

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Commission for the Recognition of Specialties and Subs specialties in Professional Psychology (CRSSPP)

Principles for the Recognition of Subs specialties in Professional Psychology¹

Approved by APA Council of Representatives in August 2020

To educate and protect the public, the profession has the responsibility to exercise authority over the process of subspecialty recognition. CRSSPP will consider petitions for formal recognition of a subspecialty. Petitions that CRSSPP approves will be reviewed and acted upon by the APA Council of Representatives (COR). CRSSPP will review the status of each recognized subspecialty at least every seven years and recommend whether the subspecialty should continue to be recognized.

Through a review of documents and discussions about subspecialties in psychology, it has become apparent that psychologists view subspecialties from a variety of perspectives. The "universe" of subspecialties could extend from a potential unmanageable number of individual "micro" skills to considerably more organized and complex "near specialties" depending on how a specific array of knowledge and skills is defined. Consequently, principles governing the recognition of subspecialties must be very clear and well-defined.

For purposes of this undertaking, the following subspecialty definition is adopted:

A subspecialty is a concentrated area of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that:

- (a) exists within at least one recognized {parent} specialty;
- (b) requires additional education, training, and/or professional experiences; and,
- (c) involves specific (1) problems, (2) populations, and/or (3) circumscribed approaches.

A subspecialty has characteristics of the specialty area in which it is embedded and reflects a more specific area of the specialty based on targeted problems, populations, and/or techniques. Subs specialties are delineated in the *Education and Training Guidelines: A Taxonomy for Education and Training in Professional Psychology Health Service Specialties and Subs specialties* (APA, 2020). Subs specialties are distinct from specialties which are defined areas of professional psychology practice characterized by a distinctive configuration of competent services for specified problems and populations.

Subs specialties can only be acquired through relevant education and training focused specifically and intensively on defined content. Although some subs specialties may be unique to only one specialty, others may belong to more than one specialty. To educate and protect the public, the profession has the responsibility to exercise authority over the process of subspecialty

¹These principles are aimed at those areas of practice in psychology that have a history of primarily providing services to the public. Other areas, traditionally identified with the academic and scientific aspects of psychology, are not addressed.

recognition. The process should not be abdicated solely to market forces or to pressures from external bodies. Nothing in this document precludes a provider of psychological services from using the methods or working with the populations of any subspecialty as long as they do so “within the boundaries of their competence, based on their education, training, supervised experience, consultation, study, or professional experience” (APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct; APA, 2002, amended 2010 and 2017).

Organization(s) responsible for a subspecialty will define how it meets public need and how practitioners acquire the psychological knowledge and skills that represent the bases for its practice. In addition, organization(s) responsible for the development of a subspecialty are responsible for collaborating with other organizations to ensure that appropriate education and training is provided in a sequential and integrated nature. When education and training in a subspecialty can be achieved through interdisciplinary study, organization(s) responsible for the subspecialty will describe how the subspecialty meets the criteria, within the context of interdisciplinary education and training, and ensures there is a clear explanation of the unique contributions of psychological knowledge and methods to the assessment, treatment, or understanding of the interdisciplinary focus.

SUBSPECIALTY RECOGNITION PRINCIPLES

Formal recognition of a subspecialty in psychology begins with the submission of a petition to the APA seeking recognition of the proposed subspecialty.

The following criteria are used to evaluate petitions for recognition of a subspecialty in professional psychology:

Criterion I. Administrative Organizations. The proposed subspecialty is represented by one or more organizations that provide systems and structures that are sufficient to support the organized development of the subspecialty in terms of effectiveness, quality improvement, and provider identification and evaluation. When a subspecialty is nested within more than one specialty, one specialty must act as lead for administrative purposes.

Commentary: To ensure the management of the subspecialty, having the resources of national organization(s) willing to assume responsibility is important, so that psychology's scientific and professional integrity can be preserved. These organizations meet regularly to review and describe the subspecialty and appropriate policies for education and training in the subspecialty.

Criterion II. Public Need for Subspecialty Practice. The services provided within a subspecialty are responsive to identifiable public needs.

Commentary: Subspecialties may evolve from the recognition that there is a public need for subspecialty practice. Subspecialties may also develop from advances in scientific psychology from which applications to benefit the public may be derived.

Criterion III. Diversity. The organization(s) responsible for a subspecialty develops and implements a plan for inclusion of diverse individuals, including those with a wide range of cultural and individual differences, in the education and training subspecialty. The plan includes integration of contemporary psychological theory, research, and applied skills pertinent to the subspecialty's program of education and training.

Commentary: The subspecialty provides trainees with relevant knowledge, attitudes, and skills about the role of diversity as well as cultural and individual differences as they relate to the science and practice of a subspecialty. The subspecialty's diversity focus should incorporate each of the following areas: (i) development of subspecialty-specific scientific and theoretical knowledge; (ii) preparation for practice; (iii) education and training; (iv) continuing education and professional development; and, (v) evaluation of effectiveness.

Criterion IV. Distinctiveness. A subspecialty is represented by concentrated areas of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that: (a) exist within at least one recognized {parent} specialty; (b) require additional education, training, and/or professional experiences; and (c) involve specific (1) problems, (2) populations, and/or (3) circumscribed approaches used in psychological assessment

and/or treatment within which one develops competence. A subspecialty must demonstrate how it is distinct from the specialty.

Commentary: *A subspecialty typically reflects the development of competence in activities beyond broad and general doctoral training. Although it is recognized that there will be overlap among the knowledge, skill bases, and problems and populations of focus of subspecialties and their parent specialties, a subspecialty should involve a distinctive area or elaboration of expertise that can be understood as beyond basic specialty expertise.*

Criterion V: Advanced Scientific and Theoretical Preparation. In addition to a shared core knowledge base, skills, and professional attitudes required of all specialists, a subspecialty requires advanced subspecialty-specific scientific knowledge.

Commentary: *Petitions demonstrate how advanced scientific and theoretical knowledge is acquired and how the basic preparation is extended within a subspecialty.*

Criterion VI. Parameters of Practice. A subspecialty may be described as a concentrated area of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that requires additional education, training, and/or professional experiences, and involves specific problems, populations, and/or circumscribed approaches.

Commentary: *This consists of the descriptions of specific procedures and techniques used in the subspecialty and the populations to which they apply, including assessment techniques, intervention strategies, consultative methods, diagnostic procedures, ecological strategies, and applications from clinical research to serve a public need for psychological assistance.*

Criterion VII. Initial Acquisition of Knowledge and Skills. A subspecialty is acquired through a defined program of study and training that enables psychologists to develop the necessary competence to practice the subspecialty. The program of study and training for a subspecialty references and employs the *Education and Training Guidelines: A Taxonomy for Education and Training in Professional Psychology Health Service Specialties and Subspecialties* (APA, 2020).

Commentary: *Education and training in a subspecialty may occur at the doctoral, doctoral internship, postdoctoral, or post-licensure level. Subspecialty education and training is sequential and integrated in nature, and includes supervised experience and evaluation related to the knowledge base and skill sets distinctive to the subspecialty. If the subspecialty is interdisciplinary, articulate the way that psychological practice, specifically, is conducted within the subspecialty.*

Criterion VIII. Maintenance of Competence. The organization(s) seeking recognition for a subspecialty is responsible for identifying or providing practitioners with regularly scheduled opportunities for continuing professional development in the subspecialty practice, and assessment of subspecialty knowledge and skills.

Commentary: This criterion requires that petitioners articulate the continuing education and training necessary to maintain competency in a subspecialty. A petition should specify what methods must be used to achieve these goals.

Criterion IX. Effectiveness. A subspecialty should present and document the best available evidence and research that demonstrates its effectiveness on specific problems and/or populations, consistent with the APA 2005 Policy on Evidence-based Practice.

Commentary: A body of evidence is to be presented that demonstrates the effectiveness of the subspecialty with appropriate problems and populations and documents the best available research.

Criterion X. Quality Improvement. A subspecialty organization promotes investigations and procedures to ensure ongoing improvement in the competencies of subspecialists.

Commentary: The public interest requires the best services possible for consumers. A subspecialty, therefore, must continue to seek ways to improve and monitor the quality of subspecialist services. Quality improvement can take many forms. Petitions should describe procedures for regular review of relevant research and practice literature that supports improvement in subspecialist skills and services. In addition, the petition must include a plan for public dissemination of this information.

Criterion XI. Guidelines for Subspecialty Service Delivery. The subspecialty has developed and disseminated guidelines for practice in the subspecialty that expand on the profession's general practice guidelines and ethical principles.²

Commentary: These guidelines are communicated to subspecialists and members of the public.

Criterion XII. Provider Identification and Evaluation. A subspecialty describes competency-based methods for evaluating expertise and identifies subspecialists who have achieved such benchmarks.

²In this context, practice guidelines refer to modes of conceptualization, identification and assessment of issues, intervention planning and application by subspecialists. Such guidelines may be found in documents or websites including, but not limited to, those bearing such a title or as described in a variety of published textbooks, chapters, and/or articles focused on such contents.

Commentary: *Identifying psychologists who are competent to practice the subspecialty provides a significant service to the public. Initial demonstration of competence to practice in the subspecialty may include successful completion of the required organized sequence of education and training. As a subspecialty develops over time, it is expected that the subspecialty will develop more formal structures for the recognition of competence among subspecialists.*

References

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