your dissertation, you branched out and did something just a little bit different, that's okay.

When you talk with your primary mentor in this interview, you can discuss a range of things with a recognition that some of these things you might do right away, and some might be the kinds of questions you'd like to ask as the years in your graduate program will progress. You're also likely going to meet with the mentor's graduate students. That might be over the course of a meal or at a party, or it might be a formal interview that you're

doing during the interview day, do know that the graduate students play a very big role in helping the mentor decide which student they should take.

You do want to make sure that you're on but obviously, this is a peer, so you're also natural and comfortable with these graduate students and you're asking them the kinds of questions that only they can tell you. What's the mentor like to work with? What's it like being in that department or in that community? What's the feel of the graduate program and what are the ways in which the graduate school fosters a sense of collaboration and collegiality? Those are things that the graduate students will be best at telling you about, and you can ask them directly.

Now, you may also be meeting with other faculty and graduate students during the interview process, which is fantastic, but you're not expected to know all about their research. Of course, you're applying to work in a specific lab or two, and if you're meeting with someone outside of those labs, it's perfectly appropriate to ask them just what they're working on and you're not expected to know. It is a good idea to express some interest in what they're working on and ask them some scholarly questions, even if it's not something that you would ultimately study yourself.

Again, you're trying to demonstrate that you can think scientifically about questions, and you'll be a good colleague to have in the department, even if you're not in their lab. As I mentioned, there are meals and social events. Do make sure that although alcohol may be served or there may be opportunities to cut back and the other graduate students that are there might be handling themselves in pretty casual ways, you are definitely still part of an interview process at that time so make sure you're behaving in the ways that you think reflect best the ways that you'll be seen professionally.

Now, when you get there, every interaction that you're engaging with, even with the administrative assistants who are helping to coordinate handling reimbursement receipts or showing you to the rooms that you're going to be to, they are all evaluating you. Very often they may be sending emails about their impressions of you during the interview day, right after they've had interactions with you. I'm not saying that's a freak you out. I know that's really scary, but I do want to mention it because it's a good idea to try and keep in mind the things that you're saying and doing and whether they give off the kinds of impressions that you want to.

I'm going to let you freeze your screen so that way you can capture what all of these look like and you can think about them a little bit later. Show that you're interested in science. Show that you can engage in good critical thinking and have great interpersonal skills. Analytical thinking and problem-solving skills are really helpful to demonstrate. You're open-minded to all kinds of ideas. You're going to be part of an intellectual environment and community. How will you engage in that community?

Show that you have some independence and interest in questions that you can generate by yourself. You would work well with others on a team. Take some initiative and volunteer to be helpful or part of a good team. Be a good team player and you're open to supervision and personal insight as well. These are the qualities that faculty say are the ones they're

looking for the most on the interview. Now, when you ask questions, and keep in mind you might be asking more questions on these interviews than you are being asked, so make sure you come with a long list of questions that you're going to be asking everyone that you interact with.

A lot of times when people ask questions, they ask very generic questions like, tell me about your mentor's style, or what are some of the things graduate students do after they finish this program? If you ask a generic question, you're very likely to get a generic answer. I have to say that from people that do a lot of interviews as the interviewer or the faculty member or even the graduate students who are being asked a lot of questions, it can get a little bit boring to answer the same question over and over and it'll feel dry, but you can change that very easily.

Simply talk a little bit in a preamble about why you're asking the question or what kinds of things you're interested in the most and you'll find that that allows folks to tailor their answer specifically to you and suddenly it doesn't feel like a dry generic interview anymore. It feels like a conversation with a lot of back and forth, and people will say, we really clicked, or that was really helpful. When you're doing so, you might say, I'm really excited about an academic career. Can you tell me a little bit about what kinds of careers people go to after they graduate?

People will say, "Oh well, in that case, I'm very excited to tell you all about our experiences for academia." Or, "I'm really excited about collecting data that uses this particular method. Can you tell me more about the projects that you're engaging in with that method?" Then they'll tailor their answers to you in a way that's very specific to that interest they know you have and it's going to feel a lot better. Now, I know when you're interviewing it's going to be very common to be really in your head, maybe even with a flat affects because you're thinking so hard about how you're coming across or what the next question to ask is but that can be a common mistake.

Don't forget to give a follow-up to what you hear and say, wow, that sounds really exciting, or that's exactly what I was hoping to hear. That's what I'm looking for. That sounds like a great fit for me for graduate school. Remember that the faculty are nervous too. They only have three people to choose from and they want somebody to say yes. You showing some enthusiasm and some interest, not overboard, not desperate, but some general and appropriate level of enthusiasm to what you hear is a great way to reassure the faculty that you remain interested in their lab.

Now, they're going to make decisions in a variety of different ways. Some will be able to make decisions within just a few days after the interview process is over, but some won't and that doesn't mean that they don't like you or that you're not going to get an offer. Some departments just have a very long and thorough process by which they have to demonstrate that they have the funding, or the department has given that faculty a TA slot to fill and it might take weeks until they're able to get all the paperwork together and officially make you an offer.

It's perfectly appropriate to send a note to the faculty to say, I remain interested in the position very much. Just wanted to find out about your timeline. No pressure. Just wanted to learn when I should be on the lookout for some information. Again, as long as you're doing that appropriately with some deference to how busy the faculty are, it's totally okay to ask those questions but don't assume that just because one lab gave out their offers that you should be getting offers for another lab at the same school at the same time.

Different faculty, different funding streams, very different timelines. Now, you might find out that you're getting an offer and congratulations. That's terrific. In a future series, we'll talk about which offers you might want to consider accepting, but you might find out that you haven't and they've given it to somebody else. That person very well may be getting other offers and you are very likely to get a call at any minute saying that you're next up on the list. Don't feel bad if that's the case. Very, very many people don't get the very-- They're not the first person selected, but they end up going to that graduate school anyway and working with that mentor anyway because they were the number two pick or even the number three pick. They do fantastically and it's fine.

I have to tell you, the graduate students all interviewing are all fantastic. The difference between taking one versus another has nothing to do with how great you are. It really can be even just down to idiosyncratic factors or factors that really suggest that you are all tied in being just as good. Don't feel bad if you're on the waitlist or you're told that you will get an offer if the person who received one first declines. That still means you have a great shot of getting in.

Now, once all those offers are out, folks have until April 15th. Those are graduate school rules across all disciplines. It takes a long time to wait, but you might be waiting months to find out whether that other person said yes or no. Hang on. If you're feeling comfortable doing so until you are sure you're making the right decision. At some point before April 15th, someone will have said yes or no and you will find out for sure whether you're able to get in.

Now, if you get the offer that you wanted, you do not have to wait till April 15th. Say yes right away if you're feeling comfortable doing so and that speeds up the process for everybody. Just a final quick word about thank you notes. These interviews are really hard to schedule and coordinate and everyone's taken a lot of time out of their busy day to get to know you. You might end up working with this person for a postdoc or you might interact with them as a colleague and a collaborator one day so keep in mind, no matter what you thought of the school or what you think of the mentor, a nice little thank you email is always a nice idea.

It's also a good time to express your enthusiasm once again and say, I really enjoyed meeting with you. Thank you so much for taking the time. I loved everything I heard about your lab, and I would love the opportunity to work with you. Let me know if you have any questions. I'm happy to continue the dialogue if you'd like. Everyone will always appreciate a quick thank you and it's a good idea for you to send one by email. You don't have to send one to every single person you met with. You can just say, please pass along my thanks to the others that I met with on interview day.

You can join us for questions and answers or access our prior videos, which are on this YouTube channel. Keep a lookout on *APA Science Spotlight*. Subscribe to our newsletter. It's free. It's not just for APA members and you will hear about our live Q&A sessions on this topic and on future topics in our becoming a psychological scientist series. Thank you so much.

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