Can Licensed Mental Health Counselors Administer and Interpret Psychological Tests?

ANALYSIS AND POSITION PAPER BY 
THE NATIONAL BOARD OF FORENSIC EVALUATORS

The National Board of Forensic Evaluators (NBFE) adopts the position that appropriately trained licensed mental health counselors may administer and interpret psychological tests, a viewpoint consistent with various state licensure boards including Florida, the state the NBFE is headquartered in, which declared that licensed mental health counselors, clinical social workers, and marriage and family therapists “may administer and interpret such tests as long as they have received the appropriate training, and thus, are qualified to perform such procedures.” ¹ We support the efforts of organizations such as the National Fair Access Coalition on Testing that advocate for “the protection and support of public access to professionals and organizations who have demonstrated competence in the administration and interpretation of assessment instruments, including psychological tests.” ²

Our position is based on four premises: (1) Counselors have always been experts in testing; (2) Testing is within the scope of practice of counselors; (3) Counselors meet the standards of test manufacturers; and (4) It is impractical and unethical to prohibit counselors from administering and interpreting tests.

FACT: COUNSELORS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN EXPERTS IN TESTING

The counseling profession began in the late 1890s and early 1900s. The first professional counselors were vocational guidance counselors who specialized in the administration and interpretation of various tests, including intelligence and aptitude tests. We believe Gladding and Newsome (2018) put it well when they wrote that the first counselors “quickly embraced psychometrics to gain a legitimate foothold in psychology” (p. 8)³. Counselors have continued to administer and interpret such tests up to the present day.

¹ Foster, S.J. (2000, February 4). Letter to Judge Roger McDonald
There is a consensus within the counseling profession that testing is within the scope of practice of professional counselors.

The primary counselor education accrediting body is the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP). CACREP’s 2016 education standards refer to the expectation that all accredited counseling degree programs teach counselors to administer and interpret tests:

Section 2: Professional Counseling Identity
Subsection: Counseling Curriculum

The eight common core areas represent the foundational knowledge required of all entry-level counselor education graduates. Therefore, counselor education programs must document where each of the lettered standards listed below is covered in the curriculum.

7. ASSESSMENT AND TESTING
a) historical perspectives concerning the nature and meaning of assessment and testing in counseling
b) methods of effectively preparing for and conducting initial assessment meetings
c) procedures for assessing risk of aggression or danger to others, self-inflicted harm, or suicide
d) procedures for identifying trauma and abuse and for reporting abuse
e) use of assessments for diagnostic and intervention planning purposes
f) basic concepts of standardized and non-standardized testing, norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessments, and group and individual assessments
g) statistical concepts, including scales of measurement, measures of central tendency, indices of variability, shapes and types of distributions, and correlations
h) reliability and validity in the use of assessments
i) use of assessments relevant to academic/educational, career, personal, and social development
j) use of environmental assessments and systematic behavioral observations
k) use of symptom checklists, and personality and psychological testing
l) use of assessment results to diagnose developmental, behavioral, and mental disorders
m) ethical and culturally relevant strategies for selecting, administering, and interpreting assessment and test results

The National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) is the first and largest certifying body in the United States for professional counselors. The credential NBCC has established for clinical mental health counselors is Certified Clinical Mental Health Counselor (CCMHC). In order for this credential to be awarded to a counselor, the counselor must have been educated on the administration of psychological tests. In addition, counselors must pass the National Clinical Mental Health Counseling Examination.

---

(NCMHCE), which includes test items on the administration of psychological tests for purposes of assessment, diagnosis, and treatment planning.6

The American Counseling Association (ACA) is the largest association representing counselors in the United States. The ACA identifies “the administration of assessments, tests, and appraisals” as a primary component of the scope of professional counseling.7 The ACA’s most recent Code of Ethics refers repeatedly to the ability of counselors to administer and interpret tests, provided that counselors are appropriately trained in the tests they utilize.8 The ACA takes an official position that “professional counselors with a master’s degree or higher and appropriate coursework in appraisal/assessment, supervision, and experience are qualified to use objective tests. With additional training and experience, professional counselors are also able to administer projective tests, individual intelligence tests, and clinical diagnostic tests.”9

The American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA) is a division of the ACA that exclusively represents clinical mental health counselors. AMHCA’s published standards for clinical mental health counseling clarify that mental health counselors are expected to be trained in clinical assessment and testing.10 Like the ACA, AMHCA’s 2015 Code of Ethics refers to the ability of counselors to administer and interpret psychological tests provided that counselors are appropriately trained.11 AMHCA co-authored a document outlining standards for assessment in mental health counseling with the Association for Assessment and Research in Counseling (AARC), formerly the Association for Assessment in Counseling and Education, clearly defining the competencies that counselors must possess to administer and interpret psychological tests such as the MMPI-II and the MCMI-III.12

From 2005 to 2013, the 31 major counseling associations, organizations, and certifying bodies met to arrive at a consensus for the definition and scope of practice for professional counseling. The scope of practice they adopted includes “Assessment: The practice of counseling includes the administration and interpretation of assessments for appraisal, diagnosis, evaluation, and referral determination to help establish individualized counseling plans and goals that may include the treatment of individual with emotional, mental, and physical disorders.” 13

Counselors are also recognized as competent test administrators by various organizations outside of the profession. For example, in September 2016 the Social Security Administration clarified its long-standing position test results administered by clinical mental health counselors can be used for

---

13 20/20 Task Force (2013). Meeting notes from Delegates meeting.
disability determination cases. In response, AMHCA issued a statement clarifying that appropriately trained counselors can administer intellectual aptitude exams and diagnose intellectual disorders.\footnote{NBFE (2016). Social Security Administration clarifies that counselors can evaluate for disability. Retrieved from https://www.nbfe.net/Articles/4321134}

**FACT: COUNSELORS MEET THE STANDARDS OF TEST MANUFACTURERS**

Licensed counselors meet the criteria for the highest qualification levels of the three most popular psychological test distributors in the United States.

Level C is the highest qualification level established by Psychological Assessment Resources (PAR). This level of qualification requires "an advanced professional degree that provides appropriate training in the administration and interpretation of psychological tests, or license or certification from an agency that requires appropriate training and experience in the ethical and competent use of psychological tests."\footnote{PAR (2012). Qualification levels. Retrieved from http://www4.parinc.com/Supp/Qualifications.aspx.} Because licensed counselors must have a minimum of a Master's degree, which is an advanced professional degree, and because CACREP- and CACREP-equivalent counselor education programs require training in the administration and interpretation of psychological tests, licensed counselors meet PAR's criteria for qualification level C and are commonly certified as such by PAR.

Similar to PAR, Pearson Clinical drafted a Level C qualification policy for tests administered in the category of clinical psychology requiring that evaluators earn a "doctorate degree in psychology, education, or closely related field with formal training in the ethical administration, scoring, and interpretation of clinical assessments related to the intended use of the assessment OR licensure or certification to practice in your state in a field related to the purchase OR certification by or full active membership in a professional organization (such as APA, NASP, NAN, INS) that requires training and experience in the relevant area of assessment."\footnote{Pearson (2016). Clinical Psychology Qualifications Policy. Retrieved from http://www.pearsonclinical.com/psychology/qualifications.htm.} At first glance, readers may deduce that Pearson Clinical requires test administrators to earn a doctoral degree. However, Pearson emphasizes the word "or" repeatedly in their policy through bold print and/or capitalized letters to denote that an evaluator need only meet one of the listed criteria. Because licensed mental health counselors are licensed, and in some cases certified, to practice mental health counseling in their respective states, the second criterion should be met by all licensed mental health counselors. In addition, some counselors will meet the first and third criteria depending on education level and association membership.

Western Psychological Services (WPS) provides two advanced qualification levels. Level C permits an evaluator to purchase “all products except advanced psychiatric instruments and advanced neuropsychological instruments” and requires evaluators to have “a master’s degree (MA, MS, MSW, CAGS) in psychology, school counseling, occupational therapy, speech–language pathology, social work, education, special education, or related field.”\footnote{WPS (n.d.). Qualification Guidelines. Retrieved from http://www.wpspublish.com/store/Qualification_Guidelines%20V3.pdf} Again, licensed mental health counselors meet...
This criterion because they hold master's degrees in a related occupation. Level N is the highest level designated by WPS, allowing purchase of all tests. This level requires “a doctoral degree (PhD, PsyD, MD) in psychology or related field or MA (psychologist, social worker) a master’s degree (MA, MS, MSW) in fields listed above and at least a weekend workshop on neuropsychological assessment.” Many but not all licensed mental health counselors will meet these guidelines. Specifically, counselors who hold a doctoral degree in a related field meet the criteria, as well as master’s-level counselors who have completed at least a couple days of additional training in neuropsychological evaluation.

PREVENTING COUNSELORS FROM ADMINISTERING AND INTERPRETING PSYCHOLOGICAL TESTS WOULD BE IMPractical AND UNETHICAL

The demand for evidence-based practices and treatment approaches continues to rise in the United States. Third party payers and authorities in the behavioral healthcare sector continue to apply pressure to providers to offer evidence substantiating diagnoses and treatment methods, as well as efforts to measure response to behavioral health interventions. Increasingly, testing provides an integral source of data to comply with these standards of care. Testing aids counselors in formulating a diagnosis, planning treatment, and measuring client progress.

According to the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services, counselors comprise the largest percentage of the U.S. behavioral healthcare workforce in the National Provider Identifier insurance. ¹⁸

To deny the largest sector of the U.S. behavioral healthcare workforce the opportunity to administer and interpret psychological tests is illogical. It implies that licensed mental health counselors are qualified to treat mental disorders but not to diagnose them nor evaluate the efficacy of their treatment approaches. This practice is akin to expecting a physician to diagnose and treat hypertension without allowing the physician to measure a patient’s blood pressure.

Counselors cannot be expected to treat what they cannot objectively diagnose or measure. Ultimately, such a practice would negatively impact client care. Thus, NBFE views any efforts to restrict the rights of counselors from administering and interpreting psychological tests as potentially harmful to clients and therefore unethical.

**A CALL TO ACTION FOR FAIR TESTING PRACTICES**

The National Board of Forensic Evaluators calls on state legislatures, licensing boards, and authorities in all disciplines of the mental health profession to advocate for laws, rules, and policies that protect the rights of all appropriately-trained licensed mental health professionals to administer and interpret psychological tests. We also encourage licensed mental health counselors to seek ongoing training in this area that exceeds that which they received in graduate school. Counselors should abide by ethical guidelines that require that they be appropriately trained on any test they administer.

**ABOUT THE NATIONAL BOARD OF FORENSIC EVALUATORS**

The National Board of Forensic Evaluators (NBFE) is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization dedicated to providing quality training and certification of all licensed mental health professionals (e.g., counselors, social workers, marriage and family therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists) in the specialty area of forensic mental health evaluation. NBFE is a proud partner of the American Mental Health Counselors Association and several other state, local, and international organizations in the mental health field. To learn more about NBFE, visit www.nbfe.net.

*Position paper authored by Aaron Norton, Executive Director of NBFE, edited by Dr. Norman Hoffman, President and Founder of NBFE, and approved by the NBFE Board of Directors 8/15/16. Revised 9/4/17.*