

THE PROFESSIONAL BOARD FOR PSYCHOLOGY

GUIDANCE TO PREPARE FOR THE NATIONAL BOARD EXAMINATION FOR COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY

This guidance is written for trainee and previously registered Counselling Psychologists who are obliged to write the National Board Examination to demonstrate their command of the competencies of Counselling Psychology. The guidance is divided into four parts as follows:

1. Preparing for the National Board Examination for Counselling Psychology
2. The Scope of the Examination Paper
3. Recommended Reading
4. Writing the Examination

In addition to this guidance, please ensure that you familiarise yourself with the [Examination Policy for Psychologists, Registered Counsellors and Psychometrists \(Form 255\)](#).

Preparing for the National Board Examination for Counselling Psychology

It is important that you take time to prepare for the National Board Exam and not simply rely on your learning from your academic and internship years.

To prepare adequately for the Board Examination for Counselling Psychology, you should be able to demonstrate a good understanding of professional identity of Counselling Psychology and demonstrate that you can apply your professional knowledge as a Counselling Psychologist to relevant cases in an ethical manner.

The format of the paper, therefore, is usually in the form of one or more written case studies followed by a variety of questions that require you to demonstrate that you can appropriately apply your knowledge. You may be asked to describe and resolve any ethical issues, provide a diagnosis and/or case formulation, and discuss how you would intervene as a Counselling Psychologist. There may be other questions that test your knowledge of the scope and professional identity of Counselling Psychology.

The Scope of the Examination Paper

The scope of the examination paper is determined by the Board's definition of Counselling Psychology and list of competencies of Counselling Psychology, both of which have been recently updated.

The definition of counselling psychology, which should always inform your approach to psychological assessment, diagnosis, formulation and intervention, is as follows:

Counselling Psychology is a specialist category within professional Psychology that promotes the personal, social, educational and career functioning and well-being of individuals, couples, families, groups, organisations and communities. Counselling Psychologists assist people with normal developmental issues, and also prevent and alleviate psychological and mental health disorders that range from mild to moderate severity. Psychological assessment, diagnosis, and formulation draw on a holistic appreciation of people's lived experiences and their sociocultural contexts. Counselling Psychologists deliver a range of high-intensity psychological interventions that take into account the therapeutic potential of positive relationships, and people's strengths and resources.

The Board for Psychology's mandate to protect the public means that the emphasis of the Examination should be on the areas that involve direct contact with vulnerable clients. Therefore, of the seven areas of competency, the examination will be confined to (1) Psychological Assessment, (2) Psychological Intervention, (3) Professional Practice and (7) Ethics and Legislation. (For a complete list of competencies, please consult the document, [Minimum standards for the training of Counselling Psychology](#).)

Psychological Assessment

- a. Knowledge of psychological measurement and psychometric theory, including the ability to judge the reliability and validity of psychometric tests in different social contexts and for different social groups.
- b. Knowledge of a range of psychological issues and problems, including life stressors and more severe issues with which people may struggle as individuals, families, groups, communities and organisations, including developmental and adjustment problems, psychological crises, and mental and behavioural disorders.
- c. Competence using ICD and DSM diagnostic systems to diagnose mental and behavioural disorders, as well as knowledge of informed critiques of such systems.

- d. Ability to conduct a comprehensive intake interview to obtain a detailed history and coherent description of the client's (individuals, couples, families, groups, communities or organisations) psychological functioning.
- e. Ability to appropriately select and accurately administer culturally sensitive instruments and norms to assess intellectual, behavioural, emotional, personality, neuropsychological and career functioning.
- f. Ability to accurately interpret and integrate data from intake interviews, records, psychometric assessments and other sources to generate coherent case conceptualisations (formulations) that describe and explain clients' (individuals, couples, families, groups, communities or organisations) psychological functioning, including their strengths and resources, and recognising the influence of sociocultural contexts.
- g. Ability to formulate useful recommendations, including, when appropriate, clear and specific recommendations for psychological interventions.
- h. Ability to communicate the results and recommendations of assessments in written and verbal form clearly, constructively and accurately.
- i. Ability to offer a well-supported medicolegal opinion and appropriate expert testimony when required.

Psychological Interventions

- a. Knowledge of the theory and practice of more than one model of psychological therapy (for example, cognitive therapy, psychodynamic psychotherapy, narrative therapy, person-centred therapy etc.).
- b. Ability to formulate and conceptualise cases and plan interventions utilising at least one consistent theoretical orientation, drawing on the relevant empirical research and appropriately matched to own clinical expertise and client preferences.
- c. Ability to implement counselling and psychotherapeutic interventions to enhance psychological functioning and well-being, and address psychological problems that fall within the ambit of Counselling Psychology, including typical life stresses and more severe issues, including developmental and adjustment problems, psychological crises and trauma, as well as mild-to-moderate mental and behavioural disorders.
- d. Ability to implement these interventions in different contexts, including educational, community, health, correctional and work/organisational settings.
- e. Demonstrates an appreciation of sociocultural contexts in which people are situated, including the ways in which socio-political and economic factors cause human distress.

- f. Ability to initiate and sustain mentoring relationships utilising sound interpersonal and communication and other counselling skills to assist people in their learning, personal and professional development.
- g. Ability to design and provide psychoeducation, as well as community and public health interventions to prevent or delay psychological problems that fall within the ambit of Counselling Psychology, reduce the negative impact of these problems, and/or promote psychological health, optimal functioning and well-being.
- h. Ability to facilitate group processes, including, mediation, conflict resolution, and restorative justice.
- i. Ability to support and enable vulnerable groups to express their views and concerns, and access information and services, and to defend and promote their rights.

Professional Practice

- a. Knowledge of the theories of mental health and well-being, life-span development, family systems, resilience and adjustment, career psychology, positive psychology and health psychology, and the application of these in assessment and intervention.
- b. Knowledge of the history and values of Counselling Psychology; demonstrates understanding of self as a Counselling Psychologist.
- c. Committed to holistic strength-based development, and, while able to diagnose symptoms effectively, avoids excessive focus on pathology in treatment planning and case conceptualisation.
- d. Demonstrates understanding that historical, social and contextual factors influence human development and functioning across multiple life domains.
- e. Knowledge of important features of the South African social contexts, including poverty, inequality, and unemployment, the high prevalence of HIV, and race and racism; demonstrates understanding of the principles of social justice.
- f. Ability to work sensitively with marginalised groups, and address psychological issues related to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and disablism.
- g. Demonstrates reflectivity both during and after professional activity, based on an understanding of own personal strengths and weaknesses, patterns of behaviour, emotional and cognitive biases, motivation, beliefs and values, and how these may impact on clients and professional functioning.
- h. Communicates clearly using verbal and written skills in a professional context; demonstrates clear understanding and use of professional language.
- i. Forms and maintains productive and respectful relationships with clients, peers/colleagues, supervisors and professionals from other disciplines.

- j. Ability to identify and network with local resources and facilities, and empower clients to access health, community, legal, labour and educational resources.
- k. Ability to refer clients to relevant professionals in a variety of systems, including health, education, legal and labour systems.
- l. Competence in information management, which includes the appropriate management of records and psychometric instruments.
- m. Ability to promote the profession of Counselling Psychology

Ethics and Legislation

- a. Demonstrates advanced knowledge and application of the code of professional ethics of the HPCSA and the Professional Board for Psychology.
- b. Knowledge of relevant legislative frameworks which impact on psychological practice and research.
- c. Ability to act in accordance with these ethical and legal frameworks.
- d. Understanding of the limitations and boundaries of own professional competence.

Recommended Reading

You will need to consult readings that will help you to appropriately demonstrate the competencies that are listed above. Some useful ones are described below, though the list is not and can never be exhaustive:

Candidates are advised to consult relevant local and international literature that describes the history, the values and practice of Counselling Psychology. If you are not well versed in this area, then some useful references, include some of the following:

- [Bantjes, J., Kagee, A., & Young, C. \(2016\). Counselling Psychology in South Africa. Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 29\(2\), 171-183.](#)
- [Packard, T. \(2009\). The 2008 Leona Tyler award address: Core values that distinguish counseling Psychology: Personal and professional perspectives. Counseling Psychologist, 37, 610–624.](#)
- [Young, C. \(2013\). South African Counselling Psychology at the crossroads: Lessons to be learned from around the world. South African Journal of Psychology, 43\(4\), 422-433.](#)
- [Young, C., Bantjes, J., Kagee, A. \(2016\). Professional boundaries and the identity of Counselling Psychology in SA. South African Journal of Psychology, 41\(1\), 3-8.](#)

To practice ethically in South Africa, you should be able to demonstrate sound knowledge of the relevant HPCSA policies. These include the following:

- The ethical code for Psychologists. This includes two documents: The first is the [Ethical Rules of Conduct for Practitioners Registered under the Health Professions Act, 1974](#) that applies to all registered health professionals, and the second is [Annexure 12 - Rules of Conduct Pertaining Specifically to the Profession of Psychology](#).
- It is essential that you make sure that you are very familiar with the ethical code to practice ethically in South Africa. The ethical readings can and should be complemented but never replaced by other sources. Good complementary readings include the work of Alfred Allan and others (E.g., [Allan, A. \(2016\). Law and Ethics in Psychology: An International Perspective \(3rd Ed.\). Place: Inter-Ed](#)).
- You should also be familiar with the [List of Classified Tests \(Form 207\)](#), and understand the purpose of test classification, which is described in the [Policy on the Classification of Psychometric Measuring Devices, Instruments, Methods and Techniques \(Form 208\)](#).
- Other important HPCSA policies that could be covered in the Exam include the revised [Policy Document on Business Practices](#).
- As Counselling Psychologists, you should understand and appreciate the mental health and psychological implications of the HIV pandemic and be familiar with the [HPCSA Good Practice Guide \(HIV\)](#).

Ethical practice should also comply with the laws of the country in which you will work. Candidates should familiarise themselves with the relevant sections of the following National legislation:

- [Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 108 of 1996](#). This chapter is the Bill of Rights that enshrines the rights of all people in our country and affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom. Psychological Acts must always be conducted in a manner that is consistent with the Bill of Rights.
- Also relevant is the [National Health Act, 61 of 2003](#) that provides a framework for a structured uniform health system within the Republic, taking into account the obligations imposed by the Constitution and other laws on the national, provincial and local governments with regard to health services.
- It is advisable that you familiarise yourself with the [Health Professions Act, 56 of 1974](#) that established the Health Professions Council of South Africa and the Professional

Boards to provide for control over the education, training and registration for and practising of registered Health Professions.

- [The Children's Act, 38 of 2005](#) governs all the laws relating to the care and protection of children and is therefore very relevant to the practice of Counselling Psychology. Similarly, the [Child Justice Act, 75 of 2008](#) specifies the laws that apply to accused children.
- All practising Psychologists should understand the legal aspects with regard to mentally ill offenders in South Africa, and so you should be familiar with the relevant sections of the [Criminal Procedure Act, 51 of 1977](#).
- [Section 8 of the Employment Equity Act, 55 of 1998](#) refers to psychological testing in the workplace, which you should know. Though written for the workplace, the requirements are applicable in many other contexts. Indeed, make sure that you appreciate the use and potential abuse of psychological instruments in our multicultural, post-apartheid era.

There are many readings that you may want to consult to prepare yourself to answer questions on psychometric assessment. The following text is a good resource and freely available:

- [Psychological Assessment in South Africa: Research and applications](#), edited by S. Laher & K. Cockcroft (Eds.) and published by Wits University Press in 2013. The text is open access and can be freely downloaded <http://oopen.org/search?identifier=1004362>

You should be able to demonstrate very good knowledge of the major diagnostic systems:

- The Fifth Edition of the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders \(DSM–5\)](#) (you should know too that this is one of two systems, and in practice you should also be familiar with the International Classification of Disease, Eleventh Revision (ICD-11), particularly where it deviates from the DSM-5). Counselling Psychologists are expected to have particular expertise in dealing with mental and behavioural disorders of mild to moderate severity, and the range of other situations and conditions that may be focus of clinical attention.

Diagnostic questions will be to do with psychological problems that fall within the scope of practice for Counselling Psychology, including typical life stresses and more severe issues, such developmental and adjustment problems, psychological crises and trauma, as well as mild-to-moderate mental and behavioural disorders. Of the mental and behavioural disorders, ensure that you are very familiar with the diagnostic criteria for the anxiety disorders,

depressive disorders, substance-use disorders, obsessive-compulsive and related disorders, bulimia nervosa, and the trauma and stressor-related disorders. Counselling psychologists should of course understand the diagnostic distinctions and overlaps between bereavement and depression and other related disorders.

And do not forget that Counselling Psychology is also concerned with the spectrum of psychological challenges that may or may not meet diagnostic criteria for the mental and behavioural disorders. Issues of adjustment, conflict, displacement, disaster, stress, trauma, disability and change are equally worthy of attention.

You are free to use any recognised psychotherapeutic approach in answering questions to do with case conceptualisation / case formulation and intervention. You will not be expected to provide an in-depth description of any of the therapeutic approaches, but you may well be asked to comment on the therapeutic implications of a case study and will struggle to do this without a solid understanding of one or more approaches.

As already stated, the list of readings and legislation above is far from exhaustive. You should also consult your own course readings and material that address these core competencies of Counselling Psychology listed above in the broad areas of assessment, diagnosis, formulation and intervention, and those that deal with contextual issues such poverty, inequality, and unemployment, the high prevalence of HIV, and race and racism, multi-culturalism, child abuse, human rights, disability, social justice and more.

If asked to provide a case formulation (or case conceptualisation), you should do so in such a way as to describe and explain the clients' psychological functioning (a client could be an individual, couple, family, group, community or organisation), no matter how impaired, including always their strengths and resources, and, very importantly, illustrate the influence of relevant social, cultural, political and economic factors. Always stay true to the philosophical tenets of Counselling Psychology.

Writing the Examination

Though you will by now have successfully written many exams in your life, it is always good to be reminded to approach the paper carefully and systematically. Arrive early, so that you do not put yourself under any unnecessary stress. Check that you have been given the correct paper (it has happened that candidates have written the paper for another category). Make sure that you read the instructions, case studies and the questions very carefully. Examinations are stressful, and it is easy to misread a question or miss an important detail in the case study.

Manage your time carefully. Often when candidates fail the exam, it is because they did not manage to complete all the questions. Allocate time to each section according to their proportional values; If, for example, a question is worth 25 marks out of 100, you should spend no more than a quarter of your time on it, which for a three-hour exam, is 45 minutes.

Spend a few minutes to structure your answers rather than immediately responding and always try to leave enough time at the end to review your answers carefully.

Good luck.

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