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Letters to the Editor

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Stephen M. Marson & Donna DeAngelis, Editors

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Replies to: [Does Racial Bias Exist in the ASWB Social Work Exams?](#)

In the USA, the topic of the ASWB exams is *hotly* debated. Within social work discussion circles, I have never witnessed such overt anger. I found this display of emotions quite perplexing. The topic of these exams has been more emotionally charged than discussions regarding abortions. For full disclosure, I recruited faculty to submit letters to the editor. I made a concerted effort to encourage the angriest commentators to contribute to the discussion. My efforts failed. When I asked the three most angry activists why they would *not* submit their positions as a letter to the editor, I received no reply. Thus, there are no letters which *strongly* oppose the exam structure.

Stephen M. Marson, Ph.D. Editor

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From: Anthony Bibus <bibus@augsborg.edu>

Date: Monday, August 22, 2022, at 3:05 PM

To: Stephen Marson <smarson@nc.rr.com>

Subject: Re: ["BPD-L"] Social Work Values and Ethics in Intercultural Relations

Steve,

Thanks for the useful, fun to read, and timely editorial essay, Steve! I have heard both professional and public members of Minnesota's licensing Board of Social Work who were Black make similar statements as your colleague said:

"The most devastating form of racism is creating a lower standard for African American students." In the discussions generated by assertions like these, I affirm my agreement with this view. Racism abounds when we assume a person from a specified group thereby cannot meet standards. And of course, standards themselves can be influenced by institutional racism. There be ghosts and dragons, as you have said.

(You probably meant "quantitative" right? in the following sentence at the start of the ASWB and Racial Test Bias section:

"Unlike in the academic setting, ASWB has always employed highly qualitative strategies to address institutional racism.")

Tony

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From: Joel Fischer <jfischer@hawaii.edu>

Date: Tuesday, August 23, 2022, at 7:25 PM

To: <smarson@nc.rr.com>

Subject: Your racism editorial

Hi Steve: long time no nothing, yeah?

Well, I am reconnecting (I hope) to let you know your editorial was DYNAMITE!!

I have a small group of professors from all over the country with whom I communicate regularly who are all over this issue with extremely divisive accusations, full of blame.

I can imagine that similar attitudes might be pretty common in social workers all around the US.

So, I will attempt to find a way to send your editorial to my friends and acquaintances. I am certain you will have a major influence in changing the opinions of many people.

Great job!

Aloha, Joel

PS. If there's any chance you could email this editorial to me, it would greatly facilitate my efforts.

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From: Diane Falk <Diane.Falk@stockton.edu>

Date: Wednesday, August 24, 2022, at 1:52 PM

To: "Steve Marson (smarson@nc.rr.com)" <smarson@nc.rr.com>

Subject: Does racial bias exist in the ASWB exam?

Hi Steve,

I found this to be a very helpful article. NASW-NJ has been hosting discussions among NJ social work program deans, directors, and related educators about this issue, and many have targeted the exam. I have sent your article to the NASW-NJ Executive Director, hoping that it will enlighten the discussion.

Diane

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From: Patricia West-Okiri <Patricia.West@wnmu.edu>

Date: Tuesday, August 30, 2022 at 8:57 AM

To: Stephen Marson <smarson@nc.rr.com>, Chris Lloyd <ecloyd@ualr.edu>, Raymond Adams <dewayne234@gmail.com>

Cc: Shimon Cohen <shimonsocialwork@gmail.com>, 'bpd-l@list.iupui.edu'

Subject: Re: ["BPD-L"] Sign the petition: End Discriminatory Social Work Licensing Exams

Hi,

Here is just a guess in answer to how the exam *could* be biased even though the questions are not. On the exam, there are many "best choices" (lots of grey area...judgement-based questions). Correct answers are based on normed responses. Norming involves selecting the choices that most examinees make - so you are relying on the majority of exam-takers to choose what qualifies as "correct". Who takes the exam most often? That's going to be your reference group (the norm). So, might the exams be normed against a reference group that is not necessarily representative of BIPOC? It is highly possible. If so, someone who is not a member of the reference group may answer based on their perspective, culture, experiences, etc. as they select the "best choice" in each scenario, I mean, isn't that what we all do?

One way to address this might be to change the way the exam questions are normed so that reference groups are more representative, though I am not sure how that might affect the validity and reliability of the exam overall.

As someone who works at a rural HSI, I often advised my students not to think about the questions from a rural or minority (most often their own) perspective, but as they are taking the exam, to channel their inner "city-dwelling mid-30's white woman" because this is the likely reference group based on the majority of test-takers. (Sorry if that sounds offensive to anyone! But this advice has helped many of my students to pass.)

Have a good day,

Patti

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From: Andrew Fultz <fultza@nsula.edu>

Date: Tuesday, August 30, 2022 at 11:46 AM

To: "bpd-l@list.iupui.edu" <bpd-l@list.iupui.edu>

Cc: Shimon Cohen <shimonsocialwork@gmail.com>, Patricia West-Okiri <Patricia.West@wnmu.edu>, Chris Lloyd <ecclloyd@ualr.edu>, Raymond Adams <dewayne234@gmail.com>, Stephen Marson <smarson@nc.rr.com>

Subject: RE: ["BPD-L"] Sign the petition: End Discriminatory Social Work Licensing Exams

Good morning colleagues,

I want to first recognize that many have spoken honestly and intelligently on the topic of the inequities that exist in relation the licensure passage rates. I believe many of us see those inequalities as complex and derived from a system of privilege and social structure that has not supported or helped those most affected by the disproportionate passage rates, particularly Black social work students and professionals, and older students and professionals in this case as well. Those emails, twitter posts, podcasts, and correspondents have moved the discussion forward even in the moments of uncomfortable dialogue and silence. The responses by individuals who have chosen to speak as the empirical voice of reason challenging the claims of racism and inequality have spoken from their own perspectives. As noted in many of the articles shared in the petition and in other literature, these responses contribute to a long-standing issue many have with how the status quo is supported and how empirical science is used as a means of norming and providing objectivity while negating the need for changes. This has left many struggling to want to remain in the dialogue.

I believe we are at a time in our society where conversations on race, racism, power, oppression, inequality and similar topics (that are lived realities for many) are changing and have become even more difficult than we could have predicted 6-10 years ago. The conversation on the ASWB exam is a great example of this. I would challenge us all to read and reflect on the work of pioneers through the years as an example of how we should remain steadfast in our willingness to discuss these issues and allow our

perspectives to shift. I am thinking of the works of James Baldwin, bell hook, Kimberle Crenshaw, Audre Lorde and countless others who were writing on these topics from their own nuanced perspectives when it was not palatable to those with unchecked privilege and power. I say their names because they have impacted me personally. There are countless others who have written and spoken on these topics for years. Don't discount them because of a perception of a lack of empiricism. We would not have a profession if individuals did not question the status quo decades ago.

I think our discussions regarding the results by race and age are showing us where to grow as individuals and as a profession. The immediate reaction by many was to call out the effects of racism. Others retorted with affluence and poverty as the possible better correlates or avenues of scientific inquiry. I would challenge that we look at this non-dualistically and understand this as an example of how we are all looking at the same thing differently. Dualistic thinking leads us to a battle of "this versus that". This is how sides are formed in this type of dialogue. Non-dualistic thinking allows for opposite truths to exist in the same moment. I would challenge those on the dissenting side (of whether this is racism) that they have chosen to consider that affluence and poverty are the social manifestations of inequity and White supremacy that exists within our society. Those are two of many ways in which we can measure the effects of racism and disenfranchisement. They contribute to the overall effect of what we call racism. Borrowing the idea, you can argue that the better correlates are affluence and poverty, but do we not agree that those ultimately serve as mechanisms of inequality?

Why is it that people of color in our country are disproportionately negatively affected in relation to poverty, hiring rates, interactions with law enforcement, and even licensing pass rates in social work? Looking at the example given recently, students from affluent schools had better passage rates than those from less affluent schools of social work. Where does the disproportionality and disenfranchisement come from? What factors lead those schools to struggle for funding? Why do the other schools thrive? We can all imagine the various ways that schools in the top 10 have ascended to

that level. It isn't just the processes of White supremacy, norming, and power, or is it a multidimensional issue that we are dealing with here?

The point of this email is to say that dialogue is really difficult, but we have to be committed. We have to be willing to examine the status quo and know that we can never assume we have arrived when it comes to standards and means of licensure. We have to acknowledge and remember that we have a large number of young colleagues spending \$260 per test and more in the licensure process of each state who are being affected by an exam that is resulting in disproportionate outcomes for marginalized individuals. They have lost jobs after spending thousands of dollars to earn a degree from an accredited program. They have spent money on test preparation. With where we are in society today, we need a licensure process so that empower all students to effectively and competently work in their communities and have a means of financial stability. We also have to remember the importance of critical dialogue if we are to move forward together. Moving forward fractured is a risk I don't think we want to take. It is our responsibility to carry the load and do the work, however it is most effective for each person. I do not have all the answers to solve the problem, but collectively, if we will do the work, we can develop it together. I have seen critical ideas submitted already and others are formulating and preparing for more. We should support them and join them.

Sincerely,

Andrew

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From: Katherine van Wormer <katherine.vanwormer@uni.edu>

Date: Tuesday, August 30, 2022 at 3:35 PM

To: Stephen Marson <smarson@nc.rr.com>

Cc: Shimon Cohen <shimonsocialwork@gmail.com>, "BPD-L@list.iupui.edu"

Subject: Re: ["BPD-L"] Sign the petition: End Discriminatory Social Work Licensing Exams

The problem is not in the individual questions but in the nature of standardized (multiple choice) questioning itself. No, the individual questions are not racist or sexist; they just do not measure what they are supposed to measure. The dilemma is there needs to be some kind of national testing for licensing purposes to enhance respect for the profession while at the same time the profession can't afford to lose some of its most valuable social workers who are from culturally backgrounds more closely aligned with the people they will be working with. On this listserv we can all agree on these points I think and, on the need, to find some other way to measure competence, perhaps using questions drawing on analysis of case histories or of writings on the workings (and failures) of social welfare programs. This discussion is important, and the focus should be on solutions. So, let's all put our heads together and come up with some workable suggestions. (I never used multiple choice questions in teaching social work and wasn't aware of any racial/ethnic differences in the results although the female students did better than male students on the whole.)

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From: "Anderson, William A" <william.anderson@mnsu.edu>

Date: Friday, October 7, 2022 at 7:04 PM

To: Stephen Marson <smarson@nc.rr.com>

Subject: Re: ["BPD-L"] ASWB Exam Comments

The following comment was originally posted to the BPD listserv Thursday, October 6, 2022. The opinions are the author's and are not from any of the organizations mentioned.

The recent burst of interest in the ASWB exam has revealed a number of complicated issues and also some simplistic possible solutions. As one who was actively involved years ago in licensure (founding member of the Minnesota Board of Social Work) and ASWB (delegate and Board member), I would like to add some perspective. I have also been a social worker for more than 50 years (currently retired but still active as a volunteer) and have seen the changes that licensure has brought to our profession.

The development of professional social work has generated many benefits for all levels of social work practice, from the dramatic expansion of funding for clinical social work to the increase in employment for bachelor's level social workers with professional education. Many of my generation will remember when there was limited reimbursement available for clinical practice and when anyone could call themselves a social worker. Groups such as NASW and CSWE have played an appropriately self-serving role in this development through lobbying for licensure laws and creating a national system of educational standards recognized by those laws. The rapidly expanding role of ASWB as both the provider of national exams and the developer of model statutes and other resources for state licensure information has also contributed to this process.

The first issue that seems to come up in every discussion of licensure is the failure to see the difference between a professional organization (e.g., NASW) and a regulatory agency (state licensure boards and by extension ASWB). As a member of NASW for over 40 years I valued its provision of continuing education, its social change efforts and its creation of a

community of professionals. I was less enamored of its over-emphasis on clinical social work but that is the source of the majority of its members. Similarly, as one who has written or guided the writing of many CSWE re-accreditations, presented at multiple conferences and done a few site visits, I see the value of national educational standards, even if they are implemented in ways that sometimes have to respond to political realities and fear of lawsuits. Accreditation standards have been used as a lever by programs throughout the country to expand their resources and serve students better. Given the generally positive role of NASW and CSWE, it is not surprising that many folks seem to expect licensure boards to also be advocacy organizations for social workers, when in fact they are primarily tasked with restricting licensure to those who are qualified and confronting ethical lapses that threaten the safety of the public.

The use of a licensure exam is certainly not unique to social work and is part of the process of assessing qualifications in most professions and many occupations. What may be more unique is paying attention to and publishing data about passage rates (I recently asked several administrators of other health-related boards and they had not seen such data). The choice of exam type is a delicate balancing of validity and practicality – exams should be able to prove their connection to practice and should also be manageable in terms of administration and cost. Clearly the traditional multiple-choice format is a compromise, and one that academics are familiar with in their own practice. While I haven't seen any studies of the question, it does seem like the higher the student/faculty ratio is in a classroom the more likely that assessment will be done with easier to score devices. I personally prefer simulations and writing assignments, but if you put 40 students in my course (with no TA) I will move toward more easily quantified tools. Similarly, if Boards are testing tens of thousands of applicants per year there is almost no other option than so-called "objective" tests, both in terms of administration and especially cost – applicants already are faced with what they consider high licensing costs, imagine if they were paying for individualized simulations or other strategies that might be more valid (or might not).

Another argument I've seen is based on the idea that students have already completed an accredited degree so why should they also have to take a test. I'm presuming that no one wants to do away with CSWE accreditation even if it may also discriminate against people who are counseled out or have life experiences but can't afford college or who attend schools that don't offer the BSW or MSW (I had a spirited discussion once with a social sciences faculty member from a school with a fancy reputation who wanted to know why his students couldn't become licensed even though that school doesn't offer any social work degrees). It might be useful to reflect on how CSWE develops educational standards versus how ASWB develops test content domains. CSWE uses an elaborate committee process with input (opinions) from delegates to develop the standards which are then interpreted and implemented across departments and ultimately operationalized by faculty within their classrooms. ASWB uses a much more grounded process based on a job analysis where practicing licensees are surveyed about what they actually do and then trained item-writers create questions which reflect those activities; those questions are then reviewed by an exam committee and pre-tested and carefully reviewed for possible future use. As one would expect, all of the domains that ASWB assesses are part of an accredited program's curriculum but there is a value to having a national standardized test that is tied to practice rather than simply accepting that students from the wide variety of schools have the minimum knowledge, skills and values (KSV) that they need. I have no doubt that the ASWB exam development process is a lot more rigorous and concerned about diversity than what the vast majority of faculty use to measure outcomes in their classes.

Another challenge derives from the age old question of "what is social work"? I've seen this in two different manifestations: 1) does social work differ so much from place to place (CA to MS to ME) that there is no way to assess applicants that were trained for their school's unique environment?; and 2) does social work differ across target populations so much that there is no way to assess applicants with a standardized exam? Of course one could break this down even farther to differences in rural/urban or differences within minority populations. Even in heavily Caucasian

Minnesota there are pockets of cultural differences and then differences within subgroups with shared labels such as Black or Latinx. So if you are a graduate of an accredited program do we make the seemingly naïve assumption that you are qualified to work with any client population anywhere? Or, if you are a graduate of a program focused on urban Native American issues do we presume you are qualified automatically to relocate and be licensed to work with a completely different population? Or is it possible to identify a generic set of KSV's that define social work practice and then leave the specifics to advanced education and on the job training?

That last idea may in fact be a trick question; it is pretty obvious that whenever a default definition of a complex concept is proposed, it is often a white definition. States that don't want their children exposed to progressive ideas try to enforce traditional (i.e., white) reading lists and curriculum. States that want to discourage groups from voting propose restrictions on any radical new ideas like same-day registration or mail voting. Has ASWB gathered data from primarily majority practitioners and built an exam that discriminates against non-majority applicants? The recently released report from ASWB (see their website) suggests that there are many differences in performance across groups, schools, and regions. Is it ASWB's fault if applicants from regions that fund education better do better on the test? Or if some schools within a region that are better staffed or funded have students that do better? As any of us who have some language skills beyond English would attest, it is not that hard to get along in a second or third language, but it is very hard to take a multiple-choice test outside of your primary language. But wouldn't that be easy to remedy – why not offer the exam in every language that applicants request? Obviously because that would be extremely expensive and the act of translation can cause difficult validity questions. Who would pay for these additional expenses (it would not seem possible for the small pool of applicants to have to cover the cost)?

While I could discuss these issues for hours (and have), I'm sure I've passed most folks' email length tolerance so I'll wrap it up. The test results show disparities across race and age in particular and much smaller

disparities across gender. ASWB does everything that best practices in psychometrics suggest to reduce differential item impact. The test is the final stage in a long line of activities that are vulnerable to systemic racism, and may just be revealing the failures of our K-12 and collegiate educational systems. Jurisdictions that jump on this issue without much thought and simply throw out the exam requirement will make it impossible for their licensees to move across state lines as the vast majority of states will continue to recognize that social work licensure (like most everyone else) should require an exam. Students should hold their academic programs responsible for not adequately preparing them for the test, and programs should do more to prepare students. Often students have not had experience with multiple choice testing in their final years of schooling (spent in small methods classes and fieldwork) so schools should make sure they are prepared. We should expect that some percentage of applicants will fail the test, but we should not grow comfortable if the patterns of failure suggest problems in our educational systems.

Bill Anderson, MSW, PhD, LISW (active emeritus)

Professor Emeritus