The Role of the American Board of Professional Psychology in Professional Mobility

John D. Robinson
Howard University College of Medicine/Hospital

Corey J. Habben
Walter Reed Army Medical Center

This article describes the role of certification by the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP) in easing the process by which psychologists move beyond their original jurisdictional boundaries to practice psychology. Meeting the requirements for licensure or certification in the various jurisdictions can be a difficult task because these requirements vary considerably from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Other mechanisms that are available to facilitate this process include the Certificate of Professional Qualification in Psychology issued by the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards and certification by the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology. The ABPP certificate/diploma has been regarded by many state psychological associations and state boards of psychology as an appropriate way in which to recognize psychologists who are eligible for licensure/certification in a jurisdiction because of the examination requirements for board certification.

Professional mobility of psychologists, both physically and virtually via telecommunications, is an important issue in our field. Our profession has become highly mobile; more than 1,000 colleagues annually request a transfer of their licensing examination scores to a new state (DeLeon, 2000). Yet crossing the state, provincial, and territorial boundaries to practice can be a difficult process. By 1977, each U.S. state, the District of Columbia, each Canadian province, and each U.S. territory had laws, rules, and regulations that governed the practice of psychology. These requirements for licensure or certification vary considerably from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Fortunately, there are existing mechanisms available to facilitate this process. One is the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP).

The American Board of Examiners in Professional Psychology (ABEPP) was established in 1947 and was later renamed the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP). Board certification is offered in 12 specialty areas, for which an extensive written and oral examination is required. This examination requirement for the ABPP diploma can serve as the basis to waive some or all examination requirements for state licensure. Currently, 33 jurisdictions including the District of Columbia recognize ABPP board certification as meeting all or some of the jurisdiction’s requirements for licensure (Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards [ASPPB], 2002). Because of the widely held respect for the ABPP diploma/board certification, it is recognized by the U.S. government as the only board certification that allows psychologists in the uniformed services (the Air Force, Army, Navy, and U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps) to be eligible for professional pay increases. It is also recognized by the state of Missouri for providing pay bonuses for state-employed psychologists who are diplomates/board certified.

When ABPP was originally established, its goal was to develop and administer an examination for psychologists that would assess advanced competency in special areas of professional psychology and to provide a professional credential that exceeds the requirements of state and provincial licensure (Bent, Packard, & Goldberg, 1999). The four areas at that time were clinical psychology, school psychology, counseling psychology, and industrial–organizational psychology (I/O). Later, the specialty areas were expanded to include clinical health psychology, rehabilitation psychology, psychoanalysis, forensic psychology, family psychology, clinical neuropsychology, behavioral psychology, and group psychology. Industrial/organizational psychology was also recently renamed organizational and business consulting psychology.

State Psychological Associations (SPA) issued lists of approved psychologists who, by the criteria established by the SPA, were considered qualified or competent to offer services to the public. These criteria frequently did not require an examination. Most SPA recognized the ABEPP/ABPP diploma as meeting the requirements for that state. The ABPP was the only national organization that “certified” psychologists as competent to offer these services to the public on a national level based on an examination with uniform national standards. Later, states began to pass laws...
authorizing the regulation of the practice of psychology and issued guidelines, regulations, and rules. They were also authorized to develop and administer examinations for this purpose. Several states included in their statutes, regulations, and/or rules that the holders of the ABPP diploma would be exempted from all or part of their state’s examination. This was later expanded to include exemption from the national standard licensure examination, known as the Examination for the Professional Practice of Psychology.

In more than half of the United States, board-certified (ABPP) psychologists are declared “board eligible” for licensure either by statute or by board policy. This means that the candidate is either granted a license after the application is approved or that the candidate may be required to take some form of the local examination. Because all 62 state and provincial licensure laws have their own licensure laws and requirements, this enables a board-certified psychologist to have a more mobile license.

Board certification by ABPP is perhaps the oldest accepted mechanism by which to achieve professional mobility. Unlike licensure, which serves as a credential for generalist knowledge in psychology, board certification by ABPP offers credentialing in 12 specialty areas. Awarding of the diploma is based on examination (oral and written) in a psychological specialty area and is not merely a review of credentials, as it is with many so-called vanity boards. Dattilio (2002) highlighted that board certification, although still not necessary for independent practice, is becoming increasingly essential as the profession continues to expand. Today’s psychologist is more likely to specialize and has three times as many specialties from which to choose as the psychologist of 2 decades ago (Drum & Blom, 2001).

The procedure for requesting that ABPP notify a state board of psychology is quite simple. The board-certified (diplomate) psychologist contacts the ABPP central office by phone, e-mail, or regular mail to inform the office that he or she has applied to a certain jurisdiction for licensure. At that point, the ABPP central office will send a letter to that state board stating the applicant’s name, ABPP specialty or specialties, diploma number(s), award date(s), and that the applicant is in good standing with the ABPP. Good standing is determined by the psychologist’s signature on the yearly Attestation Statement that the applicant completes for the ABPP. The state board of psychology may, in turn, check the applicant’s credentials with the National Practitioner Data Bank/Healthcare Integrity and Protection Data Bank, the ASPPB, or other organizations that maintain a disciplinary data bank. Applicants who hold the ABPP board certification are not usually asked to provide transcripts, supervisors’ statements, verification of internship training, and so forth. However, requesting these documents is at the discretion of the psychology board. The ABPP does not charge the board-certified psychologist for this letter. Data are not available at this time on the number of ABPP-certified psychologists who request this service yearly.

There are still other mobility mechanisms available. The Certificate of Professional Qualification in Psychology (CPQ) issued by the ASPPB is recognized by at least 30 jurisdictions including the District of Columbia and 7 Canadian provinces (ASPPB, 2002). Endorsement by the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology, which was established in 1973, can also assist in providing professional mobility. In fact, registrants of the National Register can be accepted as candidates for the ABPP examination in some specialty areas. Nevertheless, the use of board certification by the ABPP by state psychology boards can provide a vital mechanism for professional mobility through endorsement that serves to meet a nationally recognized standard for mobility of licensure among jurisdictions.

References


Received October 8, 2002
Revision received April 25, 2003
Accepted May 22, 2003

Instructions to Authors

For Instructions to Authors, please consult the June issue of the volume or visit www.apa.org/journals/pro and click on Submission Guidelines.