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Alternative Pathways to Social Work Licensure: A Critical Review and Social Equity Policy Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: In August 2022, the Association of Social Work Boards released a long called for pass rate analysis that revealed significant disparities. While many states look to cease the requirement of the Bachelors, Masters, and Advanced Generalist exams in their licensure process, status quo bias leads to hesitancy to remove the requirement of the Clinical exam.

Method: A critical review was undertaken to identify possible alternatives to the current multiple-choice competency-based exam which yielded three assessment formats (oral exams, portfolios, and performance assessment/simulations) and two alternatives (jurisprudence exams and provisional licensure). Informed by an Afrocentric lens, we undertook a social and racial policy analysis to examine alternative pathways for licensure from the perspective of a social work board member. We centered our analysis on the impacts on (1) Black social workers, who currently have the highest pass-rate disparities; (2) social workers whose primary language is not English, and (3) social workers with disabilities who have anecdotally reported difficulty with getting testing accommodations. We rated each alternative on four social equity analysis criteria of procedural fairness, access, quality, and outcomes. These ratings were computed into an overall rating for each alternative from equitable to inequitable.

Results: We found jurisprudence exams and provisional licensure have the best possibility of being equitable pathways to licensure, with potential impacts on the regulation of supervision and continuing education.

Conclusion: Anti-racism and social justice as praxis require social work as a profession to divest from competency-based testing to eliminate racism in our own professional policies.

KEYWORDS

Social work licensure; competency-based exams; standardized exams; social and racial equity; policy analysis

In August 2022, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) released a long called for pass rate analysis for the first time in the history of the exam (Association of Social Work Boards, 2022a). Pass rate analysis had not been previously completed by ASWB and their psychometric vendors (Social Work Leadership Roundtable Town Hall on Racial Equity, 2020). The report revealed significant disparities among social workers who are Black, Indigenous/Native American, Hispanic/Latine, older, and whose first language is not English. These disparities increase

substantially with age. The intersection of race and age was the only intersectional analysis performed, as with previous studies of licensure barriers (e.g. Senreich & Dale, 2021), and demonstrated that White test takers, at any age, are far more likely to pass the exam. The use of the ASWB exams creates a barrier to licensure for these groups, worsening systemic oppression of clients, clinicians, and communities who need culturally responsive care informed by lived experience. The Association of Social Work Boards' pass rate analysis included no data on disparities among test takers who have disabilities, an area that advocates have also identified as having equity concerns (Sheridan et al., 2010). Discussions in response to these data called for analysis of alternatives to standardized exams and the need to develop inclusive pathways toward licensure to support a diverse workforce in social work, which we aim to do here (Morrow, 2023).

The behavioral and mental health workforce is experiencing a national crisis in workforce capacity, and shortages are predicted to worsen (Hoge et al., 2013; Olfson, 2016). Social workers are a critical part of the mental health workforce and can be leveraged to manage shortages in psychiatry (Mongelli et al., 2020). Historically excluded and racially oppressed communities are the most likely to suffer due to workforce shortages (Alegría et al., 2016; Department of Nursing, 2018). An adequate social work workforce is essential, and yet the use of the exams in licensing has kept trained social workers out of practice. The elimination of pre-clinical licensing exams in Illinois led to a 700% increase in the number of licensed practitioners under the supervision of the board who would have otherwise continued providing unlicensed practice or left the profession (NASW-IL Staff, 2021). Clients also prefer race and ethnicity matching (Cabral & Smith, 2011; Moore et al., 2022) and have better relationships and better outcomes when they receive race concordant care (Chao et al., 2012; Cheng et al., 2021; Field & Caetano, 2010). These are the very social workers gatekept from entering the profession due to the ASWB racially biased exams.

It is important to understand that the concerns about licensing exams and whether they harm Black, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latine and other minoritized social workers have been voiced since before the ASWB was founded. The National Association of Black Social Workers as far back as the 1960s argued against licensure which would utilize discriminatory standardized tests. These arguments were buttressed by critical race theory analysis demonstrating the inequitable, racially biased outcomes and culturally insensitive questions on exams. Calls by researchers and advocates for the validity, reliability, and fairness of the exam to be evaluated independently have been common throughout the social work literature (Albright & Thyer, 2010; Castex et al., 2019; Woodcock, 2014). However, it was not until a multi-year campaign by the National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work (NADD) that ASWB finally released the data. Although the ASWB congratulates itself on its “historic” and “groundbreaking” release of equity in pass rates, it omits its history and practice of information suppression. The data release was demanded by powerful advocates, not generously bestowed by ASWB. This history is important because the August 2022 release of exam pass rate data is not a novel and brave move by the ASWB, but a turning point in a half-century-long battle to encourage White social work to live up to what it promises on paper (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). This fight continues in states' response to the data as well as in the court of law (*Alameda v. Association of Social Work Boards*, 2023; Sussman et al., 2023).

Examinations in licensure

Public safety and protection are primary functions of licensure overall and in social work specifically (Association of Social Work Board, 2020; Kane, 2005; Miller et al., 2015; Morrow, 2023; Randall & DeAngelis, 2008). Professional licensure exams focus on specific competencies that are seen to be critical for safe practice (Kane, 2005; Miller et al., 2015). Exams are used within the licensure process to provide standardized measures that are seen as an objective evaluation of candidates' competency, which has been translated into knowledge and skills for testing (Kane, 2005).

If we view exams as predictors of future performance, then we need some criteria to measure and evaluate that future performance. Since licensure is focused on public safety, then ethical violations and engagement in unsafe practice would be one way to evaluate the performance of standardized exams. Current licensure exemptions that allow practitioners to practice social work without passing the exam would provide a natural experiment for these purposes. However, research into exemptions and public safety concluded that “it is unknown if and to what extent public health and safety are compromised by licensure exemptions. It is even difficult to find empirical evidence supporting that social work licensure protects the public from harm” (Kim, 2023, p. 113).

Eliminating exams

In response to ASWB's report, many states look to cease the requirement of the Bachelors, Masters, and Advanced Generalist exams in their licensure process, which are duplicative of education requirements (i.e., BSW or MSW). Because ASWB's report showed that less than 40% of Black test-takers *eventually* pass the bachelors exam, 52% of Black test-takers *eventually* pass the masters exam, and 60% of test-takers over 50 *eventually* pass either exam (compared to 80–90% of White test-takers), policymakers have clear evidence that exams prevent qualified social work graduates from historically underrepresented groups from practicing. Previous to the report, Illinois removed the requirement for the exam at their LSW level of licensure after determining that bachelors and masters trained social workers pose little risk to the public with the existing requirements of supervision and accredited education (NASW-IL Staff, 2021). Their analysis determined that the master's level exam was operating as “yet another burden to access for communities who are historically oppressed” (NASW-IL Staff, 2021). The ASWB's interactive resource on licensing requirements by state or province shows that many states do not use examinations to regulate *masters-level* practice (11: California, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Wyoming, Illinois, Connecticut, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Utah, Washington, and Florida) as well as *bachelors-level* practice (15: California, Rhode Island, Illinois, Colorado, New York, New Jersey, Louisiana, Georgia, Connecticut, Vermont, Washington, Nebraska, Utah, Georgia, and Florida) (Association of Social Work Boards, 2022c). These counts include states that removed exams after the ASWB stopped counting in October 2022 after the release of their report on examination bias.

Calls to remove the ASWB clinical exam have been far fewer. Currently, only two states license clinical social workers without the ASWB examination, with many more states (Massachusetts, New Jersey, Maryland, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, the District of Columbia) actively debating bills to do likewise. Status quo bias may contribute

to the hesitancy to remove the requirement of the clinical exam and blinds American social workers to the reality that only two of eight Canadian provinces who are members of ASWB use *clinical* social work examinations to regulate entry to practice. A catastrophe of Canadian clinical social work malpractice does not exist, and social workers in the United States would likely not think twice about the status or prestige of our Canadian counterparts. That is likely because exam legitimacy is not based on predictive validity but on perceptions of rigor and the symbolism of objectivity they evoke (Gipps, 1999).

Other pathways have been developed for specific populations or in specific circumstances. Previous to ASWB's pass-rate report, Minnesota developed a professional license in response to a significant need for social workers who spoke Hmong to serve their large increase in Hmong refugees (Skeen & Goodenough, 2023). The pathway is specifically for social workers who speak English as a second language, are foreign born, and have failed the ASWB exam once (Provisional Licenses, 2023; Skeen & Goodenough, 2023). Illinois has also recently developed a professional licensure for clinical level practice that allows those that fail the exam once to obtain additional supervision hours instead (NASW-IL Staff, 2023). Texas previously had an alternative pathway for after a social worker failed the ASWB exam within five points that was revoked in 2020 (Texas State Board of Social Worker Examiners, 2020). The "Alternative Method of Examining Competency" (Alexander & Johnston, 2008) allowed candidates 2 years to collect: 11 separate papers each 3–5 page double-spaced covering a separate, specific core content area of social work practice; one 7–10 page, double-spaced case analysis of work with a typical client during the provisional period; one 3–5 page, double-spaced self-evaluation; a daily journal of professional activities during the provisional period; quarterly evaluations from the supervisor; and an evaluation of the supervision by the candidate (*Texas Register*, n.d.). Notably, these policies all require candidates to first fail the exam prior to accessing the alternative pathway, exacting additional time and money from historically excluded and marginalized populations prior to providing access to a pathway to licensure.

Theoretical foundation

Due to whom these disparate pass-rates impact, we draw upon the Afrocentric paradigm as described by Schiele (2000) for policy analysis which focuses unequivocally on the impact on groups who are historically excluded, marginalized, and oppressed (Schiele, 2000). Modern Afrocentricity is an umbrella of theories and practices, first coined by Molefi Kete Asante (Kumah-Abiwu, 2016). Afrocentric policy analysis keeps with the overarching tenets of Afrocentricity by (1) viewing individual identity as collective, (2) giving preeminence to the group while still seeing the group as being made up of human people, and (3) insisting on maintaining the understanding of the needs and general humanism of the people when viewing a group (Schiele, 1990, 1997). Standardized testing is rooted in White supremacy (Au, 2020a, 2020b; Rosales & Walker, 2021) and leads to epistemic erasure of historically excluded and marginalized communities (Cunningham, 2018). Given that a central issue with the examinations is regarding what knowledge is validated and considered important for the evaluation of social work professionals, we found it vital to utilize the Afrocentric paradigm as it affirms the importance and validity of African and Indigenous wisdom and worldsense. Afrocentric analysis considers not only the cost but whether policies meet criteria of reciprocity, mutual respect, and working toward the

common good (Pellerin, 2012). Schiele (2000) critiques predominant social policy analysis frameworks as coming from a Eurocentric cultural lens:

They often neglect to recognize and underscore how their policy frameworks reinforce core themes of the Eurocentric worldview. They tend to omit or minimize Eurocentric domination as a chief attribute of the policy formulation, implementation, and analytic process, opting instead to highlight the importance of social class and universal concerns dealing with economic stratification or inequality (2000, pp. 171–172)

The Afrocentric paradigm, instead, focuses on the collective interests and well-being for all by centering on the experiences of those Schiele describes that are the most vulnerable. He draws on Iris Young's Five Faces of Oppression to describe varying levels of oppression and vulnerability experienced by different groups within society (Schiele, 2000).

Using an Afrocentric lens, our policy analysis focus will be on racial and social equity. While equity is frequently considered an important aspect of policy analysis (Bardach & Patashnik, 2020; O'Connor & Netting, 2011; Reisch, 2022), it is often seen as compromising efficiency (Gooden, 2023). The current usage of examination within licensure for social work is a policy choice that is feasible (Kane, 2005) and cost-effective, however it also has clear evidence of being racially biased (Association of Social Work Boards, 2022a). To address our primary concern of the use of a racist exam within the social work profession and to avoid the potential for other criteria to compromise our analysis, we will focus solely on social and racial equity in alternative pathways as this criterion should be our central concern if social work is to engage in social justice and anti-racism as a praxis.

Aims

The focus of this paper is to undertake a social and racial equity policy analysis of alternatives to the clinical exam at the independent licensing level identified through a critical review of the literature. There are three historically excluded groups for whom we focus on for social and racial equity impacts: (1) Black social workers, who currently have the highest pass-rate disparities; (2) social workers whose primary language is not English, and (3) social workers with disabilities who have anecdotally reported difficulty with getting testing accommodations.

Materials and methods

The overarching steps of the policy analysis undertaken here used Bardach and Patashnik's (2020) Eightfold Path for policy analysis to examine the issue of alternative pathways for licensure from the perspective of a social work board member. The eight steps include define the problem; assemble some evidence; construct the alternatives; select the criteria; project the outcomes; confront the trade-offs; stop, focus, narrow, deepen, decide; and tell your story (Bardach & Patashnik, 2020). The policy issue or problem we are aiming to address is that current licensing requirements for independent clinical social work practice create unnecessary barriers to licensure for Black, Hispanic/Latine, Indigenous, and other social workers of color, disabled social workers, and social workers whose native language is not English due to reliance on racist standardized testing. We completed a critical review of the literature to identify alternative exam formats and alternatives to competency-based

examination as policy alternatives to the current exam, which is step three. Then, each alternative was examined through the lens of social and racial equity, our chosen criteria in step 4, to center these concerns in considering alternative pathways for social work licensure.

Critical review

To explore potential alternative pathways, we conducted a critical review of social work historical practice, social work licensing literature, and the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (the *Joint Standards*) (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education Eds., 2011). The *Joint Standards* are cited as the main source of psychometric guidance for the ASWB exams and describe quality testing standards and guidelines which can be used to evaluate examination practices (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education Eds., 2011). Although many state boards are focused on reducing disparities in the ASWB pass-rates, there is no alternative examination that state boards can adopt that will serve the same purpose. We believe this policy paradox relies on a limited understanding of alternative pathways to licensure exams already or previously employed by social work boards as well as alternatives suggested by psychometricians. This assessment informed the selection and exclusion criteria for our critical review of the literature.

Systematic literature search methods were not used in this study because (a) much of the scholarship about social work examination and licensing is not published in peer-reviewed literature and (b) not all historical material is readily available online or searchable in databases and archives. Therefore, a targeted and purposive search approach was used. Beginning with the *Joint Standards*, we identified three alternatives exam formats – oral exams, performance assessments/simulations, and portfolios. In a purposive evaluation of the social work regulation literature and recent policy news, we identified two other alternatives – provisional licensure and jurisprudence exams – currently or previously used by social work boards to regulate clinical practice.

These five potential alternatives – oral exam, simulation, portfolio, provisional licensure, and jurisprudence exams – were inputted as keywords into Google Scholar and Google News in combination with [regulat*] [licens*] [certifi*] to arrive at a first set of articles potentially relevant to the review, following the critical review methodology from Carnwell and Daly (2001). A single author reviewed each article to see if it contained potentially relevant information related to potential bias or social equity of an exam alternative. They also combed the reference list of each article for additional sources and looked at what articles cited pertinent articles. We used “social work” as a keyword to identify articles that were specific to the discipline; however, information on the implementation of exam alternatives in other disciplines was also included if there were similarities in the professional context. Given our focus was on identifying alternatives, we did not provide themes based on theory or methodology, but by content to create the critical review below (Carnwell & Daly, 2001).

Our review was designed to be broad, but we excluded several categories of literature. Analysis of articles led us to exclude any papers focused on problems with the ASWB exam (or another discipline’s exam) as the focus of our review was alternatives to the existing

standardized multiple-choice exams. Social work licensing generally includes a degree from an accredited institution and continuing education. While alternative pathways may impact these aspects of licensure, these do not constitute alternative paths on their own. Thus, we did not include “education” in our review of alternatives. Similarly, we excluded international articles from the review. The United States is unique in that the ASWB examination is used to regulate clinical practice in all 50 states, whereas, many Canadian provinces do not use the examination, instead providing registration rather than licensure (Association of Social Work Boards, 2022c). Although this worsens the US-centric bias of the empirical record contained within, the wide variation in regulations, licenses, tiers, and scopes of practice across international borders is beyond the scope of this review. Articles older than 50 years and articles not written in English were also excluded from this analysis.

In evaluating the literature from our review, we organized the alternative pathways into two main groups: alternative exams and alternatives *to* the exams. Alternative exams include oral exams, portfolios, and performance assessment/simulations. These exams are built in similar ways to multiple choice exams, and would cover similar competencies that are linked to safe practice, and their main difference from the existing exam is that they include different item formats (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education Eds., 2011). In comparison, provisional licensure is an alternative pathway currently in use that could be offered without the requirement of failing the exam first, thus it would be offered as an alternative to the exam. Jurisprudence exams, while still an exam, are already in use in many states and are structured differently. Their focus is on laws and rules, a specific subset of knowledge, and does not cover any skills or abilities. Instead of covering all the competencies that are linked to safe practice for the profession, it covers one single domain that is critical to safe practice in many professions and is not open to speculation. As such, we view it as an alternative to our current exam which is framed as measuring competence (Association of Social Work Boards, 2022b).

Criteria

Informed by an Afrocentric paradigm, we drew upon writings focused on social and racial equity in government and public administration that are applicable to social work licensure (Gooden, 2014; Johnson & Svava, 2015). The outcome of our analysis is to rate each of the alternative pathways using Gooden’s (2014) racial equity ratings. These ratings range from equitable to inequitable, and rate the performance of a policy on the social equity analysis criteria developed by the Social Equity Panel of the National Academy of Public Administration (Johnson & Svava, 2015). These include the criteria of procedural fairness, access, quality, and outcome. *Procedural fairness* is focused on due process, procedural and operational issues, and equal rights or eligibility for policies and programs (Johnson & Svava, 2015). *Access* involves distributional equity and the level of access to services, or in this case examinations, such that everyone receives the same equitable access to assessment (Johnson & Svava, 2015). *Quality* is focused on consistency in the quality of services and process equity which would, for example, ensure that that social workers have the same quality of test prep (Johnson & Svava, 2015). Lastly, *outcomes* are focused on whether the policy has the same impact on all individuals or groups. Equitable outcomes would reflect no disparities in pass-rate or achievement of licensure. We adapted Johnson and Svava (2015) and Gooden’s (2014) work to rate each criterion as

Table 1. Social equity analysis outcomes by alternative pathway.

Social equity criteria	Performance assessments /simulations			Jurisprudence exams	Provisional licensure
	Oral exams	Portfolios			
Procedural fairness	Poor	Poor	Poor	Good	Good
Access	Poor	Poor	Good	Good	Good
Quality	Poor	Fair	Fair	Good	Good
Outcomes	Poor	Poor	Poor	Good	Good
Overall outcome	Inequitable	Inequitable	Moderately inequitable	Minimally inequitable	Minimally inequitable

poor, fair, good, or excellent. Based on the summation of the ratings in each category, each alternative identified in our critical review was categorized as equitable, minimally inequitable, moderately inequitable, and inequitable. Inequitable reflects poor performance across the categories. Moderately inequitable reflects fair performance on average over the four criteria. Minimally inequitable reflects fair to good performance across our equity dimensions based on our critical review. Equitable would reflect excellent equity across the four dimensions.

To rate the alternatives in each of these categories we considered the perspectives of people from many different standpoints including current students, career changers, older social workers, those who had passed the exam, those who had been unable to pass it after multiple attempts, people involved in social work education and test preparation, as well as Black, Hispanic/Latine, Indigenous, and disabled social workers. Due to the variable impact of implementation that could impact our equity criteria, and the issues with the exam that is supposedly following the *Joint Standards*, we aim for a middle of the road approach. Johnson and Svava (2015) explain that equity in equal results requires that changes in policies or additional resources be provided until the same results are achieved. However, we recognize that there might not be the funds or political will to do so, hence we consider the logistics and costs involved in each alternative and what lengths may be required to ensure equity for each of the alternatives, which we discuss in our results section. We do not assume that everything that could be done would be done in practice, nor do we view the alternatives pessimistically as likely to be as biased as is possible. Given the intersectionality of the potential impacts across groups, we are hesitant to find any of the categories excellent, as such we did not find any alternative to be equitable.

Results

For each of the alternatives we draw upon existing literature, the *Joint Standards*, and the perspective of three historically excluded groups: (1) Black social workers, who currently have the highest pass-rate disparities; (2) social workers whose primary language is not English, and (3) social workers with disabilities who have anecdotally reported difficulty with getting testing accommodations. A summary of our rankings can be found in [Table 1](#).

Alternative competency exams

Performance assessments or simulations

Performance assessments and simulations are focused on candidates demonstrating that they can perform specific tasks and demonstrate specific abilities (American Educational

Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education Eds., 2011). The difference between these is that performance assessments take place in real-life situations, such as with real clients, whereas simulations cover the same areas but are done in controlled environments, such as with actors. Performance exams and simulations require detailed scoring rubrics (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education Eds., 2011). Scoring rubrics may be analytical, meaning each criterion is judged independently, or holistic, which is scoring the overall performance (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education Eds., 2011). Rubrics must specify the criteria on which the assessment is evaluated, and the amount of judgment in scoring can differ (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education Eds., 2011). Given the variability in social work practice, scoring of these assessments will require examples for scorers; scorer qualifications, training, and monitoring; bias checking; and procedures to resolve scoring discrepancies (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education Eds., 2011). While simulations and performance exams offer greater flexibility in how candidates are assessed, that same flexibility results in variability which tends to increase measurement error and therefore impact outcomes (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education Eds., 2011).

Social work has significant variance in practice settings and theoretical orientation. Great care would need to be taken to ensure criteria chosen for assessment are not rooted in hegemonic knowledge (Au, 2020a; Cunningham, 2018). Some social workers use liberatory frameworks in their work with clients, and if performance expectations were founded in Eurocentric criteria, these assessments could continue to have disparate pass-rates which negatively impact outcomes. Preparation for a simulation of a specific type of practice interactions brings up issues of procedural fairness. Depending on the social worker's chosen practice area and the variety of simulation settings involved in assessment, some social workers could be at a significant disadvantage for recognition of their skills and abilities leading to disparate outcomes. Performance assessments and simulations may have issues with procedural fairness regarding whether or not the material will be scored in a way that validates and recognizes culturally competent care (Mina, 2022).

There are multiple considerations regarding accessibility for performance assessments and simulations. These exams would need to be available in multiple languages to be accessible to diverse test takers. This leads to additional qualification requirements, translation of all scoring material as well as the exam, and complications in bias checking. Robust accommodations would need to be provided in a fair way for those that may communicate differently for this pathway to be procedurally fair. Adjustments to the exam based on language or disability have impacts on the quality of the examination and not all supports may be available in all locations, negatively impacting access.

These exams require a variety of observations to address issues with variability between different tasks in order to generalize to overall practice (Kane, 2005). This may take a significant amount of time for both candidates and raters, and issues of stamina may need to be considered for accessibility. Simulations are given in such a way that the rater is

likely able to see the candidate and thus be aware of any accent, their appearance, and make inferences about their age, gender, and race (Kane, 2005). It may be difficult to ensure that these factors have not impacted the raters' judgments on scoring. Given the poor equity in procedural fairness, access, quality, and outcomes, simulations are inequitable. The extensive framework required for providing performance-based assessments including the development of detailed rubrics, scheduling of exams, and manual scoring of the assessment also limits the feasibility of performance assessments and increases the cost of testing.

Oral exams

Oral exams are an alternative format to written exams to assess social work knowledge and skills. Depending on the structure (multiple-choice *versus* open-ended questions), oral exams would also require scoring rubrics. Issues with scoring rubrics have consequences for procedural fairness, quality, access, and outcomes. Significant work would need to be done to ensure that oral exams, like the standardized multiple-choice questions or simulation questions, are not focused on Eurocentric hegemonic knowledge and engaged in epistemic erasure of communities of color (Au, 2020a; Cunningham, 2018). Exams would need to be provided in multiple languages to be accessible and the procedures for accessing other languages and accommodations must provide the same quality of process and assessment. Similarly to performance assessments, raters are able to see the candidate and their subjective ratings of performance may be impacted by unconscious bias (Kane, 2005). Oral exams also have issues in feasibility and cost similar to performance assessments.

California and Virginia both had oral examinations within social work licensing, with Virginia eliminating it as a testing method in 1993. Oral exams have significant concerns about bias with practitioners questioning the exams connection with safe practice (Winokur, 1998). A study of inter-rater reliability in the scoring of oral exams found only a moderate level of agreement among raters (Biggerstaff, 1994). This suggests that oral exams may have different outcomes (a poor rating for equity) and have poor procedural fairness. They also have poor access and fair quality depending on the format due to language issues and disability accommodations, suggesting that overall oral exams are inequitable.

Portfolios

Portfolios are a compilation of works collected over time with the purpose of evaluating eligibility for licensure (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education Eds., 2011). These are systematic collections that could include work done by the social worker as well as their supervisor with the guidelines specifying who is responsible for collecting which contents (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education Eds., 2011). They are scored using score rubrics in similar ways to performance assessments or simulations which may be biased and lead to disparate outcomes. Decisions regarding the contents required should be guided by the skills being assessed (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education Eds., 2011) and may impact outcomes

depending on inclusion of liberatory and critical practices. While portfolios do not require the in-person aspect of performance assessments or oral exams, the manual grading of portfolios may reduce the feasibility of this alternative due to a lack of scalability.

While portfolios may be more accessible to more social workers as they can be gathered over time, they may not be equitable procedurally. In Texas, for example, the local teachers union has pushed back on portfolio expectations for prospective teachers which include lesson plans, teaching videos, and reflection essays as it creates additional burdens for teachers (Modan, 2022). In addition to the burdensome nature of portfolios, the gathering of portfolio data may be more difficult for some social workers than others. The one example of portfolios in social work licensing included multiple papers as well as frequent supervision evaluations (Alexander & Johnston, 2008). In states where supervision must be paid for privately, the cost of a supervisor to provide additional evaluations on the candidate may be cost prohibitive for many social workers. The quality of that supervision and guidance provided in developing the portfolio may also vary, depending on rules put in place for supervision. Portfolios have poor procedural fairness and outcomes, fair quality, and good access, thus we rate them as moderately inequitable.

Alternatives to competency exams

Jurisprudence exams

Jurisprudence exams cover laws and rules that regulate the profession of social work and ethical practice. The material is usually specific to a particular state's codes regarding materials such as scope of practice and the legal landscape (NASW-CO, n.d.; Texas Behavioral Health Executive Council, n.d.). As compared to the ASWB exams, jurisprudence exams are focused on a single domain rather than competence overall and have a right or wrong answer that is black and white as it is written in laws and regulations. It does not require analysis or interpretation and thus is substantially different from the current ASWB exams and alternative formats. If included in social work licensing, a jurisprudence exam could occur in addition to current requirements of accredited education and supervision before licensure. A jurisprudence exam could also be required at Bachelor's and Master's level licensures. Jurisprudence exams are already required in several states including Colorado, Indiana, New Mexico, Vermont, and Texas.

Jurisprudence exams are often online and open book, allowing for equitable access to the exam. Due to the nature of the setup, issues of exam integrity that would require invasive remote proctoring is not required. Exam takers would be able to control their environment, such as minimizing distractions, using a device with which they have any accessibility technology set up, using headphones or fidgets. In their current format, many of these exams also do not have a time limit, which allows test takers with disabilities or lactating parents adequate time to complete the exam with needed breaks or extra time. One access issue related to exams that are taken online, however, is related to unequal access to high-speed internet in the United States. Issues of digital equity are related to infrastructure, affordability of services, and affordability of devices (Siefer & Callahan, 2020; Vogels, 2021). Some candidates may not be able to access the exam at home, on a device it is designed for, or in a controlled environment. To ensure the same level of process equity and procedural

fairness to all social workers, the exam would also need to be translated into additional languages, which is likely not cost prohibitive.

Jurisprudence exams have several logistical considerations that impact the quality of the assessment. These exams only need to be changed when statute changes so the questions are used for potentially a long time. Also, since the material is less interpretative, there is less language and nuance to translate culturally which leads to similar quality across exams. Lastly, in some places such as Colorado, the exam is not specific to social work but mental health in general. This may have consequences for the consistency of the service leading to good equitable quality and more straightforward procedural processes. These factors also impact the cost-efficiency of jurisprudence exams as an alternative. While many states may need to develop them before implementation, which is an upfront cost, this is a feasible alternative because it is scalable. Given the good equity in procedural fairness, access, quality, and outcomes, jurisprudence exams are a minimally inequitable pathway.

Provisional licensure

Provisional licensure currently occurs when social workers are provided with a license to engage in practice without passing the written standardized exam. This allows those that are not able to pass the test to engage in an alternative that has no further assessment. Provisional licensure has a long history in social work licensure, though there are no systematic studies of its outcomes in social work or allied disciplines. At present, provisional licensure is most often used by state boards of social work that require the bachelor's and master's examination to allow new social workers to practice while taking – and often retaking – the social work licensing examination. However, our focus here is on the alternatives for clinical independent licensure only.

Two current examples of this practice are in Minnesota and Illinois. At the clinical level, they both require first failing the exam and additional supervision. In Minnesota, a large increase of Hmong refugees required practitioners that spoke Hmong that were able to meet their needs (Skeen & Goodenough, 2023). Pass rate data reflect how difficult it is for non-native English speakers to pass the exam. In response to this significant need, Minnesota developed a provisional licensing pathway that was available at multiple points of licensure specifically for social workers who spoke English as a second language, were foreign born, and failed the ASWB exam once (Provisional Licenses, 2023; Skeen & Goodenough, 2023). Illinois has also recently developed a professional licensure for clinical practice in response to the pass rate analysis that allows those who fail the exam once to obtain additional 2 years of supervised practice hours prior to applying for transition to their clinical social work licensure (NASW-IL Staff, 2023).

The existence of an alternative licensure pathway provides procedural fairness and access, though the continued requirement to take the test at least once is inequitable and additional supervision may have consequences for equity. Given pass-rate disparities of the written exam, and income inequalities that exist in the United States, requiring all social workers to pay for taking the exam even though there is a higher chance that some may not pass it, is not equitable practice. Provisional licensure may be more equitable if the exams were not first required for the populations that are a focus of this paper.

The requirement for additional supervision hours also impacts provisional licensure as an equitable pathway. It is important to note that there is no scientific basis for the broadly

used “two year” rule or its numerical correlation in the number of client hours. The rule was proposed and adopted by psychoanalysts at the 1922 Congress of the Berlin Institute, and the convention has been reinforced through policymaking over the following 100 years (Jacobs et al., 1995; Watkins, 2013). Rather than being driven by empirical data, the requirement for supervision “arose when Han Sachs complained to Eitingon that he was tired of hearing his patients talk so much about their own patients in their analyses with him” (Jacobs et al., 1995, p. 20). No evidence indicates that additional supervised hours are needed for clinical social workers on the alternative path. In fact, Cooper-Bolinskey (2022) found that states requiring over 4,000 clinical hours to apply for an independent clinical license experienced greater than expected incidents of license violations, while those requiring under 4,000 h experienced fewer than expected violations. Requiring additional supervised hours of practice may not be required, may be counterproductive to good regulatory practice, and has impacts on equity. It does use policies, procedures, and a workforce that the state already governs through its clinical practice regulations and which licensees are already complying with – making it scalable across all states and procedurally fair. Other fields are considering a supervision pathway to licensure in lieu of examination without first requiring an exam for all candidates. New Hampshire and Wisconsin currently allow student apprenticeship instead of passing the bar exam, and Oregon has proposed lawyers spend 1000 to 1500 hours with a licensed Oregon attorney as one of two alternative pathways to the bar exam (Sparling, 2022).

If provisional licensure were to move forward without additional supervision, nor the requirement to first fail the ASWB exam, it would likely have significant impacts on the structure of supervision that occurs at the master’s level for there to be proof of safe practice prior to being given a clinically independent license. Michigan, for example, is looking to update its social work licensing which includes removal of the exam at all levels as well as strengthening supervision standards (NASW-MI, 2023). This would be counter to historical practice in social work as many older social workers were “grandfathered in” to that level of licensure without additional oversight or supervision. There is significant variability across states in the number of supervised hours required for clinical licensure, which creates equity issues between states. Some states even allow other mental health professionals to sign off on social worker’s supervision hours, again impacting access, quality, and potential outcomes. Some states have already increased regulation on supervision by developing a process for approving supervisors such as Louisiana (Board-Approved Clinical Supervisor, 2017), Mississippi (Professional Supervision Requirements for LCSW Licensure, 2022), Ohio (Counselor and Social Worker Board, n.d.), and Texas (Recognition as a Council-Approved Supervisor and the Supervision Process, 2022). This includes either endorsement or registration and proof of completing requirements such as training. Others have requirements that social workers must have a minimum number of years of experience and complete supervisory training to provide supervision, without an endorsement or approval of the board. This includes Iowa (Supervised Clinical Experience, 2022), Missouri (Missouri Division of Professional Registration, n.d.), and Montana (Supervisor Qualifications, 2022). Requirements for supervisors may also require ongoing continuing education specific to supervision in addition to the continuing education required for social work licensure. As supervision is more tightly controlled, limitations on the number of supervisees are likely to be needed to ensure supervisors are providing quality supervision.

Supervision has the potential to be more accessible to many social workers, though there may be concerns about procedural fairness and quality. Supervision that is culturally concordant may be difficult to access, and lack of choice among supervisors may reduce equity among the quality of supervision that social workers are able to access. The limitations that relying on supervision may face in being part of a more equitable pathway to licensure are specific to requirements for being a supervisor which would create procedural and access inequities, which may then impact quality and outcomes. If these requirements are onerous and create barriers such that social workers lack access to supervision adequate for working toward clinical licensure, then supervision would constitute a procedural barrier. Given that some states are already working toward supervision certification, and all social workers working toward clinical licensure would require supervision, these equity concerns are likely to be able to be overcome. Social workers whose native language is not English may be able to receive supervision in their native language, if supervisors are available. Black social workers would benefit from culturally congruent supervision as well. For social workers with disabilities, access to flexible supervision would be beneficial. States may benefit from supporting diverse independently licensed social workers to complete the work to become supervisors to ensure an adequate population of supervisors that can provide culturally concordant supervision to support the field's diversity. This allocation of resources supports access equity for licensure. This may also require allowance for supervision to be completed via telephone or virtually to ensure access to supervisors that may not be easily accessible locally. Affordability is also an equity concern as social workers must pay for supervision in some states, while in others social workers are able to access supervision through their employment. If supervision becomes prohibitively expensive for some social workers, then this pathway would not be accessible or procedurally fair.

For our analysis, we will assume a provisional licensure process that exists without a requirement to first fail the exam. After a standard length of supervision at the master's level of practice, and with increased oversight of supervision, social workers are given a clinical independent license. This offers a pathway that has good accessibility and quality if the oversight on supervisors is not so onerous to block the quantity and diversity of supervisors required for adequate access and the cost of supervision is within the means of all social workers. The provisional license pathway has good procedural fairness and is likely to have good outcomes, again depending on the impact of increased regulation of supervision. Overall, our analysis suggests provisional licensure is a minimally inequitable pathway to licensure with the potential to be an equitable path, as long as it does not keep in place the exam. The move toward supervision regulation may continue regardless of changes in the exam and comparatively to the path that includes the exam would be much more equitable and feasible given the existing regulatory structures.

Discussion

Based on the social equity analysis framework, provisional licensure and jurisprudence exams are the least problematic alternative pathways and likely to be the most equitable in procedural fairness, access, quality, and outcome. While jurisprudence exams are still multiple-choice exams, they do not include analysis and are often open book. Development of other competency-based formats, including oral exams and simulations, is value-laden in similar ways to the current competency-based ASWB exam and may thus

result in differences in how social workers answer questions (Gipps, 1999). The scoring of these exam formats may be prohibitively expensive for states or a testing body to administer which does not address the national crisis in social work shortages. All three alternative format exams may lack consistency in scoring and lead to disparate outcomes similar to the existing ASWB exam (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education Eds., 2011; Biggerstaff, 1994). Provisional licensure and jurisprudence exams offer the most equitable of the alternatives found in the critical review undertaken here.

Other impacts of alternative licensure pathways

The removal of exams in the process of licensure may result in additional oversight of the requirements for licensure. While social work educational programs have existing oversight in all states by the Council on Social Work Education with regularly updated Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (Council on Social Work Education, n.d.), supervision has significant variability across states and continuing education is not highly regulated. Supervision has been reviewed in this analysis in connection to the provisional licensure pathway, which often includes additional supervision, but continuing education has not been explored in conjunction with any of the identified pathways.

Continuing education has been the focus of some work by ASWB who undertook a national study to promote and address the quality of social work continuing education in 2014, called the Missing-Link Project (Kurzman, 2016). There is little research or evidence on the impact of continuing education on competency or improving social work skills (Congress, 2012; Gianino et al., 2016; Kurzman, 2016). That social workers engage in continuing education contributes to our status as a profession (Gianino et al., 2016) which many social workers cite as being concerned about related to removal of the exam. However, the profession's continuing education system has also been called the weak link in social work professionalism (Gianino et al., 2016). Continuing education regulation may benefit the profession's status as well as individual social worker's competency for practice through tighter restrictions, increased oversight, and ongoing research into continuing education. These are the same aspects of social work professionalism that the ASWB exams supposedly contribute to currently.

Eliminating racism in social work

In 2021, the Grand Challenges for Social Work added the challenge to eliminate racism (Teasley et al., 2021).¹ This initiative calls on our profession to “focus on the centrality of racism and white supremacy, both within society and within the profession” (Teasley et al., 2021, p. 1). The emphasis on social justice within social work is reflected in our code of ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2021) and anti-racism has been incorporated into the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for bachelor's and master's trained social workers (Council on Social Work Education, 2022). Yet, it is clear that the examinations themselves are embedded in White supremacy and that the invalidity and unreliability of licensing exams is unfairly burdensome to minoritized groups.

Our values and ethics require social work as a profession to divest from licensure examinations because they are rooted in White supremacy (Au, 2020a, 2020b;

Cunningham, 2018) and the epistemic erasure of communities of color (Cunningham, 2018). Values are embedded into the process during test development, privileging and reifying dominant ways of knowing; the result of which is an assessment that is not truly “objective” (Gipps, 1999). Evidence of epistemic erasure in the ASWB exams begins with its process for developing the exam, the same process used for alternative formats as well. In the 2015 practice analysis, which will inform ASWB exams until 2026, 79% of United States respondents for the clinical exam were White, while Black social workers were only 13% of the sample and Latine social workers were only 7% (Association of Social Work Boards, 2017). The goal of the practice analysis is to ensure that the exam content is accurate, which is then what the exam is developed based on (Association of Social Work Boards, 2017). When 80% of those responding are White, then much of what the clinical exam is testing is hegemonic knowledge and values in social work. The National Deans and Directors President, Dr. Teasley, states that what is missing from the examinations are Afrocentric perspectives, critical race theory, and the knowledge that comes from practicing in community (DeCarlo, 2022). These exclusionary practices compound over time, as the practice analysis only allows those that have passed the exam to complete the survey (Association of Social Work Boards, 2017). Given the outcome of the pass rate disparity analysis, the exams seem to first block Black, Hispanic/Latine, and Indigenous social workers from the field, and then at each iteration of the exam it is ensured that the knowledge of these communities are not included in the exam. In this way, ASWB’s examination program exerts control over what knowledge, skills, and abilities are the most important, which is highly weighted toward the opinions of White social workers (Gipps, 1999).

Significant debate about bias in standardized exams already exists in many other professions and testing situations. The previous CEO of ASWB Dwight Hymans acknowledged the growing tide against examinations in a presentation on racial justice stating that “generally speaking across any exam whether it’s a licensing exam or a college entrance exam . . . it’s fairly common knowledge that there are disparities in outcomes” (Social Work Leadership Roundtable Town Hall on Racial Equity, 2020, pt. 17:28). The widespread nature of exam disparities would suggest the confirmation of standardized examination being rooted in White supremacy (Au, 2020a, 2020b; Cunningham, 2018). Regardless of whether these issues are widespread, it is up to the social work profession whether we wish to engage in this practice. The eliminate racism grand challenge includes as a priority to “root out racist policies and practices” (Teasley et al., 2021, p. 11) which would demand that we divest from standardized examination within the social work licensure process. As this analysis shows, alternative more equitable pathways are available; it is our responsibility to act.

Limitations

There are three primary limitations in our analysis: criteria chosen, lack of engagement in the changing technological landscape, and the restrictions of current licensure. Social policies reflect communally held values and beliefs and thus policy analysis is often focused on value judgments (Bardach & Patashnik, 2020; Segal, 2016). This is reflected in our problem definition which is focused on the current ASWB clinical exam as a racist and unnecessary barrier to licensure. We chose criteria specifically to address that problem that would result in more equitable licensure procedures. Regulators must

also consider issues of efficiency and scalability which we did not focus on for our analysis. We have attempted to provide occasional commentary on the feasibility of the alternatives based on steps involved and how complicated the process might be to ensure social and racial equity. We recognize that multiple choice exams are affordable for testing large numbers of candidates. However, our primary alternatives that we found to be more equitable are also multiple-choice exams or do not include examinations at all, thus are not likely to be costly alternatives.

We also did not include in our analysis the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) such as ChatGPT. Recent research in social work examinations suggests that the use of AI might help move our licensing exams away from the multiple-choice format by allowing written responses to be graded using technology since by hand is prohibitively expensive (Victor et al., 2023). Written responses graded by ChatGPT might better account for the fact that there are multiple courses of action that are safe and ethical in professional decision-making since ChatGPT has been found to provide adequate rationale for correct answers on the multiple choice exams (Victor et al., 2023). Given this is very new technology and a rapidly changing area, we did not consider the ways that AI might be used in all the alternatives in the future. We also have concerns about ChatGPT and other AI systems in their current state as they have well-documented racial bias (Biddle, 2022; Omiye et al., 2023) and are highly destructive to the environment (George et al., 2023; Patterson et al., 2021; Strubell et al., 2019). Given these issues, AI solutions are currently not equitable alternatives from an Afrocentric lens which would include both social and environmental justice. As this technology advances, this will be an important area of research from a collective standpoint.

Finally, for this analysis, we remained within the current model of licensure, but from an Afrocentric lens this is a limitation of our policy analysis. Obtaining a license provides proof of safety in practice, and for many is seen as proof of competency, but the current process does not engage in mutual respect and reciprocity as it fails to create and encourage community and accountability. To move forward, we both need to atone for the harm our current system has done to Black professionals and communities, which is why some responses to the pass-rate analysis also called for reparations (Robinson et al., 2022). Our future as a profession focused on social work and anti-racism also calls for a re-imagining of the social work licensure system with a focus on maintaining the humanism of the collective, which we did not provide herein.

Conclusion

Our policy analysis suggests that to align with social work's values, our field should move away from competency-based examinations. More socially and racially equitable alternatives include jurisprudence exams or removing exams entirely with the tradeoff of increasing oversight and regulation on supervision and continuing education. Close attention will need to be paid to the accessibility and affordability of supervision and continuing education. Future research on certification exams will be needed to assess potential pass-rate disparities if the shift from licensing exams results in increased focus on certification exams. The changing technological landscape may also require further research to determine if artificial intelligence can be leveraged in socially and environmentally just ways for more equitable licensure processes.

Note

1. The 12 grand challenges were initially developed in 2013 and while ending racism was proposed, it was not initially selected. In 2019 the grand challenges report suggested that addressing racism and injustice existed throughout the grand challenges. In 2020, it was announced that a 13th grand challenge of eliminating racism would be added as the previous commitment statement was not strong enough or specific enough: <https://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org/grand-challenges-for-social-work/announcing-the-grand-challenge-to-eliminate-racism/>

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