

Analysis of Board of Psychology Disciplinary Actions: 1990-2007

by Salvatore Cullari, Ph.D.

A total of 291 disciplinary actions in Pennsylvania were documented and reviewed between 1990 and July 2007, and the trends were also compared to a national analysis. The results reveal some interesting relationships, or lack thereof, in regards to gender, education levels and experience.

The information reported in this study is based on 207 individual disciplinary cases, as many cases were eliminated for a variety of reasons. Of the cases studied, 69 percent involved males and 31 percent related to females. Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine the ratio of males to females for the universe of licensees for the time periods covered in this study. However, it is likely that until recently there were more males licensed in the state than females, so at least some of the gender differences may be due to this factor. Fifty-four percent of the cases occurred between 1990 and 2000, and the rest after 2000.

The disciplinary actions resulting from these cases are as follows:

- License suspended: 28 percent;
- Reprimand: 28 percent;
- Fines: 23 percent;
- Voluntary surrender of license: 10 percent;
- License revoked: 9 percent; and
- Probation: 2 percent.

The most frequent causes of these actions, in descending order of frequency, are as follows (the second set of figures are the percentages of males):

- Failure to comply with continuing education (CE) requirements: 37 percent (64 percent);
- Unprofessional/unethical practice: 17 percent (67 percent);
- Sexual misconduct: 13 percent (all but one case involved males);

- Criminal convictions: 7 percent (86 percent);
- Non-sexual relationships beyond the scope of practice: 7 percent (71 percent);
- License suspended in other jurisdiction: 7 percent (86 percent - many of these involved sexual misconduct);
- Practicing with a lapsed license: 6 percent (33 percent);
- Substance abuse: 2 percent (50 percent);
- Unfit to practice: 2 percent (20 percent);
- Breach of confidentiality: 1 percent (100 percent); and
- Other: 1 percent.

In terms of education, 58 percent of the respondents had a doctoral degree, 29 percent had a master's degree and in 13 percent of cases their degrees were undetermined. Note that Pennsylvania stopped licensing persons at the master's level in 1995 so this particular data may not be revealing.

The average age of the respondents at the time of the disciplinary action was 54. None of these cases involved persons younger than 30. The mean number of years of independent practice at the time of these actions was 22. Only 6 percent of the disciplinary actions involved licensees with LESS than 10 years of experience. Women were slightly younger than men with a mean age of 52 as compared to 55. They also had somewhat less years of independent practice (19) than men (23).

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The Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPPB) has collected similar data across the United States and Canada from August 1983 to July 2007. The most frequent causes of disciplinary actions in their database of 3,153 actions are as follows:

- Unprofessional/unethical practice: 29 percent;
- Sexual/dual relationships: 29 percent;
- Criminal convictions: 10 percent;
- Fraudulent acts: 6 percent;
- Improper record keeping: 6 percent;
- Failure to comply with CE requirements: 5 percent;
- Inadequate supervision: 5 percent;
- Breach of confidentiality: 4 percent;
- Impairment: 4 percent; and
- Fraud in application for license: less than 2 percent.

These data were not broken down by gender. If CE requirements are considered to be less serious than some of the other causes, then Pennsylvania licensees tend as a whole to have less serious infractions compared to the national sample.

Some of the conclusions that may be drawn from these data are: 1) Male licensees are much more likely to engage in sexual misconduct than women; 2) The vast majority of licensees who are disciplined are older and have a great deal of experience (licensees under the age of 40 represent only a small percentage of the total number of disciplinary actions reported); and 3) Higher education or experience does not appear to diminish the likelihood of disciplinary actions, although this is a complicated issue which needs more attention.

Milestones

Patricia M. Bricklin, Ph.D.

Board Chairwoman Bricklin, of Delaware County, was the 2007 recipient of the American Psychological Foundation's (APF) Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement in the Practice of Psychology. The APF's Gold Medal Awards recognize distinguished and enduring records of accomplishment in four areas of

psychology: the application of psychology, the practice of psychology, psychology in the public interest, and the science of psychology.

Dorothy W. Cantor, president of the APF, presented the APF Gold Medal Award to Dr. Bricklin at the 115th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association on Aug. 18, 2007.

Congratulations Dr. Bricklin!

Eve Orlow, Ed.D., M.S.

Board Member Orlow, of Montgomery County, received the Ethics Award from the Pennsylvania Psychological Association.

Congratulations Dr. Orlow!

Alex M. Siegel, J.D., Ph.D.

Board Member Siegel, of Montgomery County, served as president of the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPPB) in 2008. ASPPB is the association of psychology licensing boards in the United States and Canada. Formed in 1961, ASPPB creates the Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP), which is used by licensing boards to assess candidates for licensure and certification. ASPPB also offers mobility programs to assist in licensure of psychologists already licensed in another state, province, or territory, and also publishes materials for training programs and for students preparing to enter the profession.

Congratulations Dr. Siegel!

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