

A Primer on Professional Credentialing: Introduction to Invited Commentaries on Licensing Behavior Analysts

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ABSTRACT

Questions have arisen recently about the relative merits of certification and licensure for protecting practitioners of behavior analysis and consumers of their services. The two approaches to credentialing have short- and long-term implications for practitioners, consumers, and the field. To provide background for the invited commentaries on these issues, we describe similarities and differences in the two types of professional credentials.

Descriptors: behavior analysis certification, licensing of behavior analysts, professional credentials

Applied behavior analysis (ABA) is increasingly recognized as a distinct profession (e.g., U.S. Department of Defense, 2007). That recognition and a growing demand for ABA services are provoking concerns about credentialing practitioners of behavior analysis and regulating what they do. Funding sources like government agencies and health insurance plans are understandably reluctant to pay non-credentialed individuals to provide ABA services, or to pay credentialed providers without exercising some oversight of their practices. Consumers and employers need a means of differentiating practitioners who do and do not have bona fide training and experience in ABA. Practitioners want assurance that they will be able to make a living doing the kind of work they have been trained to do. Policymakers may be pressured by some constituents to increase the availability of ABA services and to recognize practitioners of ABA in laws and regulations, while other constituents urge them to control costs and protect the interests of other professional groups.

Recognition of behavior analysis as a profession has been enhanced substantially by the international certification program for ABA practitioners managed by the Behavior Analyst Certification

Board, Inc.[®](BACB[®]). The BACB program may well serve many of the needs just mentioned, in conjunction with laws and regulations recognizing the BACB credentials. Questions have arisen, however, as to whether licensure might better protect ABA practitioners and consumers of ABA services than does certification. The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the similarities and differences between these two types of credentials.

Legitimate professional certification and licensure programs have several features in common. Both specify minimum eligibility requirements, typically in the form of coursework, degrees, and supervised practical experience. Individuals who meet those requirements must pass a written examination that meets established psychometric and legal standards in order to obtain the credential. To maintain their credential, certified and licensed professionals must obtain continuing education and practice within the bounds of the profession's code of ethics, as well as relevant laws, regulations, and policies. All elements of legitimate credentialing programs are derived from the profession's research literature, systematic analyses of job requirements and practitioner competencies, accepted professional and cultural practices, and

relevant case law (Moore & Shook, 2001; Shook, 1993, 2005; Starin, Hemingway, & Hartsfield, 1993).

There are several important differences between certification and licensure. Certification programs are typically voluntary on the part of practitioners and are usually operated by the profession, often through a national or international nonprofit corporation. Certification is usually not required to practice, although under trademark laws only individuals who hold the certificate may represent themselves as certified. Licensure, on the other hand, is usually mandated by state or provincial law and operated by a governmental entity, such as a state or provincial regulatory agency. That agency establishes eligibility requirements for licensure, oversees the practice of licensees, and enforces restrictions on practice as specified in state or provincial statutes.

One type of licensure statute is a *title act*, which mandates that only professionals who hold a specified credential can legally use a title (such as "physician" or "behavior analyst"). A *practice act* prohibits those who do not hold a specified credential from practicing the profession. Most licensure laws include both title and practice components. Another difference between licensure

and certification is that certification is usually portable across states and countries. A license obtained in one state or country, however, may not be recognized in other locations that have different licensure laws and therefore different requirements for obtaining and maintaining licensure. Finally, these distinctions between certification and licensure are not always clear. For instance, a certification program may be run by a governmental entity, much like a licensure program (Moore & Shook, 2001; Shook, 1993; Starin et al., 1993).

Each approach to credentialing practitioners of behavior analysis has benefits and drawbacks for practitioners as well as consumers, funders, and regulators of ABA services and the field of behavior analysis as a whole. The commentaries that follow explore the pros and cons of licensure and certification and their implications.

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