

From Alternative Pathways to Abolition: Abolish the Association of Social Work Boards Exam

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Abstract: *In 2022, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) provided for the first time the demographics on all five of its examinations between the years 2011 and 2021. The pass rates demonstrate a foundationally discriminatory system that routinely fails Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) while passing white social workers. Implementing critical race theory and abolitionist social work practice to analyze the foundations of the ASWB exam, this article investigates five routes to social work licensure including performance assessments/simulations, oral examinations, portfolios, jurisprudence exams, and provisional licensure. However, the analysis demonstrates that each of these alternatives produces inequitable overall outcomes leading to further marginalization of BIPOC social workers. Instead, the authors advocate for the abolition of the social work exam. Abolition would establish the most equitable overall outcome for social workers within the social work licensure examination process, for all social workers, while simultaneously challenging white supremacy within the social work field.*

Keywords: *Critical race theory, abolitionist social work, ASWB exam*

Licensing social workers is a central regulatory task of social work boards (Thyer & Biggerstaff, 1989). Across the United States, social work boards are tasked with regulating social work practice. The purpose of such social work regulation is “to protect the public from incompetent or unethical practitioners by ensuring a minimal level of competence” (Nienow et al., 2021, para. 1). Thyer and Biggerstaff (1989) identify this phase of state-regulated social work practice as the highest stage of development within the profession (Association of Social Work Boards [ASWB], 2021). Regulations for the practice of social work began to take shape in the 1930s, however, the current makeup of social work regulation within the United States really was formed in the 1960s and 1970s with social work licensing profession (ASWB, 2021; Nienow et al., 2021).

In this context, the Association of Social Work Boards formed in 1979 “to provide support and services to the social work regulatory community to advance safe, competent, and ethical practices to strengthen public protection” (ASWB, 2021, p. 6). Representing sixty-four regulatory boards across the United States and Canada (ASWB, 2022c), the ASWB developed the examination process as an “assurance that people who are licensed to practice social work share certain competencies” (ASWB, 2025, p. 2). It provided its first examinations in 1983 in Oklahoma, New York, and Virginia, and has since offered licensing examinations in all fifty United States, and the District of Columbia (ASWB,

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2022c). Widely considered a critical part of the licensure process (Hirsch et al., 2023), the ASWB now administers five examinations offered including the associate, bachelor, master, advanced generalist, and clinical exams for more than fifty thousand test takers every year (ASWB, 2022a).

The purported drive for assessment is to ensure public safety, however, social work activists have long worried that the ASWB exam leads to racially inequitable outcomes for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) (Senreich & Dale, 2021). Although the ASWB had “been unwilling to release [the demographics of pass rates] for decades,” in the wake of social activism following the murder of George Floyd, social workers across the US joined together in a concerted effort to push the ASWB to release the data (NASW, 2022b, para. 1). Finally, after decades of activist calls for transparency, in 2022 the organization relented and provided for the first time the demographics on all five of its examinations between the years 2011 and 2021 (ASWB, 2022a). Confirming the accusations of BIPOC social work activists, the numbers demonstrate extreme racial disparity in social work licensing exam pass rates (Nienow et al., 2022). For brevity, the following covers the three most common of ASWB’s five exams: the clinical, master, and bachelor exams.

The ASWB (2022a) reports that between 2011 and 2021 there has been a steady increase of test takers. The clinical exam increased from 9,100 in 2011 to 20,657 in 2021, the master level exam increased from 11,260 to 21,650, and the bachelor level increased from 3,164 to 3,494 (ASWB, 2022a). According to their report, the clinical level exam first time pass rate is 76.1%, the master level exam is 78.5%, and the bachelor level exam is 74.4%. However, not everyone passes these exams even after multiple attempts: the eventual pass rates of these are 87.7%, 85.9%, and 80.7% respectively (ASWB, 2022a). While 12.3% never pass the exam, these pass rates look very different after uncovering the racial demographics underlying these scores (ASWB, 2022a).

Whereas 83.9% of white clinical test takers passed, only 72% of Latinx, 62.9% of Native Americans, and 45% of Black social workers passed the first attempt (ASWB, 2022a). On the master level exam, whereas 85.8% of whites passed their first attempt, only 64.4% of Native Americans, 63% of Latinx, and 44.5% of Black social workers passed their first attempt (ASWB, 2022a). Finally, regarding the bachelor level exam, whereas 76.2% of white test takers passed their first attempt, 63.6% of Native American, 52.8% of Latinx, and 33.3% of Black social workers passed their first attempt (ASWB, 2022a).

The eventual pass rate looks even worse (ASWB, 2022a). Eventual pass rate means the rate of examinees who ever pass even after multiple attempts. The following eventual pass rates signify the rates at which a group ever passes the exam, meaning a large portion of these demographics are forced out of the profession. Whereas 90.7% of white clinical test takers eventually pass, only 76.6% of Latinx, 73.5% of Native Americans, and 57% of Black social workers eventually pass (ASWB, 2022a). On the master level exam, whereas 90.8% of whites eventually pass, only 72.2% of Native Americans, 71.2% of Latinx, and 51.9% of Black social workers eventually pass (ASWB, 2022a). Finally, regarding the bachelor level exam, whereas 81.6% of white test takers eventually passed, only 70.9% of

Native American, 58.5% of Latinx, and 33.8% of Black social workers eventually passed (ASWB, 2022a).

Social work is not alone in this problem. The NASW of Ohio notes that “disparities in pass rates across oppressed populations exist in other professions’ licensure exams but at a less alarming rate” (NASW-OH, 2022, 3). They provide the example, “nationally, the disparity in pass rates for the bar exam for attorneys is 85% for white test takers and 60.89% for Black test takers [and] for pharmacists, the pass rates are 72.2% and 60.2%, respectively” (NASW-OH 2022, 3). Also, like social work, the American Bar Association has identified massive racial disparities in passage of the Bar exam (Rosciiglione, 2024; Sloan, 2023; Ward, 2022). However, the problem is more acute in the social work profession, and “the ASWB exam’s racial inequities are substantially worse than these comparable professional examinations” (NASW-OH, 2022, 3). Key within this lack of diversity are the artificial barriers to licensure established within the ASWB examination (Hirsch et al., 2023).

The present article is a revised report to the Oregon Board of Licensed Social Workers (OBLSW) from the Alternative Pathways to Social Work Licensing Committee (Farr et al., 2024). Following the release of the ASWB exam pass rate data, the OBLSW began discussions on the impact of the ASWB exam on racial equity in Oregon. In March of 2024, Scott Wilson, former Certified Social Work Associates (CSWA) Board Member, and Paddy Farr, current LCSW Board Member, proposed a new committee to the board to confront this issue, the Alternative Pathways to Social Work Licensure Committee. The following month, in April of 2024, board approved the committee, naming Farr as the Chair of the Committee and Wilson as committee member. With authority from the board, the Alternative Pathways Committee began forming its membership the following month in May of 2024. Wilson and Farr began searching for candidates by canvassing faculty of universities, leadership of advocacy organizations, and staff of social work agencies. Initial interviews were selected for three candidates. In Late May, the committee had taken shape with membership as voting members including Katia Duncan, Clinical Professor in the Ballmer Institute at the University of Oregon, Delmar Stone, Executive Director at the National Association of Social Workers Oregon Chapter, and Jonny Dominguez, LCSW therapist in private practice. The group met for four sessions in June of 2024. During these meetings, the committee investigated current ASWB pass rate demographics, surveyed current policy propositions, and identified a standard for assessment of licensure requirements. In September of 2024, Farr submitted the report to the OBLSW (Farr et al. 2024).

As a theoretical lens, the committee harnessed the insights generated through critical race theory. Implementing an analytic of critical race theory and a praxis of abolitionist social work, the group assessed the historical development of racism in Oregon, investigated current ASWB pass rate demographics, surveyed current policy propositions, and identified a standard for assessment of licensure requirements. From this research, the committee recommended to the OBLSW that an alternative pathway to licensure would be discriminatory, and instead, the board should adopt an abolitionist position against the ASWB exam that eliminates the requirement for all Oregon social workers. In the following, the authors of the recommendations to the OBLSW cast a wider net to confront

the problem of white supremacy within the ASWB exam across the US. In the first section, the research investigates how the ASWB exam has maintained systems of white supremacy through the social work licensure while restricting and blocking a vision of anti-racist social work. In the second section, the research assesses six possibilities for alternative routes to social work licensure, including performance assessments/simulations, oral examinations, portfolios, jurisprudence exams, provisional licensure, and abolition. Like the recommendations to the OBLSW, the article concludes that only abolition will confront the white supremacy at the heart of the ASWB exam.

Theoretical Framework

The present article implements a theoretical framework of critical race theory to analyze the development and administration of the ASWB exam. As a development from critical legal studies, critical race theory originated as a method of investigating the reproduction of racism within the criminal justice system (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Today, it represents a collection of related theories focusing on “the ways in which racial oppressions are concealed through color blind policies in the post-Civil Rights era” (Gomez & Farr, 2023, p. 172). In its most basic formulation, critical race theory includes six tenets: 1) race is socially constructed, 2) racism is real and ordinary, 3) context determines race and groups may experience differential racializations, 4) racial progress has represented an interest convergence that maintains racial oppression in the interest of white supremacy, 5) race is not an essential characteristic of a person but instead is determined in relation to other power dynamics of gender, class, sexuality and others (i.e., intersectionality), and 6) narrativity provides a means to grasp racism in a way that is not possible through quantitative means (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gomez & Farr, 2023).

In conjunction with critical race theory, the present article implements an abolitionist social work praxis focused on eliminating the vestiges of white supremacy within the social work field. The abolition movement has been at the forefront of social activism against US systems of white supremacy since the antebellum period (Critical Resistance, 2022; Davis, 2003; Dettlaff, 2023). As a direct line from the tradition of American abolitionists fighting to end slavery and dismantle white supremacy, the abolitionist movement continued to grow through reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the colorblind era to confront the systems of racialized power maintained today (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2003; Dettlaff, 2023). Beginning from the position that the systems built through chattel slavery were never truly abolished and that the reconstruction was arrested through white supremacist power grabs (Alexander, 2010), the abolition movement opposes the reproduction of white supremacy in contemporary society (Gomez & Farr, 2023). This has had a tremendous impact on contemporary social work theory and practice. Abolitionist social work builds on the critical methods employed through critical race theory and the abolitionist movement to interrogate the reproduction of racialized oppressions within social work practice evidenced by child welfare, domestic violence advocacy, sexual assault, forensic psychotherapy and others (Brock-Petrossius et al., 2022; Dettlaff, 2023; James, 2021; Kaba & Nagao, 2021; Kim et al., 2024).

Social Work as White Supremacist Project

It is uncontroversial to state that colonization and chattel slavery played a central role in the formation of the United States. Racism is an ordinary part of American life (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gomez & Farr, 2023). The land on which sits the United States is Native land stolen through white settler colonialism and maintained through mass genocide of Native peoples (Churchill, 1997; Lewis, 2014, 2023; Lewis & Connolly, 2019). The wealth on which the United States is built was facilitated by mass enslavement and human trafficking of Black people (Blackmon, 2008; Perry, 2020). The contemporary structure of the United States has maintained a continuity of Black and Indigenous subjugation through systems of white supremacy inherited by liberal democracy (Blackmon, 2008; Churchill, 1997; Hartman, 1997; Perry, 2020). Following the reconstruction era, many of the race-based practices of enslavement and colonization were continued through first Jim Crow and then through surface level color blind enforcements targeting BIPOC communities (Alexander, 2010; Blackmon, 2008; Hartman, 1997). During this period of the post-bellum US, the prison system was created as a means to reenslave Black people through the exception clause of the 13th Amendment (Alexander, 2010; Farr, 2022).

The history of social work is enmeshed within this history of white supremacy. Racism is ordinary even in social work (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gomez & Farr, 2023). Across the country, the social work field is guilty of grave racial injustices and has a long history of collaboration with US based settler colonial, white supremacist, and eugenicist social programs (Farr, 2021). Social workers have run segregated settlement shelters, worked to prevent Black suffrage, recruited Black participants in the Tuskegee atrocity, and removed Native children from their communities placing them in boarding schools, among many other violent injustices (NASW, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a). All the while, social work had hidden itself behind a veil of pseudoscientific eugenic explanations on racial disparities (Kennedy, 2008). Kennedy explains that “social workers, including leading visionaries such as [Mary] Richmond and [Jane] Addams, as well as members of the rank and file, were intimately involved in furthering the eugenics agenda” (Kennedy, 2008, p. 33). Through the embrace and propagation of eugenics-based practices, the social work profession was established as a central practice within white supremacist social policy designed to disempower and control Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (Kennedy, 2008; O’Brien, 2022).

In contemporary social work, the profession has embraced the social construction of race and implemented measures for ensuring equal access, opportunity, and outcomes. Yet, like other areas of American society, these changes have represented a mere interest convergence with white supremacy (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gomez & Farr, 2023). In our contemporary era, social workers maintain the fundamental design of eugenic and white supremacist practices through seemingly innocuous color-blind policies. Examples of social workers’ continued responsibility in these practices abound. Today, maintaining the violence against Black population originating under conditions of enslavement, social workers are enmeshed within the criminal justice system in the United States boasting both the largest imprisoned population and largest population

under supervision in the history of the world (Detlaff et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2024). Again, the Black and Indigenous family separations begun during enslavement and colonization continued through the purposeful development by social workers of child welfare policies that target Black and Indigenous families (Detlaff, 2023; Detlaff et al., 2023). Anti-sexual assault laws, of which social workers have been instrumental in creating, have been and continue to be harnessed to target Black and Native men while allowing whites to assault Black and Native women with impunity (Alexander, 2010; Hartman, 1997; Kim et al., 2024; Thompson-Miller & Picca, 2017). While each of these practices are drawn up as race neutral and color blind, concealed beneath the façade of a formal equality in social work practice is the same eugenic and white supremacist design endemic through the history of the profession. In truth it is this history of racism and violence that has created a public health crisis that can only be confronted through a movement for racial justice (Russell, 2021).

This brings the discourse back to the professional regulations of social work. Racism is ordinary and the appearance of progress hides an interest convergence that benefits white supremacy (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Farr, 2022; Gomez & Farr, 2023). Even in the administration of social work professional education, certification, and licensure, social work has a long sordid history of preventing BIPOC from entering the profession by using eugenics as a pseudoscientific strategy for public safety (Baker-Gary & Gary, 1994). This began with the early development of the profession with foundational theorists and practitioners such as Jane Addams advocating for eugenics social policies through a white supremacist social work practice (Hall, 2022; O'Brien, 2022). The barriers built through these policies have led to increasing disparities in certification and licensure rates for BIPOC social workers (Senreich & Dale, 2021). Today, unbeknownst to many, what began as outright eugenic based practices meant to maintain the purity of social work continues to direct the social work profession as an interest convergence maintaining racism through the professional regulations established in this dark page of social work history. Here, the standardized testing implemented by the ASWB is a key moment in this thread of white supremacy wherein the purported objectivity and fairness of the examination grew directly out of the eugenics movement as a method designed to establish whites as a superior race.

Early pseudoscientific advocates of this practice believed that widespread standardized testing would help promote white superiority in society in two ways: first by maintaining whites in positions of power and second by providing empirical data justifying racial hygiene (Au, 2020a, 2020b; Stoskopf, 2002, 2012). This problematic practice gained steam across multiple dimensions of psychological testing, education, training, and licensure examination. In public education, this practice has established a system in which white students are advanced and promoted while Black and Brown students are disenfranchised (Gillborn, 2010). The outcome forms a thread from this history through the color-blind era resulting in the contemporary racial disparities in standardized educational assessment scores for BIPOC students (Au, 2020a, 2020b; Rosales & Walker, 2021).

At the same time, parallel to educational assessments, professional practices began developing standardized assessments based on this eugenic science (Himelfarb, 2019). Professions as varied as law, engineering, medicine, and education professionals use

standardized testing as a means to assess the preparation of a professional for independent practice. Just as in the educational testing of youth, standardized testing has created barriers for many BIPOC to enter these professions thus maintaining the same racial disparities created in educational settings. Researchers have found racial disparities in pass rates across professional examinations such as the Bar Exam, the American Board of Family Medicine Exam, and the Association of Social Work Boards exams, among many others (Himelfarb, 2019; Senreich & Dale, 2021; Wang et al., 2022; Ward, 2022). As with standardized testing in education, this racial disparity within professional examinations can be traced directly back to the eugenic theories used as foundations for the development of standardized testing.

While for nearly a century many professions have implemented standardized testing, the ASWB has provided the social work exam only since 1983 (ASWB, 2022c). Hence, compared to many of the other professions, the ASWB exam is a late addition to the standardized assessment of professions. At the same time, where standardized assessments in educational settings have demonstrated racial disparities in pass rates, the ASWB is a microcosm of a much larger issue of interest convergence papered over with colorblind policies. Hence, although a late comer, the ASWB relies on the same theories used to establish standardized assessments within education and across industries to launch the ASWB examinations as a requirement of social work practice. And like standardized assessments generally, this has created a racialized system privileging whites. This fact can be witnessed in the pass rate demographics of the ASWB exam: the current pass rates disclosed by the ASWB are indicative of how colorblind practices maintain systems of white supremacy even within the profession of social work. Although the purpose of the ASWB examination is to protect the public (ASWB, 2021, 2024; Nienow et al., 2021), instead it has led to racially inequitable outcomes for BIPOC social workers (ASWB, 2022a, 2022b). The root of the problem is the standardized assessments which maintain an ordinary racism benefiting white supremacy across systems.

An Assessment of Alternative Pathway Models

Outrage ensued following the release of the ASWB pass rate demographics, and a grassroots movement took hold across the US led by Black social workers. Activists began canvassing their local social work licensing boards and their state legislatures for changes to licensing requirement. Leading the country, Black activists in Illinois fought and won an alternative pathway to licensure that has greatly increased access to licensure while making an impact on social work across the country (NASW-IL, 2023). In August of 2023, Illinois became the first state to provide an alternative pathway to social work available for all (NASW-IL, 2023). The movement spread to Minnesota, and in October of 2024, the state became the second to provide an alternative path to licensure, offering anyone with a social work degree in Minnesota to apply for an alternative pathway (Minnesota Board of Social Work, 2024). Currently, multiple other states are following the lead of Illinois and Minnesota to investigate their own alternatives to ASWB examinations including Oregon, Virginia, and Michigan. At the same time, parallel to social work, similar movements for change have pressed for licensing requirements of attorneys with states such as Oregon, Wisconsin, and New Hampshire establishing alternative pathways and others preparing

alternative pathways including California, Minnesota, Utah, Nevada, and South Dakota (Rosciiglione, 2024; Sloan, 2023; Ward, 2022).

Confronting the history of exclusion and increasing diversity of the profession is critical to increasing the social work labor force. To this end, the present article implements a theoretical framework of critical race theory and abolitionist practice. As mentioned in the introduction, the present article is a revised report to the Oregon Board of Licensed Social Workers (OBLSW) from the Alternative Pathways to Social Work Licensing Committee (Farr et al., 2024). Using Gooden's (2014) *Social Equity Analysis* for assessing racial equity in government programs, the Committee's critical race analysis and abolitionist proposal builds on the licensure policy analysis developed in "Alternative Pathways to Social Work Licensure: A Critical Review and Social Equity Policy Analysis" (Hirsch et al., 2023). Below is described the assessment tool.

Gooden (2014) includes the following social equity criteria: a) procedural fairness, b) access, c) quality, and d) outcomes. Gooden uses the definitions of Keehley et al. (1996) for these criteria. Procedural fairness signifies due process, equal protection, and equal rights (Gooden, 2014; Keehley et al., 1997). Access signifies equity of distribution across the population (Gooden, 2014; Keehley et al., 1997). Quality signifies equity of process across groups (Gooden, 2014; Keehley et al., 1997). *Outcomes* signify the impact of a policy across groups and individuals (Gooden, 2014; Keehley et al., 1997). These four criteria are rated as a) poor, b) fair, c) good, or d) excellent. Together, the four criteria inform an overall outcome for the policy as a) equitable, meaning "excellent performance on each of the four equity dimensions" (Gooden, 2014, p. 159) b) minimally inequitable, meaning "at least good performance on each of the four equity dimensions" (Gooden, 2014, p. 159) c) moderately inequitable, meaning "at least fair performance on each of the four equity dimensions" (Gooden, 2014, p. 159), or d) inequitable, meaning "below fair performance on one or more equity dimensions" (Gooden, 2014, p. 159).

The present analysis of the Alternative Pathways Committee, however, diverges slightly from Gooden's (2014) overall outcomes in order to provide a more generous assessment of the alternative pathways. Aligned with the analysis of Hirsch et al. (2023), the overall assessment instead takes averages of the ratings: a) an inequitable overall outcome results from poor rating across each dimension, b) a moderately inequitable overall outcome results from an average rating of fair across dimensions, c) a minimally inequitable overall outcome results from an average rating of good across dimensions, and d) an equitable overall outcome results from excellent ratings across dimensions. Hirsch et al. (2023) assessed portfolios, oral exams, performance assessments, simulations, jurisprudence exams, and provisional licensure. The Committee identified these alternative pathways as nearly exhaustive with the exception of an abolition of the examination requirement. As such, the Committee added this proposal to the list of alternative pathways.

In June of 2024, the Committee met on four occasions to discuss and evaluate policy options for the state of Oregon. The sessions were open to the public and announced on the OBLSW website following Oregon Public Meeting law. After the meetings, minutes were submitted for the public record. The chair, Paddy Farr, presented the proposed alternative pathways provided by Hirsch et al. (2023) and the theoretical framework of critical race

theory after which the Committee proposed the addition of abolition. During sessions, the Committee investigated each of the alternatives through discussion while Chair Farr took notes. Following the theoretical foundation of critical race theory and with abolition as a policy option, the Alternative Pathways Committee reevaluated the alternatives thereby finding different results from Hirsch et al. (2023), particularly on the provisional licensure, and providing a final recommendation for abolition. Concluding the Committee's sessions, Chair Farr collated the deliberative results into a format matching Gooden's (2014) racial equity analysis and Hirsch et al.'s (2023) assessment of alternative pathways. The Committee voted to submit these results to the OBLSW. In September of 2024, these recommendations were submitted. The following sections are broken into three parts. The first describes portfolios, oral exams, performance assessments, and simulations. The second section describes jurisprudence exams and provisional licensure. The final section, concluding this article, describes abolition of the social work exam as a step toward an abolitionist social work practice. The ratings and overall outcomes found by the Alternative Pathways Committee are included in Table 1.

Table 1. *Equity Analysis of Alternative Pathways and Abolition*

Pathway to Licensure	Social Equity Criteria				
	Procedural Fairness	Access	Quality	Outcomes	Overall Outcome
Performance Assessments/ Simulations	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor	Inequitable
Oral Exams	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor	Inequitable
Portfolios	Poor	Good	Fair	Poor	Moderately Inequitable
Jurisprudence Exams	Good	Good	Good	Good	Minimally Inequitable
Provisional Licensure	Poor	Good	Fair	Poor	Moderately Inequitable
Abolition	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Equitable

Portfolios, Oral Exams, Performance Assessments, and Simulations

Under the first group of alternatives are portfolios, oral exams, and performance assessments or simulations. These alternative pathways are grouped together because each of them faces very similar problems and inequities. Following Hirsch et al. (2023), the Committee used the definitions provided by the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the American Psychological Association (APA), and National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME) (2014). Portfolios are defined as a collection of real-life work submitted for examination and assessed under a rubric (AERA et al., 2014). Oral examinations are defined as an examination before a panel of examinees scored with a rubric, similar to a thesis or dissertation defense (AERA et al., 2014). Performance assessments are defined as assessments in real life situations with clients that are scored on a rubric (AERA et al., 2014). Simulations are nearly identical to performance assessments, defined as simulated situations with clients that are scored on a rubric (AERA et al., 2014).

Each of these were tested and explored within the present article based on Gooden's (2014) social equity analysis. The Alternative Pathways Committee brought each proposal forward and reviewed the requirements for completion. The Committee found many of the

same problems and pitfalls in these forms of assessments as are present with standardized assessments such as the ASWB exam, namely the process of standardization reproduces an effect on racial equity that maintains heteropatriarchy and white supremacy. Furthermore, in line with Hirsch et al. (2023), the committee identified a new difficulty of unconscious bias apparent with oral exams, and performance assessments or simulations. The Committee identified an addition barrier to implementation around cost for social work boards. The Committee identified four primary problems with these forms of assessment, three of which align with Hirsch et al. (2023).

First, because the rubrics are developed and scored in order to maintain the same conditions for each examinee, the knowledge base implemented maintains the same white supremacist and heteropatriarchal vision of proper social work as does the ASWB exam. This is the case with all four pathways described above. As demonstrated through the demographic data in education and the professions, BIPOC test takers pass at lower rates across standardized assessments (Au, 2020a, 2020b; Gillborn, 2010; Himelfarb, 2019; NASW-OH, 2022; Rosales & Walker, 2021; Senreich & Dale, 2021; Stoskopf, 2002, 2012; Wang et al., 2022; Ward, 2022). From this mass of data produced through standardized assessments, it is deduced that these alternatives do not provide a pathway that challenges the fundamental difficulties with the ASWB exam around standardization.

Second, because the testing environment will reproduce a high-stakes exam mimicking ASWB testing environments, the barrier to entry will for BIPOC social workers will likewise maintain. This is the case with oral exams, performance assessments, and simulations but possibly with portfolios as well depending upon if they are scored live in an oral exam format. A key difficulty identified within research into standardized assessments demonstrates that the high stakes nature of the assessment is a major factor in low pass rates for BIPOC test takers is (Del Carmen Unda & Lizárraga-Dueñas, 2021; Nienow et al., 2022; Spurlock, 2013; Steedle & Grochowalski, 2017; Vasquez-Heilig et al., 2018). Where each of these alternatives provide the same high stakes environment as does a traditional multiple choice standardized assessment, the same inequities are reproduced through the process of assessment.

Third, regarding assessments through oral exams, and performance assessments or simulations, because unconscious bias can play a key role in the rating of a particular examinee, BIPOC social workers will continue to suffer under these conditions and possibly at a more extreme rate than the ASWB exam. This is the case particularly with oral exams, performance assessments, and simulations but possibly with portfolios as well depending upon if they are scored live. A wealth of evidence has been provided by researchers on unconscious bias and its negative effects on BIPOC students. Enough evidence of this has been generated to produce a metaanalysis in grading and in assessments of students (Malouff & Thorsteinsson, 2016). Where these alternative forms of social work assessment require the test taker to be present before a panel, the evidence points to these biases becoming a barrier for BIPOC examinees.

Finally, the Alternative Pathways Committee identified an additional difficulty around cost of implementation. This is the case with each alternative including oral exams, performance assessments, simulations, and portfolios. Social work boards across the

United States function on tight budgets through state funding. Implementation of any of these alternatives would require significant logistical effort and funding in order to produce and manage. The alternative pathways described in this section would likely become the responsibility of the state boards to administer in addition to other logistical efforts. In this way, it is not realistic to push an additional function of a new assessment system on state boards. Whereas the current system of ASWB examination provides a system of assessment, development, management and administration of an assessment system is outside the capabilities of state boards under current funding levels.

The history of white supremacy and eugenic science in the development and implementation of standardized testing across education and the professions should give social workers pause before implementing a new standardized assessment to replace the old (Au, 2020a, 2020b; Gillborn, 2010; Himelfarb, 2019; NASW-OH 2022; Rosales & Walker, 2021; Senreich & Dale, 2021; Stoskopf, 2002, 2012; Wang et al., 2022; Ward, 2022). Portfolios, oral exams, performance assessments, and simulations do not meet the goal of a more equitable examination. In truth, each is an interest convergence in which the standards for white supremacy maintain within the social work licensing system. The Committee thus assessed, reproducing the findings of Hirsch et al. (2023), that oral exams, performance assessments, and simulations are all inequitable, however, as long as portfolios are not presented in vivo then these may be rated as moderately inequitable. For ratings and overall outcomes of the equity analysis, see Table 1.

Jurisprudence Exams and Provisional Licensure

The second group of alternatives includes jurisprudence exams and provisional licensure. The Committee used the definitions provided by Hirsch et al. (2023). Jurisprudence exams are defined as an examination on knowledge of rules, laws, and ethics regulating the social work profession. These may be open book evaluations taken online or via printed PDF. Colorado, Indiana, New Mexico, Vermont, Oregon and Texas are states currently using jurisprudence exams at varying levels of licensure (Hirsch et al. 2023; Farr et al., 2024). For example, in the state of Oregon, a jurisprudence is administered to CSWA through an open book PDF evaluation. Provisional licensure is defined as any form of licensure that is provided without requiring the ASWB exam. While this practice of provisional licensure is common among states at the Bachelor and Master/Associate level during the period a candidate is attempting to pass the associated ASWB exam, provisional licensure is less common at the clinical level. Only two states currently have alternative pathways toward independent clinical licensure via provisional licensure, namely Illinois and Minnesota (Minnesota Board of Social Work, 2024; NASW-IL, 2023). The Committee's assessment of these alternatives is provided below.

Regarding jurisprudence exams, the Committee found that this alternative pathway is a minimally inequitable alternative pathway to licensure. Because they are provided in a cost-free and open book assessment on local rules and laws as they are written, jurisprudence exams are easily accessible to social workers, have little chance of cultural bias, are free of charge, and are directly applicable to the tasks of a regulated social worker within a jurisdiction. Furthermore, because many states already use a jurisprudence exam

for prelicensed social workers under supervision, e.g. Licensed Master Social Workers or CSWAs in Oregon, the social work boards would have little to no development costs associated with expanding the exam to cover other licenses and certifications. Despite these promising results, the Committee found three difficulties with jurisprudence exams that diminish their desirability. These are described below.

First, in many locales, jurisprudence exams are scored by hand which increases the labor cost for assessment. A potential work around for this difficulty may include computer-based assessment and scoring, thereby becoming even more efficient and sustainable. However, this comes with its own difficulty of internet access. Second, Hirsch et al. (2023) identified one single potential pitfall with jurisprudence exams: in some jurisdictions, where the jurisprudence exam is administered over the internet, a lack of internet access may present a barrier for exam administration. As currently practiced in Oregon, because the jurisprudence exam is completed on a printable PDF that can be mailed if requested, internet is not required for administration. However, this again circles back to the problem of labor costs for manual scoring.

Third, the committee found that although the jurisprudence exams provide a more equitable and fair entrance into licensure that assesses the knowledge social workers require in order to practice within a state, the knowledge base itself is uncritically accepting of the norms and standards preserved in law rather than critical thinking skills required for breaking down white supremacy. This marks a deeper issue with jurisprudence exams. A strength of social work ethics, as laid out by the NASW (2021c) Code of Ethics, is to distinguish law and ethics such that legal frameworks may prove to be harmful and unjust (Reamer, 2008). As pointed out by Fredric Reamer (2008), key author of the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2021c), “in some instances, blind obedience to the law can be shortsighted and harm clients, particularly when laws seem to be unjust” (Reamer, 2008, para. 12). As such, the present research proposes that the jurisprudence exam is a viable alternative pathway to social work licensure providing minimally inequitable outcomes for BIPOC social workers and the social work profession, however, it is a second best to the final recommendation.

Regarding provisional licensure, the Committee found that this alternative pathway results in a moderately inequitable overall outcome. Because provisional licensure eliminates the need for examination, many of the inequities of the examination process are mitigated. While the Alternative Pathways Committee found that eliminating the exam requirement does greatly improve access to social work licensure, the present research identified a deeper inequity within provisional licensure. The committee thus assessed this pathway as moderately inequitable. The present research finds significant barriers established through provisional licensure evident within the states that have enacted this alternative. The Illinois model for alternative pathways to licensure requires an associate to fail the ASWB clinical exam at least once and then to complete an additional 3,000 hours of supervised practice beyond the required 3,000 hours of supervised practice currently required (NASW-IL, 2023). Minnesota follows the Illinois model but can be done at any level of licensure and requires 37.5 hours of additional supervision over 1-3 years in lieu of exam passage (Minnesota Board of Social Work, 2024).

However, provisional licensure demonstrates that it is at a major financial cost to the social worker that will negatively impact BIPOC social workers the most. First, many social workers are not provided supervision as a benefit of their employment and instead must pay a private supervisor (Suttle, n.d.; Thom & Norris, 2023; Walker & Bruhn, 2023). Mojozy, an organization that helps early career clinicians navigate education and licensure, estimates that clinical supervision can cost between \$50 to \$250 or more per hour for those who have to pay (Mojozy, 2025). Given that a social worker is required to complete 100 hours of supervision, every social worker who is unable to secure supervision as a benefit of their employment is required to pay thousands of dollars to complete the requirements of licensure. This places a greater financial burden on social workers who take the provisional licensure option. Black social workers have pointed to difficulties finding supervision due to the high costs, often for poor quality supervision from white supervisors (Walker & Bruhn, 2023). Because the option is developed to alleviate the inequities produced through the ASWB exam, this pathway to licensure will force social workers to pay more in supervisory costs, and because BIPOC social workers will be more likely to take this pathway to licensure, this will create a racially inequitable system of payment for supervision.

Second, in many agencies, a social worker's pay is tied to the status of their licensure. For example, in the US Federal Government, the social worker job series has multiple grade determinations including GS-07, GS-09, GS-11, and GS-12, each with specifications on licensure and experience (United States Office of Personnel Management [USOPM], 1964). As an example, in 2025, an unlicensed social worker with an LMSW is designated a pay grade of GS-09 and can expect to earn an annual salary beginning at \$52,205 whereas a licensed social worker with an LCSW is designated a pay grade of GS-11 and can expect to earn an annual salary beginning at \$63,163 (FederalPay, n.d.a, n.d.b; USOPM, 2025). Hence, those without an independent clinical license are paid at a lower rate than those with an independent license. Provisional licensure is not an independent license, and hence, those under the conditions of the provisional license will be paid less than those with a full independent license. Because the alternative pathway is meant to provide greater equity for BIPOC social workers, the program will end up costing them thousands of dollars in lost wages.

Finally, because provisional licensure is an alternative to traditional licensure specifically aimed at BIPOC social workers (Hirsch et al., 2023), a social worker who has elected the alternative outs themselves as not taking the ASWB exam. Although it is widely acknowledged passage of the exam is correlated to race and not ability to perform professional tasks, there are still both conscious and unconscious judgements against social workers who have failed the ASWB exam. Thus, a social worker who takes the alternative pathway may suffer judgement of their professional ability taking the alternative pathway. This can cause psychological harm to the social worker while also potentially affecting their consideration for employment. Because the pathway was designed for racial equity, this outcome will do the greatest harm to BIPOC social workers. For ratings and overall outcomes of the equity analysis, see Table 1.

Abolish the ASWB Exam

While the goal of regulation is to create assurances for public safety of social work practice, there is currently no evidence that the ASWB exam achieves public safety (Apgar, 2019; Apgar & Nienow, 2023; Hirsch et al., 2023; NASW-IL, 2023; NASW-OH, 2022). Assessing the many locales where the master and bachelor level exam is not required for licensure, this has not created a public health hazard (NASW-IL, 2023; NASW-OH, 2022). For example, Illinois, Rhode Island, and Delaware removed the requirements for Master and Bachelor level exams for dependent licensures after requiring them for many years, and the result was greater access to licensure without any significant harms to the public (NASW-OH, 2022). Today, the lessons from Illinois and Minnesota are clear: an exam is not required to demonstrate an ability to practice, and eliminating exam requirements increases the diversity of the workforce through more equitable assessments.

Nevertheless, as outlined in Table 1, each alternative assessed thus far results in an inequitable state of affairs. According to the shortcomings of these various designs for an alternative pathway, a truly equitable alternative to the current model of licensure is not yet apparent. On this issue, Cassandra Walker, an activist leader for the #StopASWB coalition in the effort for the alternative pathways in Illinois and coauthor of “Alternative Pathways to Social Work Licensure” (Hirsch et al. 2023), stated:

The reckoning around ASWB has been coming for decades, and I am happy to see this first step signed into law here in Illinois. We fought long and hard for those social workers who have been unjustly barred or pushed out of clinical work in their communities. Despite the abuse and attacks used against us, we will keep working to make social work live up to the promises it makes on paper. I hope that other professions and states follow our example and push this work further as it is clear that these kinds of tests are not making us safer, don't measure what they claim, and generally weaken our ability to properly staff organizations in professions which already have massive shortages (NASW-IL, 2023, para. 9).

Walker is articulating that in order to make a lasting impact on equity in the social work profession, a more daring strategy than proposing system reforms is in order. Following the critical race theory analysis provided above, a mere reform of the examination system would constitute an interest convergence insufficient to eliminate white supremacy within the profession. A reformed system of licensure that maintains the vestiges of white supremacy through color blind racism is still a system that is white supremacist at its core. As social workers investigating the ASWB exam, an abolitionist paradigm regarding the ASWB exam would outright end the exam from requirements for licensure, creating the most equitable state of affairs for all social workers. Hence, although the options described above are nearly exhaustive of possible alternatives, the authors of this article argue that a truly equitable alternative for all social workers is instead the abolition of the ASWB exam. This abolition would mean not an alternative pathway but instead a single pathway that does not discriminate or segregate BIPOC social workers from the licensure process.

Functionally, as the lowest bar to clear, what abolition of ASWB examinations means is eliminating the exam from requirements while maintaining the current licensing and certification structure required by social work boards. Currently, state boards have robust mechanisms for gate keeping the social work profession including requirements for supervision, holding a degree in social work, and maintaining professional ethics (Nienow et al., 2021; Thyer & Biggerstaff, 1989). These robust standards may provide oversight, however, there is no evidence the ASWB examination provides any level of public protection (Apgar, 2019; Apgar & Nienow, 2023; NASW-IL, 2023; NASW-OH, 2022). Hence, maintaining the standards already set by social work regulation would provide a low-risk strategy for eliminating the examination.

Although the focus of alternative pathways to licensure has been on licensed independent clinical practice, the demographic pass rates for each of the ASWB exams demonstrate racial inequities (ASWB, 2022a). As discussed above, the pass rates across each ASWB exam—i.e., master, generalist, clinical, associate, bachelor—contribute to the ongoing racial inequities in the social work profession and are based in the same white supremacist and settler colonial methodology as is the clinical exam. As such, abolition of ASWB examinations should include not only the clinical exam but also the bachelor exam, the master exam, and all other exams used by states to maintain barriers for social work licensure. In short, rather than establish a new alternative for BIPOC social workers, the social work field should abolish all ASWB exams.

Whereas establishing an alternative pathway to licensure through one of the routes analyzed by Hirsch et al. (2023) would maintain inequities within the social work field, abolishing the ASWB exam would have the effect of establishing an equitable state of affairs within the social work licensing process. See Table 1. Abolition would improve procedural fairness by establishing the same path for every social worker regardless of ability to perform on standardized assessments. Abolition would increase access to licensure by creating a route available for every supervised associate social worker without barriers beyond supervision. Abolition would produce the same high standard of social work knowledge equal to that of the current system. Abolition would create a system designed for excellent outcomes for every social worker who completes supervision. And abolition would ground licensure in a target of equitable overall outcomes for a new social work field. Although, as assessed within the equity analysis, an alternative pathway might improve conditions from inequitable to moderately or minimally inequitable, alternative pathways miss the mark.

Nothing less than abolition can achieve an equitable pathway to licensure. Nevertheless, abolition of the ASWB examination may be only the beginning of a larger process of abolition within social work. As demonstrated through the history of social work, the profession has aligned with white supremacy, and this collaboration is at the heart of the social work project (Dettlaff, 2023; Dettlaff et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2024). Here, professionalization of social care has aimed to sever BIPOC communities from traditional practices while claiming sole legitimacy to help those communities (Dettlaff, 2023; Kim et al., 2024). As the bureaucratic administration of social work professionalism, social work regulation plays a central role in the function of this process. Future research and activism

should focus on the ways professionalization of social work has maintained white supremacy and abolitionist visions against social work regulation.

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