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Robert H.I. Dale

Butler University, rdale@butler.edu

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State Psychological Associations, Licensing Criteria, and the “Master’s Issue”

Robert H. I. Dale

Abstract

The psychological associations in the 50 states and the District of Columbia were surveyed with regard to their membership structure and the status of master's-level members. Most (31) of these associations closely follow the membership criteria established by the American Psychological Association, allowing associate membership for master's-level personnel, whereas 15 associations provide full membership for such personnel. A minority (17) of the state psychology boards provide some form of licensing or certification for master's-level personnel, and 5 more states provide for registration of such personnel. It is argued that the structures of state psychological associations reflect a tension between two views of psychology: as a scientific discipline or as a profession. The scientific emphasis encourages associations to include all individuals interested in a field or scientific endeavor; the professional perspective motivates associations to exclude those ineligible to join a profession of self-regulated, highly qualified, health service providers.

The American Psychological Association's (1986) publication *1986 Graduate Study in Psychology and Associated Fields* indicated that there are 305 American psychology departments/professional schools that award doctoral degrees in psychology and another 178 psychology departments/ schools that offer psychology degrees at the master's level (MA or MS). Students seeking a master's degree only are accepted into 116 of the 305 doctoral programs. Another 90 doctoral programs do not accept students seeking only a master's degree, but they award the MA degree upon satisfactory completion of course/research requirements. Thus, according to this publication, there are 384 psychology departments/professional schools from which a student can obtain a master's degree in psychology.

These programs have produced a large number of master's-level personnel. Stapp, Tucker, and VandenBos (1985), on the basis of their 1983 census of psychological personnel, estimated that about 28,800 master's-level personnel are working in psychology, and about 23,600 of them provide health or mental health services. Stapp et al. (1985) also estimated that about 84,000 MA degrees in psychology had been awarded between 1973 and 1983 and that 30,000-40,000 of the recipients had found employment in the field of psychology. In fact, they estimated that nondoctoral employees constituted about 35% of the psychological personnel in the mental health work force.

It is therefore clear that tens of thousands of master's-level personnel, from hundreds of programs, are working in the field of psychology. For the last 40 years, the American Psychological Association (APA) has been concerned with determining the appropriate status of

these master's-level personnel (Colliver, Havens, & Wesley, 1985; Fox, Kovacs, & Graham, 1985; Perlman, 1985a, 1985b; Woods, 1971), especially with regard to their licensing/certification, their APA membership status, and the APA certification of MA programs.

The licensing/certification issue appears to have been resolved, insofar as the APA has decided that a doctorate should constitute part of the minimal licensing requirements for a psychologist (APA, 1987b). This has contributed to a situation in which about 73% of PhDs, but only 25% of MAs, in psychology are APA members (Stapp et al., 1985). It has also resulted in ongoing discussions with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), which does not advocate that a doctorate be required for licensing (see Brown & Minke, 1986; Fagan, 1986; Hilke & Brantley, 1982). Many master's-level personnel have become affiliated with the NASP rather than with the APA (Fagan, 1986).

The membership status question has also been resolved, at least temporarily. For associate membership, the APA requires a master's degree in psychology (or 2 years of graduate work in psychology) from a regionally accredited graduate or professional school, followed by a year of acceptable professional experience that is psychological in nature (APA, 1988, Article II, Section 7). An associate member of APA can vote after 5 consecutive years of associate membership (APA, 1988, Article II, Section 6). However, at least one APA subcommittee (the Board of Directors Subcommittee on the Future of the Profession of Psychology) proposed in September 1987 that the bylaws be changed to prevent master's-level personnel from attaining associate member status.

Last, it appears unlikely that the APA will certify or accredit master's programs, although several authors have recommended such a step (APA, 1987c; Annis, Tucker, & Baker, 1984; Erdwins & Buffardi, 1983).

In this study I examined the status of master's-level personnel in regard to both membership in state psychological associations and licensing/certification. There have been rapid changes in both areas and, in order to guide policy relevant to master's-level personnel, current nationwide information may be useful.

Method

In September 1986, letters were sent to the 50 state psychological associations and the District of Columbia Psychological Association; their addresses were given in a list of APA-affiliated state psychological associations provided by the American Psychological Association. The letters requested information concerning the membership categories used by the associations and, if possible, the legal/professional certification status of "master's-level" people. In February 1987, similar follow-up letters were sent to the 14 associations that had not responded to the first letter; the addresses were provided by the American Psychological Association in January 1987. In June 1987, a third letter, accompanied by an eight-question questionnaire (available upon request), was sent to 8 associations that had not responded to the first two letters. In July 1987, telephone

calls were made to the 7 associations that had provided no information or incomplete information. In January 1988, telephone calls were made to eight associations to obtain additional information. After these contacts, the membership status of master's-level personnel had been obtained from all 51 associations.

Licensing information was derived from the *Handbook of Licensing and Certification Requirements for Psychologists in North America* (American Association of State Psychology Boards [AASPB], 1986), supplemented by the information provided by the state associations (13 of which supplied copies of the pertinent state licensing/certification laws). In August 1987, seven state licensing boards were telephoned in order to clarify apparent discrepancies between the information provided by the AASPB and the state associations. After these contacts, the licensing/certification status of master's-level personnel in all 50 states and the District of Columbia had been obtained.

Results

State Association Membership

Master's-level personnel can attain full membership in the Washington, D.C., Association and 14 of the 50 state associations, associate membership in 31 state associations, and affiliate membership in 3 state associations; 2 state associations have no membership category for master's-level personnel (Table 1). Of the 15 associations allowing full membership, 8 require only an MA degree, 6 require the credentials for APA associate membership (an MA plus 1 year of professional experience), and 1 requires an MA degree plus 2 years of acceptable professional experience. Of the 31 state associations allowing associate membership, 14 require APA-like credentials (MA plus at least 1 year's professional experience) and 17 require only the master's degree. The master's degree exceeds the educational criteria for the 3 states offering affiliate membership.

The main disadvantage of associate membership is the inability to vote or hold office. Of the 34 state associations giving associate or affiliate membership, 10 permit new associate members to vote, and only 6 permit the newly admitted associate member to hold office. After 5 years of continuous associate or affiliate membership, voting and holding office are allowed by another 11 and 4 associations, respectively. Two other states allow a transition from associate to full membership after 5 years, and Montana allows full membership to associate members of APA who have attained voting privileges in APA (by having been an associate member of APA for 5 consecutive years). In other words, 24 of 34 state associations permit voting after 5 years of associate membership, but only 13 associations allow one to hold office after this period. Furthermore, in 3 of these 13 associations, associate members may hold only one office, in which they represent associate members.

State Licensure/Certification

Although 12 state psychological associations reported that master's-level personnel were being certified as counselors, marriage and family therapists, and chemical abuse (or substance abuse) counselors by other agencies, these sources of certification were not systematically examined in this study. The data to be reported refer only to licensing/certification in psychology by state boards of examiners, which regulate the independent practice of psychology. Personnel with a master's degree in psychology can be fully licensed in three states and receive limited licensing or certification in 14 states (Table 1). These limited licenses allow the practice of a limited range of assessment and psychotherapeutic activities under the supervision of a licensed psychologist. Four states require registration of master's-level psychologists, and one state permits their voluntary registration. Whereas a certified or licensed master's-level person may be held responsible for his or her performance, the supervising psychologist is entirely responsible for the registered master's-level personnel. The registered personnel usually have titles indicating some relation to psychology as a profession; for example, in New Hampshire, they may be registered as "psychological assistants" or "associate psychologists." Idaho, on the other hand, has resolved the so-called titling issue (what to call master's-level people) by registering master's-level personnel as Category II "service extenders." Two more states reported that master's-level personnel could practice psychology (under supervision by a licensed psychologist) under either an institutional exemption (North Dakota) or an exception to the law (Maryland). Last, two state psychology boards (Ohio and Virginia) license school psychologists at the master's level.

Discussion

Not surprisingly, most of the state psychological associations categorize master's-level personnel in much the same way as the APA does, although master's-level personnel can eventually assume full membership in 18 state associations. These associations appear to hold a strong inclusive attitude, attempting to retain the allegiance of master's-level personnel. The 12 state associations that never permit master's-level personnel to vote and the 23 associations that never permit them to hold office are, apparently, assuming the strong exclusive attitude adopted by the APA with regard to licensure. Most state associations appear to be attempting to determine the appropriate balance between inclusion and exclusion with regard to master's-level personnel.

The adoption of inclusive or exclusive attitudes toward membership is a key issue for the future of state psychological associations. Most state associations share the APA's stated goals of advancing psychology as a science and profession (see APA, 1988, Article I), although these two goals are not always congruent; that is, advancing the profession of psychology is not synonymous with advancing the science of psychology. An inclusive approach to membership would encourage the participation of nonlicensed personnel (master's-level people or PhDs who are not health service providers) in the development and support of psychology as a *discipline*, or branch of knowledge. This could be achieved by such steps as full membership for MA personnel working in the field of psychology and differential dues by which the differing needs of individuals employed in different specialities and/or capacities are recognized. The exclusive approach would discourage the participation of nonlicensed personnel in the *profession* of

Table 1. State association membership and state licensing status for master’s-level personnel

State	Association membership			Licensing
	Status	Criterion ^a	Privileges ^b	
Alabama	Associate	APA	—	Register (Voluntary)
Alaska	Associate	MA	V, O ^c	Associate
Arizona	—	—	—	—
Arkansas	Full	MA	—	Examiner
California	Associate	MA	V, O	Assistant
Colorado	Associate	MA	V	— (Bill pending)
Connecticut	Associate	APA	V5	—
Delaware	Full ^d	APA	—	—
Washington, D.C.	Associate	MA	V, O	—
Florida	—	—	—	—
Georgia	Associate	APA	V5	—
Hawaii	Associate	APA	V5, O5	—
Idaho	Full	APA	—	Register
Illinois	Affiliate ^e	—	—	—
Indiana	Full	MA	—	—
Iowa	Full ^{d,f}	APA	—	—
Kansas	Full	MA	—	Register
Kentucky	Full	MA	—	Assistant
Louisiana	Associate	MA	—	— (Bill pending)
Maine	Associate	APA	V5	Examiner
Maryland	Associate	MA	—	Register
Massachusetts	Associate	MA	V, O	—
Michigan	Associate	APA	—	Limited license
Minnesota	Full	APA	—	Full
Mississippi	Associate	MA	—	—
Missouri	Associate	APA	V	Full
Montana	Affiliate ^g	—	—	—
Nebraska	Affiliate	—	—	—
Nevada	Associate	MA	V	Associate
New Hampshire	Associate	APA	FM5 ^h	Register
New Jersey	Associate	APA	V5, O5 ^c	—
New Mexico	Associate	MA	V5	Associate
New York	Associate	APA	—	—
North Carolina	Full	MA	—	Associate
North Dakota	Associate	APA	FM5	—
Ohio	Associate ^e	MA	V5	School/register
Oklahoma	Associate	MA	—	—
Oregon	Full	MA	—	Associate
Pennsylvania	Full	APA	—	—
Rhode Island	Associate	MA	V, O	—
South Carolina	Associate	MA	—	—
South Dakota	Associate	MA	V	—
Tennessee	Full	APA	—	Examiner
Texas	Associate	MA	V, O ^c	Associate
Utah	Associate	APA	V5	—
Vermont	Full	MA	—	Master
Virginia	Full	APA	—	School
Washington	Associate	MA	V5	Assistant
West Virginia	Full	MA	—	Full
Wisconsin	Associate	APA	V5, O5	—
Wyoming	Associate	APA	V5, O5	—

Note. The licensing titles omit the modifiers "psychological" or "psychologist" from assistant, associate, examiner, and master.

^a MA = Master's degree required; APA = master's degree plus 1 year of professional experience required.

^b V = voting; V5 = voting after 5 consecutive years of membership; O = may hold office; O5 = may hold office after 5 consecutive years of membership; FM5 = full membership after 5 consecutive years as associate member.

^c Eligible for only one seat on executive council (member-at-large/liaison for associate members).

^d Revision of status pending.

^e Full member with MA if certified/licensed as school psychologist.

^f After July 1988, master's degree plus 1 year experience become criteria for associate membership, Full membership is available after 5 consecutive years as associate member.

^g Full member if American Psychological Association associate member with voting status,

^h Upon demonstration of significant contribution in psychology (American Psychological Association, 1988, Article II, Section 11).

ⁱ Master's-level applicant with less than 2 years of postdegree experience must apply for associate membership.

psychology. An exclusive state psychological association would be primarily concerned with the needs and goals of a guild of highly educated mental health service providers. Associations could achieve this by providing token, nonvoting membership to master's-level personnel and by having high, universal annual dues. Whichever course is taken, the structure of the state psychological associations should reflect the officers' or executive board's conscious decision of how to best represent the profession and/or discipline of psychology. Given that the membership status of master's-level personnel differs widely across state associations, researchers should empirically determine how these differences influence the satisfaction, professional allegiance, and productivity of master's-level individuals.

The field of psychology is faced with a situation in which almost 400 departments and schools award MA degrees in psychology to thousands of students annually. A high proportion of these students provide mental health services (Stapp et al., 1985), and most of them do not pursue doctoral training (Erdwins & Buffardi, 1983; Perlman, 1985b). They can be licensed in psychology (even with supervision) in only 17 states and registered in only 5 states, so that most must be practicing under other professional licenses (e.g., counselor) and titles (e.g., mental health specialist, psychotherapist) or under various exemptions from the state laws governing "the practice of psychology" and "psychologists." Nonetheless, their employers are generally pleased with the performance of master's-level personnel (Havens, Colliver, Dimond, & Wesley, 1982) and will continue to employ them (Annis et al., 1984; Colliver et al., 1985). Judging by the *Model Act for State Licensure of Psychologists* (APA, 1987b), which has no provisions for the licensure of nondoctoral personnel, the APA is not attempting to change the status quo.

There are several ways to resolve the current contradiction (and ethical dilemma) created when students are provided psychological training and then prevented from providing services as "psychologists." One option would be to stop awarding master's degrees (especially "applied" degrees) in psychology, according to reasoning analogous to a medical school's reasoning for not awarding partial medical degrees. However, the termination of all master's degree programs in psychology is clearly politically and organizationally impossible.

Another option would be to provide APA accreditation of MA programs (Annis et al., 1984; APA, 1987c; Colliver et al., 1985; Erdwins & Buffardi, 1983), combined with more widespread (not more comprehensive or more independent) licensing status. For example, licensed psychometrists and therapeutic assistants could provide assessment and therapy under the supervision of a licensed psychologist, much as licensed nurses provide health care under the supervision of physicians. This approach would amount to providing formal, legal recognition to a class of health service providers currently referred to as Category B providers in APA guidelines for the providers of psychological services (APA, 1981, 1987a).

The distinction between more nationwide licensure and higher levels of licensure is important because the widespread reluctance to license psychologists at the master's-level seems to be largely based on fears of economic competition between doctoral and master's levels within psychology. In fact, much of the reluctance to accord master's-level personnel full membership in state organizations also appears to result from a fear that this would encourage their independent practice. However, it is possible that extending limited, second-tier licensing status (and full association membership status) to master's-level personnel would reduce their competition with the doctoral-level practitioners because master's-level personnel would be less motivated to attain alternative licensing status (e.g., substance abuse counselor) allowing them to practice and be paid, independently of licensed psychologists. The relation between licensing and association membership status, on the one hand, and competition in professional practice, on the other, needs to be studied empirically.

Last, it is possible that the quality of mental health care would be improved if all states adopted legislation similar to that in the 14 states that currently license individuals as psychological assistants (or under similar titles). Such legislation would provide minimum qualifications (and recognition) for master's-level persons who provide psychological services. Empirically testable hypotheses are that limited licensing would encourage the affiliation of master's-level personnel with the profession of psychology, increase their participation in state psychological associations, and increase their support of doctoral psychologists in legal confrontations with other professional groups over service issues. Unless the status of master's-level personnel in the profession of psychology is changed, I anticipate increases in their licensure and practice under nonpsychological titles. This will not necessarily be in the best interests of the personnel, psychology, or the general public.

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