

Board Certification in Psychology: Is It Really Necessary?

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This article poses the question of whether specialty board certification in psychology is truly necessary. The article reviews the basic tenets of board certification and why it should become a requirement beyond the level of independent state or provincial licensing. In addition, the article presents some of the reasons why psychologists may have been reluctant to pursue board certification, as well as some of the pitfalls encountered in the process of becoming certified. Further discussion illuminates the need for psychologists to adhere to rigid requirements for credentialing and not to become prey to ersatz or so-called vanity boards.

By the time psychologists complete their formal education and training, the challenge of facing yet another hurdle beyond acquiring their state or provincial licensing in psychology is not likely to be embraced with much passion. Typically, psychologists who wish to practice independently spend 4 years in undergraduate school and 2 years in a master's program, plus 3–4 years of study at the doctoral level—all in addition to a year or more of internship and one or more years of postdoctoral training. It is subsequent to the postdoctoral training that individuals usually become eligible to sit for the Examination for the Professional Practice of Psychology (EPPP), after completing a comprehensive application form and documenting their clinical hours of training, education, and supervisory experience accumulated on the doctoral level. It goes without saying that placing additional credentialing and certification hurdles beyond this point is less than desirable, particularly if psychologists are convinced that such a certification is not necessary in their profession. Moreover, many in the field of psychology have become disillusioned with the concept of board certification, believing it simply to be “icing on a cake that needs no further sweetening.”

But now, more than ever, specialty board certification for psychologists is an important aspect of their credentialing, regardless of their employment, particularly because licensing for psychologists, which was originally designed as an entry-level criterion, is essentially a generic credential, as with medicine and surgery. For example, medical students submit for their licensing examination in three parts. The first two parts are administered during their second and third years of medical school, and the last part is administered at the end of their first year of residency, at which

time they then become licensed by their local state or province. They must then complete 3–6 years of residency training in their chosen area of specialization (e.g., psychiatry, internal medicine), which includes one internship year before they can be considered trained to work in their chosen field. Subsequently, they must also apply for their specialty board certification in order to be certified upon completion of their residency training, because their license to practice typically reads “medicine and surgery.” Similarly, most states in the United States, as well as most Canadian provinces, do not license psychologists as either clinical or counseling psychologists per se but instead issue generic licenses, as is done in the field of medicine (Dattilio & Gordon, 2000), and they do not license individuals in any particular specialty area (Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards [ASPPB], 2000). Consequently, it is the responsibility of the individual psychologist to obtain credentials that reflect his or her specialty training and qualify that person as competent in his or her stated field. Thus, specialty board certification has become an essential step in assuring both consumers and other professionals that one has met the qualifications to practice in a particular area of specialization. It was also for this reason that the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology was developed so that third-party payers could easily identify clinical psychologists in the field.

The concept of board certification, however, is not a new one. One of the first certifying boards for psychology was the American Board of Examiners in Professional Psychology (ABEPP), which was established on April 23, 1947, as a separately incorporated body replacing the American Psychological Association Committee. This committee had been expressly organized to consider the formation of a credentialing body for individual psychologists (Bent, Packard, & Goldberg, 1999).

Much like that of physicians, the board certification of psychologists was designed to provide credentialing over and above that which was provided by the American Psychological Association and individual state and provincial licensing boards and to issue a certificate of proficiency that would distinguish between basic training and more advanced levels of competence. (For further details, see the excellent article by Bent et al., 1999.) As Bent et al. pointed out, board certification was also initially devised as a way to exclude charlatans and unethical practitioners from the ranks of legitimate professionals who offer their services to the public.

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Surprisingly, the number of individual psychologists seeking board certification has remained disappointingly low. According to statistics provided by the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP), only 3,303 psychologists in the United States and Canada are currently board certified—that is, only a small fraction of the psychologists who are currently licensed to practice. For example, on the basis of statistics reported in 2000 by ASPPB, the estimated number of licensed psychologists in the United States and Canada is 101,518. If we compare this number to the reported number of those who were certified in 2000 by the ABPP (3,303), this equates to less than 3.5%.

There are several possible explanations for why so few psychologists become board certified. One is the high cost of an application and examination, which includes an initial, nonrefundable fee of \$100, an additional practice sample fee of \$200, and finally an examination fee of \$400. This is not to mention the enormous effort that must be expended in documenting years of education, training, and so forth, as well as the time spent on preparing for the examination and eventually traveling to the examination location. For senior-level psychologists, this can become complicated, especially if previous supervisors are deceased. Another factor is discouragement owing to the large number of applicants who fail the examination, with the pass rate for ABPP candidates falling somewhere in the range of two thirds to four fifths (Bent et al., 1999).

In addition, many professionals view board certification as “elitist” and as an unnecessary credential. This perception suggests that such certification may have more of an “intellectual” connotation than it does any practical utility. In addition, by the time one has achieved a doctoral degree, state or provincial licensure, and 3–5 years of postdoctoral experience (thus becoming eligible to sit for a board certification exam), completing such an application process may be viewed as just another arduous, time-consuming hurdle. Allocating adequate study time, submitting to a grueling examination, and risking potential failure typically add up to something that most professionals would like very much to avoid, especially if they do not believe that it is necessary.

However, as the field of psychology becomes more specialized, as has the field of medicine, specialty board certification is likely to be among the requirements of an increasing number of entities, especially in the areas of neuropsychology, clinical, forensic, and health psychology (Belar & Jeffrey, 1995). For example, some hospitals and institutions now inquire into whether applicants are board certified, and some, albeit few, offer raises and bonuses as incentives to achieve board certification. In fact, military psychologists who maintain board certification are now remunerated accordingly (Packard, 2000). Moreover, there is some research that suggests that board certification may induce psychologists to become more involved in certain areas that they normally would be less inclined to pursue, such as neuropsychology and forensic practice (Sweet & Moberg, 1999; Sweet, Moberg, & Suchy, 2000).

Expert witnesses are also increasingly being questioned in both state and federal courts as to their specific certification in their areas of expertise, a practice that became particularly evident with the decision in the case of *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals* (1993) regarding expert testimony.

On the basis of statistics compiled by the ASPPB, some 28 states in the United States and 9 provinces in Canada recognize ABPP board certification as a partial waiver for licensure in the

respective state or province provided that the applicant already maintains a license to practice psychology in a state or province (ASPPB, 2000). This credential, along with the newly developed Certificate of Professional Qualification (CPQ), allows psychologists to become licensed much more easily in other jurisdictions in which they may choose to practice. The CPQ is intended to facilitate licensure reciprocity and mobility and is now accepted by 12 jurisdictions, with another 8 reporting that they are in the process of making the rule or statute changes necessary to accomplish this goal.

Holding an ABPP certificate is one of the main threshold requirements listed under “Option 2” in qualifying for the CPQ. This option may be especially attractive to senior psychologists, who might have difficulty documenting their passing of the EPPP exam with a score of at least 70%. Although initially the Option 2 requirement recognized inclusion in the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology or the Canadian Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology as an alternative to possessing an ABPP credential, the ASPPB Board of Directors voted to eliminate that option as of December 31, 2001, but will continue to waive certain CPQ requirements for holders of ABPP specialty certificates. This was done, in part, because many licensing boards require oral examinations and in further recognition of the value of ABPP’s rigorous credential review and examination-based approach to specialty certification. Because board certification is a primary source for the documentation of education, internship, and postdoctoral experience, such a credential can serve as a cost-effective measure for psychology boards to use in streamlining admission to licensure and so automatically qualify applicants in their areas of expertise (DeLeon, 2000).

With the onset of managed care and psychologists’ increasing presence in such areas as the legal arena, there has been a growing need for them to be officially qualified in their various specialties. Unfortunately, as this need for specialty certification has become clear, there has also been a proliferation of so-called vanity boards, which require little more than the filing of a basic application and the paying of a fee. Consequently, the credentialing review is forfeited, and board certification is granted without an examination.

Psychologists need to beware of the many advertisements offering board certification in various specialties and subspecialties without a rigorous credential review and examination, raising the question of whether being awarded such certification is ethical and professional. In fact, a recent article in *The Wall Street Journal* (MacDonald, 1999) raised the question of whether the actual advertising of such boards might not be considered fraudulent and deceptive. The codes of ethics of most state and provincial psychology licensure boards clearly indicate that psychologists are not to promote themselves as holding certain credentials without undergoing proper review and examination. Thus, referring to oneself as being board certified in a specialty area indicates to the consumer that one has been duly qualified by a legitimate body and has passed a rigorous credential review, as well as a legitimate written or oral examination.

Psychologists who seek professional help themselves generally assume that their health care providers maintain credentials that are based on passing an examination. For example, most of us expect our physicians to be board certified in their respective fields of medicine on the basis of a thorough credentials review and

examination. Would we feel the same sense of reassurance if we were to learn that our physician or health care professional earned board certification in his or her specialty by simply completing a brief application form and paying a fee? Undoubtedly, the answer would be a resounding "No!"

Who Certifies Psychologists?

Recently, a number of organizations have appeared on the scene that offer board certification for psychologists and psychotherapists. The oldest and most recognized board in the United States is the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP). During the late 1940s when this board came into existence, the first 1,086 diplomates were "grandfathered." Subsequently, all candidates were required to submit to both written and oral examinations. Today, only an extensive oral examination is administered, in addition to a case presentation by the candidate. This model organization oversees 11 psychology specialty boards. Many states as well as Canadian provinces will extend full or partial reciprocity for licensing to those psychologists who are certified by the ABPP and already hold a license in another state or province. The ABPP diploma has also been recognized by judicial decisions, regulations, and statutes in some jurisdictions as relevant to standards of professional competence in the practice of forensic psychology. Although this is certainly not the only board that provides certification, it does follow model procedures for doing so. Thus, whereas it might not seem fair to single out one or two boards as especially meritorious, it must be noted in this respect that there are several caveats for which psychologists should be aware when considering board certification.

1. Psychologists are strongly urged to question advertisements by boards that offer ongoing grandfathering periods without examination and by those that are not recognized by state or provincial psychology boards. In fact, psychologists who succumb to the lure of such advertisements may actually risk being challenged under certain circumstances, such as in a court of law, for having exhibited questionable behavior or for credentials that are less than legitimate. In a court case, this is most likely to occur during depositions or on cross-examination, particularly if the psychologist is serving in the capacity of an expert witness (Dattilio & Sadoff, 2001).

2. It is highly recommended that psychologists rigorously investigate the merits and certification procedures of boards whose offers they feel inclined to pursue. When seeking board certification, one should be able to make informed decisions before devoting time, energy, and money to completing the credentialing process. At any given time, there may be several organizations offering board certification. Some important questions that psychologists should consider asking these boards before deciding on one or the other are listed in the Appendix.

3. Psychologists may also want to take note of some of the standards of the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA)¹, which accredits the certifying organizations themselves. For example, the commission requires certifying bodies to demonstrate adequate resources and staff knowledge for ongoing certification and recertification activities. The ABPP adheres to such resources for certifying all candidates.

4. Credible certifying entities should also be willing to provide descriptive materials on the procedures used in the construction

and validation of the examination, as well as on all eligibility requirements and determination procedures, together with a comprehensive summary or outline of the information, knowledge, or functions covered by the exam (Foxhall, 2000).

The Future of Board Certification

As Bent et al. (1999) wrote, "it is not the exceptional specialist who should be board certified, but [it is] the specialist who is not board certified [who] should be the exception" (p. 14). If we are to keep pace with other health care professionals and maintain the dignity of our professional education and training, it is essential that we continue to examine what it is that helps us to grow as professionals and enhances the practice of psychology, now and for the future. This is not meant to imply that professional psychologists who do not maintain board certification are any less professional. But it does mean that we must ask ourselves whether we feel that we have obtained the credentials that best reflect our true knowledge and expertise in the field. Board certification in the psychological specialties seems to be the most obvious means of confirming our stated expertise, and as such, board certification is likely to become the norm in the future credentialing of all psychologists, particularly as areas of specialization become more defined.

Is Board Certification Necessary?

In the final analysis, the answer to the original question in this article is that board certification in psychology is neither a necessary nor an essential credential to have in order to practice psychology at this time. State or provincial licensing technically provides a minimum standard of performance in the field for independent practice, which appears to be satisfactory to most (i.e., the general public, third-party payers, etc.). However, if we are to take a serious stance on protecting our future profession and our position in the field of mental health delivery, board certification may well become not only necessary but imperative as a way to define advanced qualifications and standards of excellence as the field of psychology continues to expand.

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Appendix

Important Questions to Ask Boards

How long have the organization and board been in existence?

Is the organization nonprofit?

Is the organization affiliated with a well-known entity within the profession, such as a national professional association?

How many individuals are currently certified by this organization?

Is there a certification examination? If so, was a practice analysis (also called a task analysis or job analysis) conducted as part of the development of that exam?

If there is a written exam, what is the name of the examination company that guided its development?

Who are the professionals who provided the expertise on the subject matter covered by the examination?

Does the organization require those who are certified to obtain continuing education credits in order to maintain certification?

Who are the members of the board of directors and what are their professional affiliations?

Who is the organization's executive director and what are his or her professional background and credentials?

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¹ The NCCA is the accreditation body of the National Organization for Competency Assurance (www.noca.org/ncca.htm).

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