

Promoting Board Certification
Frank M. Dattilio, Ph.D., ABPP

During the late 1970s while I was completing my graduate studies, one of my late mentors and good friend, Jack Lit, Ph.D., ABPP, invited me to his home office for a group supervision session. While I was admiring his framed diplomas, I happened to notice one that was unfamiliar to me. It read, “American Board of Examiners of Professional Psychology.” This certificate was awarded to him in the early 1960s and appeared for the most part to be hand calligraphed except for the banner. I inquired with Jack as to what this certificate represented and he went on to explain to me that it was the highest credential that a psychologist could obtain. It was also his belief that someday it would likely be the required credential of all practicing psychologists. Since it was so far off of my radar screen at the time, I forgot about it initially, but Jack’s words always resonated with me. Later on, in the late 1980s after I obtained my license and all of my post-doctoral training, I saw that a few of my colleagues had also obtained board certification by the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP) and decided that it was a credential that I should pursue. One of the impetuses for me to pursue this credential was the fact that licensing for psychologists in most states is generic. Therefore, one is licensed simply as a “psychologist” as opposed to a clinical or neuropsychologist. It is board certification that certifies one in a given subspecialty. I also became attracted to the concept of fast track offered with many of the boards for midcareer psychologists. Board certification seemed to be the final cap for me to ensure that there would be no question as to the caliber of my credentials. I became board certified in the early 1990s and I am so glad that I did, since it has proven to be an important resource to my career many times over. Even though my career

was well established by the time I became certified, it added a sense of culmination to my long road of professional goals.

In the spirit of promoting board certification, about 20 years ago I published an article in the journal, *Professional Psychology Research and Practice*, titled “Board certification, is it really necessary?” (Dattilio, 2002). At that time, just shy of two percent of psychologists were board certified by ABPP. The gist of my article focused on the notion of whether board certification was really necessary for a psychologist to obtain. One of the most common responses that I received from colleagues when promoting board certification was, “Why is it necessary?” Hence, I penned the 2002 article in order to address the benefits of obtaining ABPP and why it was worth the time and effort to pursue. Since that time, there have been other articles published on the topic including one edited book (Maguth, Nezu, Finch & Simon, 2009).

Present Status

As of this writing, the recent statistics indicate that four percent of all psychologists in the country have now become board certified with ABPP.

Many of the reasons why psychologists avoid becoming board certified in the past have included the cost of application and fees along with time for preparation and study. Some may outright fear failing the test and as a result, become discouraged from even trying. In addition, many may view board certification as “elitist” and that it is more of an intellectual exercise than one that has

practical utility. As with many professionals, if they cannot see a direct benefit to the effort that is involved, they may likely be disinclined to pursue it.

As the field of psychology becomes more specialized, however specialty board certification has proven to serve as a demarcation of distinction. More hospitals and institutions now respect and anticipate board certification among psychologists with some federal organizations actually remunerating employees accordingly. There is also a discount on the fee for malpractice insurance if one is board certified. Expert witnesses are now routinely questioned about whether they maintain board certification in their specific area of practice. Also, many states and provinces have recognized the ABPP certification as a partial waiver for licensing in their respective jurisdiction.

According to the most recent edition of “The Specialist” (2021), there are now 15 specialty boards and one subspecialty board. Additional areas of specialization are also being considered in the areas of addictions, forensic neuropsychology and psychopharmacology. The expansion of additional boards may also be an increasing attraction to psychologists who wish to display specialization in their particular area of expertise.

The Future of Board Certification

As stated in my article, Dattilio (2002), Bent, Packer and Goldberg (1999), wrote in 1999 that “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). I believe that the future for board

certification with ABPP is bright and will undoubtedly continue to grow. The looming question remains whether we, as psychologists feel that we have obtained the credentials that best reflect our true knowledge and expertise in our field. Board certification in the psychological specialty 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 and the demand for accountability and credentialing increases.

The question that I posed in my 2002 article was whether board certification was really necessary. In the past 20 years since the article appeared in the professional literature, the need for professionals to detail their areas of expertise over and above generic licensing as psychologists has become increasingly essential. It is also my belief that in time board certification will become imperative as a way to define our specific qualifications and standards of excellence as the field of psychology continues to grow. As my late colleague, Dr. Lit, told me so many years ago, at some point in time, it will be the required credential of all practicing psychologists.

Promoting Board Certification

In my opinion, one of the best ways that we as board certified psychologists can promote future certification among students, mentors and colleagues is through education and supervision. The earlier that graduate students are educated to the benefits of this credential, the more they

become persuaded to pursue it, which is why I disseminated my 2002 article to numerous doctoral training programs throughout the USA and Canada.

I also believe that promoting the credential during the course of supervision as my friend, Dr. Lit did so many decades ago can also be very influential to young professionals. Helping to dispel some of the myths about the perceived rigors of pursuing board certification may also allay fears of failure for those who are intimidated by the process.

References

Dattilio, F.M. (2002). Board certification in psychology: Is it really necessary? Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 33(1) 54-57.

Bent, R.J., Packard, R.E. & Goldberg, R.W. (1999). The American Board of Professional Psychology. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 30, 65-73.

Packard, T. (2000). Benefits of ABPP certification. The Diplomat, 20 (1), 2-5.

Maguth, Nezu, C., Finch, A.J., & Simon, N.P. (Eds.) (2009). Becoming board certified by the American Board of Professional Psychology. New York: Oxford, pp. 174.