

# **An Applicant's Guide to Research-Oriented Postdoctoral Fellowships**

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I am a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Illinois at Chicago. I completed my PhD in clinical psychology at Temple University in 2016. I'm writing to provide one perspective on different types of research-oriented postdoctoral fellowships that are available, since finding a postdoc and understanding the different types of positions can be confusing.

As a brief caveat, this is not an exhaustive list of information about postdocs, so I recommend checking with other people you know who may have had different experiences. This also is targeted for people who are aiming to have primarily research-oriented careers. Therefore, I do not consider full-time clinical postdocs (in which the majority of your time is spent doing clinical work) here in detail, nor do I consider sub-disciplines (e.g., neuropsychology) in which there is a postdoc match process.

**1. Investigator-Funded Research Postdoc.** This is probably the most common type of research postdoc, one in which the PI provides funding via a grant (e.g., an R01) for you to work in his/her lab. The specific duties of the job may vary but typically involve data collection and analysis, manuscript preparation, assistance in managing the lab, and helping the PI with grant writing. There are several ways you might find out about these positions. PIs often will post advertisements on listservs (e.g., SSCP, SRP, APA Divisions, ABCT), or they jobs may be listed on the Wiki Psych Jobs or APS postdoc exchange websites (links below). However, not all postdoc jobs are posted. Some investigators may even have funding that they would choose to use on the right postdoc but would not advertise such a position if they do not need to fill it. Alternatively, PIs might be expecting to have a vacancy for a postdoc position coming up even if they have not officially posted an ad yet. So, it pays to do some networking to find out if you might be able to make a position work with a PI whose work interests you. You could work through your graduate mentor's contacts (e.g., asking your mentor to contact PIs you're interested in but do not know, if your advisor knows them), or even cold-email people to express interest. If you have a strong research match with a PI at the location in which you are completing your clinical internship, this may give you a foot in the door to obtain a postdoc should the PI have funding when your internship ends. (For some research-oriented internship applicants, consideration of whether internship sites have possible research mentors with postdoc funding could influence internship rankings. Among other reasons, it is nice not to have to move after a year of internship!)

**2. National Research Service Award Individual Postdoctoral Fellowship (F32).** A second form of research postdoc is the F32/NRSA grant. These grants pay for your salary for up to three years of postdoc. They are designed to "enhance the research training of promising postdoctoral candidates who have the potential to become productive, independent investigators in scientific health-related research fields relevant to the missions of the participating NIH Institutes." Applicants often take a new angle in mining a PI's existing data while obtaining new relevant training. These grants can be a great way to get the additional research training you need before starting an independent research career. They also can provide good training to set you up to apply for an NIH K award, if you don't think you will be ready to submit a K award in

the first year or so after your internship. One major benefit of the F32 is that for the most part, your time should be protected to work on the project you proposed and to acquire the skills you need. In contrast, in investigator-funded postdocs there may be more pressure to work as an employee of the PI, doing administrative tasks that are not always oriented toward your career development. In theory, for an F32 you could apply to work with any PI (at any institution) who is willing to serve as your mentor on the grant, which gives you considerable flexibility. The difficult thing about F32s is the timing, and the need to plan well in advance. If you start thinking about submitting an F32 during your internship year, most likely you would need to submit in the first half of the year (e.g., by the December deadline) in order to find out if your score on the first round will be fundable in time to start a postdoc on July 1 (depending on when your internship ends). If your F32 isn't funded on the first round but you want to resubmit, you may have a gap between the end of your internship and the start of the grant, if it gets funded the second time around, and you would have to find some way to pay your salary for that gap (or go unpaid until you find out about your revision score, which is a risky proposition). The safest way to apply for an F32 probably is to first obtain an investigator-funded research postdoc (as I described above), and then to apply for the F32 knowing that you have the investigator-funded postdoc as a safety net in the event that your F32 is not funded (or if it is not funded on the first round). To find out more about F32s, you can ask around in your professional network to see if you know anyone who has applied for or received one. You also can check out the NIH Reporter website and search for individuals who have received F32s from the institutes you're interested in (e.g., NIMH, NIDA, etc.) to get a sense of what kinds of things have been funded: <https://projectreporter.nih.gov/reporter.cfm>. For more information about the F32, see <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PA-16-307.html>.

**3. Institutional National Research Service Award (T32).** The T32 is another form of postdoc that is a grant that an institution receives for the purpose of training individuals in research in areas in which NIH has specified that there is a shortage of young investigators. To obtain these positions, the applicant applies to the institution, rather than applying to NIH. I have heard that it often helps to have established a relationship with the mentor for the grant. Perhaps for this reason, many individuals who receive T32 postdocs had been working at the institution already before they received the fellowship. For example, some clinical internship sites also hold T32 grants, which allows some interns to transition from internship into the T32 postdoctoral fellowship, particularly if the intern was able to establish a relationship with the mentor by working on a research project together during the internship year. Although not necessarily stated explicitly, institutions seem to use T32 grants to transition psychologist trainees from interns to postdocs to faculty members. In many cases, individuals who successfully obtain a T32 position plan to write a K award application, which facilitates the transition to faculty if the K is funded. Some T32s may also involve clinical training components or providing research training in the contexts of treatment settings.

**4. Foundation Fellowships.** There also are a number of opportunities to have postdoctoral fellowships funded by private research foundations that are funded by donors. For example, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has postdoctoral research fellowships that pay for your salary for two years at an institution in which you have a research mentor: <https://afsp.org/our-work/research/grant-information/>. The Klingenstein Third Generation Foundation also provides some funding for postdocs in the areas of child depression, ADHD, and

access to care: [http://www.ktgf.org/fellowship\\_prog.html](http://www.ktgf.org/fellowship_prog.html). These types of applications also take some time for planning as they may be due in the fall in order to allow enough time for review of applications prior to July 1 start dates. It is worth keeping an eye out for these types of opportunities.

**5. VA MIRECC fellowship.** 26 VA sites offer this research-oriented fellowship, and it's a great fit for people who are aiming for VA-based research careers. You can learn more here: [http://www.mirecc.va.gov/mirecc\\_fellowship.asp](http://www.mirecc.va.gov/mirecc_fellowship.asp) (Credit to: Dr. Ann Marie Roepke)

### **Other issues to consider:**

**What is your ultimate career goal?** Your ultimate goal for your career (e.g., a tenure-track faculty position) should influence what type of postdoc you take. If you want to obtain a faculty job but you have not published much, you may want to seek a postdoc in which you will have time to publish or in which the PI will allow you to publish with his/her data. If you already have substantial publication experience but want to learn a new skill set to use in your ultimate job, look for postdocs that will allow you to do something new while building on your existing skills, rather than continuing on in an area in which you already have demonstrated competency. If you want to work in a Psychiatry department, in some cases postdocs may provide an opportunity to establish relationships with a mentor and to apply for training grants such as K awards that would facilitate transition to faculty at the same institution. These are factors to consider when selecting postdoc.

**Do you want to obtain licensure?** Most states require supervised post-doctoral clinical work prior to being eligible for licensure. If you want to be licensed, if you choose to take a research postdoc, you will want to find out about how much time is available for obtaining the required clinical hours for licensure. You also may want to know whether you can use your regular working hours to do clinical work, or whether your PI expects that all of your clinical work will happen outside of typical work hours (which makes for long work days). Often, this is negotiable, as PIs understand the desire to obtain licensure, as long as you fulfill your employment obligations.

### **Additional resources:**

APS Postdoc Exchange – aggregates psychology postdoc job

ads: <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/post-doc-exchange>

Wiki Psych Jobs – also aggregates psychology postdoc job ads:

<http://psychjobsearch.wikidot.com/#toc17>

Other postdoc guides that may be helpful (for full disclosure, most of these I found only after writing the above):

[http://www.appic.org/Portals/0/downloads/Postdoc\\_Guide\\_Forand\\_Applebaum.pdf](http://www.appic.org/Portals/0/downloads/Postdoc_Guide_Forand_Applebaum.pdf)

<http://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/07-08/postdoc.aspx>

<http://www.abct.org/Resources/?m=mResources&fa=postJobs>

<http://www.apa.org/education/grad/post-fellow.aspx>