Competence Is More Than a License

A psychology license gives us permission to practice. It does not automatically make us competent to provide every psychological service to every population in every setting.

For psychologists, competence is an ongoing professional responsibility. It involves knowing what we know, recognizing what we do not know, and taking appropriate steps when practice moves into unfamiliar territory.

THE ETHICAL FOUNDATION

APA Standard 2.01 states that psychologists provide services within the boundaries of their competence based on education, training, supervised experience, consultation, study, or professional experience. Standard 2.03 requires psychologists to maintain competence. When entering new populations, areas, techniques, or technologies, psychologists should obtain appropriate education, training, consultation, or study.

In other words, competence is not static.

WHEN PRACTICE EXPANDS

Today's psychologists may move into telepsychology, forensic work, new assessment methods, emerging technologies, new populations, or clinical areas that were not part of their original training.

Ask yourself:

- What formal education and supervised experience do I have in this area?
- What training or continuing education do I need?
- Who could provide consultation?
- What does current professional literature say?
- Are there North Carolina or other jurisdiction-specific requirements?
- What would I do if the client's needs exceeded my competence?

Sometimes the answer is additional training. Sometimes it is consultation. Sometimes it is referral.

CONSULTATION IS A STRENGTH

Experienced psychologists sometimes hesitate to seek consultation because they believe they should already know the answer. Consultation is actually one of the tools that helps professionals maintain competence.

Consultation can be especially valuable when entering a new practice area, encountering a complicated ethical question, working with an unfamiliar population, or noticing uncertainty that could affect judgment.

THE PRACTICAL TAKEAWAY

Being a competent psychologist does not mean knowing everything. It means maintaining the knowledge and skills necessary for the work you undertake and responding appropriately when your current competence is not enough.

Sometimes the most professional decision is to seek consultation. Sometimes it is to obtain additional training. Sometimes it is to make a referral.

Knowing the difference is part of competent practice.

Resources: APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, Standards 2.01 and 2.03; North Carolina Psychology Practice Act.

Note: This article is educational and is not legal advice. Psychologists should consult current North Carolina law, Board guidance, and the APA Ethics Code for questions about their individual practice.