

The Emperor Has No Clothes

I have long believed that the governing authority for those who get licensed to practice as a psychologist rested with each State Licensing Board. These boards work to protect the public by reviewing one's academic credentials, degrees, and university accreditation. Back in the day, due to many states sunsetting their licensing laws, the APA assisted the boards by establishing agreed upon guidelines. The APA also started a school accreditation process to develop a core curriculum of study such that, regardless of the school from which one graduated, there was a uniformity in training and education. This was a growing and developing process requiring graduate programs to make changes in areas of specialty, curriculum, and, at times, personnel. In my own program, I served as a student representative and liaised with APA support personnel. It clearly was a learning experience permitting me to design my course of studies to meet their requirements. However, the process took time and our program was not finally approved until after I graduated. Once approved, the licensing process presented few if any hurdles for the applicant.

For those of us who graduated from programs not then APA approved, the process of licensure was more arduous in that the applicant had to provide evidence of the "psychological equity" of their program and core curriculum with those APA approved. This required documentation of instructors' credentials; course syllabi and grades; and evidence of an acceptable internship. After evidence of the program's equity had been approved, one would then be permitted to sit for the National Licensure Exam and be required to complete (in my day) two years of post doctoral supervision. Once licensed, the psychologist is then afforded the same rights and privileges as all licensed psychologists.

In time, more programs were accredited and the bickering between PhD's and PsyDs subsided. If you don't remember that, then you are just too young. It seems uncommon to find programs that are not accredited. Sunsetting became an issue of the past and it seemed like we were one big happy family. However, with so many more students attending graduate schools in psychology, a new problem emerged. There aren't enough APA approved internship sites available for everyone. This is a major concern for the APA as is evidenced in numerous articles and letters in the Monitor. Since this too will take some time to correct, does completing an internship from a non APA approved site compromise or undermine the overall integrity of one's having a degree from an APA accredited program? At first glance, you would not think so since your committee would have approved the alternate internship.

But things are not always as they seem, not even the "happy family" I once envisioned. Over the years, someone decided to establish an "exclusionary hiring practice" which, on the surface, does not seem discriminatory, especially to those who have more recently graduated than myself. This practice requires that "applications for employment will be accepted only from those who have graduated from APA approved programs and have APA approved internships." These ads run in the Monitor and other professional publications. Is this a subtle way of telling the state licensing boards they are incompetent in determining who can be licensed to practice and participate in equal employment opportunities? Has a new professional bias emerged since we aren't picking on PsyDs anymore? Who started this policy? Are you not aware that Human Resource and Personnel Managers who are unfamiliar with "training and education in psychology" read these advertisements and conclude they are the gospel for competence? Does APA support this exclusionary practice? Did you take into consideration there aren't enough approved internship sites to support all the students?

I am aware of a Psychologist whose degree is from an APA approved program but, due to the APA internship shortage, was approved to intern elsewhere. She graduated and is now licensed. She came into the Navy and deployed with our marines and sailors to Afghanistan. Now looking for employment she has been denied opportunity to even apply for many jobs since her internship was not APA approved. Can you imagine that? While this may seem like a simple fix, it is not. Having the APA write a letter on her behalf for each job she may apply to, now or in the future, is not the solution. Putting the reliance for who is qualified to practice and qualified to apply for work in this field back on the State Licensing Boards is more realistic. If those "biased professionals" who started this mess wish to change the standard for licensure, then take that up with the APA who can influence the state licensing boards. Personnel managers do not look at shades of grey, they don't have the time. They look at the black and white of who can or can not apply, and that is that. How many other psychologists have been affected by this exclusionary practice?

Well, if you haven't figured it out by now, I am one. I am 30 years post doctoral with years before at the masters level. I have had a broad based career practicing primarily in the clinical and health psychology realm. Currently, I am the senior psychologist at a Naval Hospital on a marine base. I have training and certifications in many specialties among which PTSD has been for a while now. I have supervised nearly 20 APA psychologists whose supervision by me was never questioned by their State Licensing Boards or the ABPP committees who later awarded their diplomates. If I am licensed in good standing and have the experience for the job, why then should my application for employ be dismissed? If you read the Equal Opportunity Policy of the Monitor's Advertising Guidelines, the standard rhetoric is there, as it should be. Read on and you will find that requiring applicants be "recent PhD's" is potentially discriminatory on the basis of age. Why then is demanding APA accreditation of all applicants any less "potentially" discriminatory on the basis of age?

Why, after thirty years of independent licensure, are my credentials no longer adequate to even get an application accepted for consideration? I can only assume there is support on the part of the APA, or these ads would not be published. Has APA grown so big they don't monitor for the interests of the individual psychologist? They stand up for so many other causes, how about standing for one that impacts their own members? Has APA suddenly assumed the authority of State Licensing Boards?

In all honesty, I have no interest in competing with younger psychologists in the job market at this point in my life. I would love to retire and do a part time practice on my own. In my case, time will render this a moot issue and no one will even remember "this old whining doc". But that does not change the circumstance that NOW affects so many others. Having come out of the 60's, I stood for many causes and can honestly say, this is just plain wrong. "The Emperor Has No Clothes."

Michael Cooney, Ph.D.
Licensed Practicing Psychologist
Camp Lejeune, NC