

Counselor Identity: A Response to the American Psychotherapy Association  
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Recently a student asked during class about whether I thought it would be appropriate for her and her classmates to seek the BCPC (Board Certified Professional Counselor) credential from the American Board of Professional Counselors (ABPC). Initially, I was a bit embarrassed to find myself confused by her question. She had asked with such conviction, that I felt I should know what she was talking about, but I had no idea what this certification was and had never heard of the ABPC. She quickly produced a very attractive glossy brochure which outlined the Board, its mission, and the benefits of membership. It turns out the American Psychotherapy Association has formed this new Board and a national certification of “professional counselors”.

With the slogan “When was the last time that an organization came along to provide any real help to you?” the ABPC purports to be the nation’s leading advocate of professional counselors. But according to ABPC, those who may apply to become BCPCs include among others: Social Workers, Marriage and Family Therapists, Sex Therapists, Psychologists, Psychiatrists, and Psychotherapists. Although some may laud this inclusive stance, there are serious problems with this new certification. First, and perhaps most important, the term “Professional Counseling” is a legally regulated term in most States with counselor licensure including the state of Ohio.

The Ohio Rules are specific. First, “no person shall engage in or claim to the public to be engaging in the practice of professional counseling for a fee, salary, or other consideration unless the person is currently licensed under this chapter as a professional clinical counselor or professional counselor” (§ 4757.02). Second, the Ohio Rules are very specific about who may become licensed as a Professional Counselor in Ohio. Under § 4757.23, to be eligible for licensure, a person must hold a graduate degree in counseling from an accredited institution with a minimum of ninety quarter hours (60 Semester Hours) of graduate credit in counseling, and she must pass the licensure exam (Currently the NCE).

Over the years, Ohio counselors have worked very hard, indeed, have been national leaders, in an effort to create a respectable professional credential that we call “Professional Counselor.” At the core of this effort has been an emphasis on Counselor Identity – that is the idea that Professional Counselors are those who embrace their identity as counselors. We are counselors by training, we identify what we do as counseling, and we are actively engaged in efforts that maintain the integrity of our field in an effort to be clear to consumers of professional counseling services. Our licensure law, which so clearly defines the title “Professional Counselor”, is grounded in this historical context of the importance of professional identity.

I became deeply concerned and troubled when the APA created a new national board of “professional counseling” that certifies anyone who wishes to identify as a professional counselor, regardless of their training or their credentials. If, however, you are one of a

number of folks who are considering this credential, before applying for this certification, consider this. Becoming a BCPC does not give one the right to identify or to practice as a Professional Counselor in Ohio. Use of this “credential” on a business card may actually be a violation of counselor law in Ohio and absolutely would be misleading to consumers of counseling services (unless you are licensed as a professional counselor).

The Ohio Counseling Association has reviewed the information available about this certification and has decided against endorsing this certification. OCA has determined that this credential does not protect the public; rather, it is more likely to harm the public by creating confusion. Moreover, as outlined above, the credential does not serve Professional Counselors or protect the field of professional counseling. Indeed, by offering to certify members of so many different disciplines, it weakens our identity by equating mental health counselors with attorneys, ministers, and social workers.

While I respect my colleagues who are attorneys, ministers, and social workers, I would never claim any one of these titles for myself, and it is my view that we should be cautious about extending the privilege of the use of our title to them and others who are not trained professional counselors. As professional counselors, licensed as such, we need to work to protect the professional identity that we have worked so hard to establish.