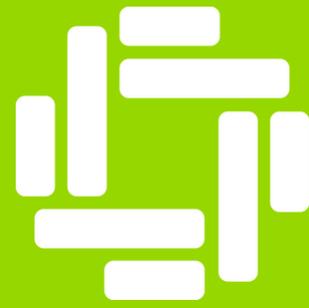


OFFICIAL MEMO



TO: Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators -Board
FROM: Nova Scotia College of Social Workers - Council
DATE: May, 2024
SUBJECT: Considerations Towards a National Competency
Assessment

Introduction

This Memorandum has been developed to explore a pathway to a nationally recognized competency assessment for all Social Work Regulators in Canada. The Nova Scotia College of Social Workers (NSCSW) has questions for consideration before endorsing and moving towards such an assessment. This memorandum provides the rationale and reasons for these questions.

In professions such as social work, medicine, dentistry, psychology, and nursing, there is an inherent requirement for professional accountability and responsibility to ensure quality service and protection of public interests. Professional suitability is determined by a comprehensive understanding of profession-specific knowledge, skills, and values, coupled with the competent application of professional behaviours in practical situations (Tam et Al, 2013). According to the functionalist theory, professions are tasked with regulatory functions in modern society. These expectations emphasize that educational achievement alone may not sufficiently measure a professional's suitability and competence, thus reinforcing the significance of secondary assessments (Tam et Al, 2013). Secondary assessments offer an extended evaluation of a candidate's abilities, going beyond theoretical knowledge to assess practical skills, ethical decision-making, and adaptability in real-world scenarios. Incorporating these layers of assessment ensure a comprehensive evaluation of a professional's suitability and readiness for their chosen field (Tam et Al, 2013).

As Canada faces growing pressure on healthcare recruitment, issues related to license mobility between provinces remain under scrutiny. Social work regulators must reach a consensus on professional competency assessment to ensure the public has timely access to ethical and qualified practitioners.

The document explores the use of secondary evaluations in professional regulation, particularly in the context of social work. It spotlights research that points out potential problems with the validity, reliability, and credibility of standardized assessments, and explores the foundations of more flexible and dynamic evaluation methods. The document also brings up specific issues regarding the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) examination.

Based on this discussion, the NSCSW has several important queries about the execution of a national competency assessment.

- Exploring the differences between summative and dynamic assessments, how can we assure that assessments effectively evaluate profession-specific knowledge, skills, and values, coupled with the competent application of professional behaviours in contextual situations.
- It's crucial to balance the need for a assessment with respect for individual rights. What measures can be taken to ensure that a competency assessment do not infringe upon Charter rights?
- How will a national competency assessment prioritize reconciliation? It's important to consider how this tool can be used to promote healing and unity.
- Given the complexity of social work, How will the assessment evaluate an applicant's ability to think critically?

The Evolution and Effectiveness of Licensing Exams

Licensing exams have long been a staple in various professions, serving as a crucial gateway to ensure that practitioners possess the necessary skills and knowledge. However, recent research has raised concerns about their validity, reliability, and overall effectiveness, prompting calls for innovation and reform.

Validity and Reliability Concerns

The validity and reliability of various licensing exams have been at the forefront of academic discourse, with multiple studies drawing attention to potential

issues with these assessments.

Bobos et al. (2021) found limited evidence on the measurement properties of Physiotherapy Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (PT OSCEs), revealing a low internal consistency and weak correlation between clinical performance and OSCE scores. This raises questions about the ability of the assessment to accurately assess the readiness of physiotherapy graduates for professional practice. Similarly, Apgar and Luquet (2023) confirmed a weak connection between the content outlines of the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) examination and the educational competencies for accreditation by the Council on Social Work Education.

Predictors of Professional Conduct

In contrast to these concerns, De Champlain et al. (2020) found that performance on the Medical Council of Canada Qualifying Examination (MCCQE) Part I and II could predict future professional behaviour. For example, lower scores on the MCCQE Part I were associated with increased patient complaints and low scores on the MCCQE Part II were linked to risky opioid and benzodiazepine prescribing behaviours. These findings suggest that the MCCQE could serve as an early indicator of potential professional issues, although further research is needed.

Additionally, Tamblyn et al. (2007) found that scores on the MCCQE, specifically those related to patient-physician communication, were significant predictors of complaints to medical regulatory authorities. This indicates the importance of assessing communication skills in medical training and suggests that remediation of communication problems could potentially reduce complaints.

Equity

Concerns about equity in professional licensure examinations have been raised in numerous studies, particularly about the Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP). Callahan et al. (2021) highlighted the significant disparity in passing rates between underrepresented Black or African American and Hispanic applicants and their majority counterparts. This raises concerns about potential biases and systemic barriers within the exam that

could unfairly disadvantage certain demographic groups. To address these issues, Callahan et al. recommend relinquishing exclusive decision-making control over the EPPP and making examination data available for independent review. Such measures could lead to a more transparent and inclusive examination process, potentially reducing disparities in passing rates and promoting greater equity.

Similar concerns about equity have been raised about the Mathematics Proficiency Test (MPT) in Ontario, Canada. Eizadirad et al. (2021) examined teacher candidates' experiences with the MPT, voicing concerns about the use of high-stakes tests as gatekeepers to the teaching profession. The authors suggest that such tests may inadvertently create barriers for candidates from diverse backgrounds, thus contributing to a lack of diversity within the teaching profession.

These studies highlight the importance of continually evaluating and refining secondary assessments to ensure they are fair, valid, and equitable. This may involve adjusting examination content to better reflect the diversity of professional practice, reviewing scoring procedures to eliminate potential biases, and implementing supports to assist candidates from underrepresented groups.

Shifting Focus to Dynamic Assessments

Markovic (2022) proposed the idea of focusing on experiential pathway programs and state-specific standards for law school accreditation as an alternative to conventional bar exams. This proposition suggests a move towards more dynamic assessments that could better mirror professional practice and emphasize ethics training. Tamblyn et al. (2007) also suggested incorporating communication skills evaluations at various stages of medical education, such as during candidate selection for medical school or identifying trainees who may need more focused skills training.

A recurring theme across these studies is the call for a transition towards more dynamic, real-world assessments. For example, Phelps and Sykes (2020) suggested using Content Knowledge for Teaching (CKT) assessment tasks and assessments to demonstrate competencies like lesson planning and

reflection on instructional goals. Smirnova (2022) advocated for discontinuing the MCCQE Part II in favour of the MCCQE Part I and developing strategies to identify potential challenges for both international and Canadian medical graduates. She also discussed other methods to ensure physician competence, including Entrustable Professional Activities (EPAs), portfolios, and workplace-based evaluations.

Marcus-Blank et al. (2019) conducted a study to determine the relationship between scores on structured interviews and licensure exams and first-year resident performance. The findings indicated that the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) Step 1 and 2 Clinical Knowledge scores were significantly correlated with cognitively oriented competencies. Furthermore, structured interview scores were valid predictors of performance on three non-cognitive competencies. The results revealed that structured interview scores added incremental validity over USMLE scores in predicting patient care, professionalism, and interpersonal skills. The authors concluded that structured interviews offer a reliable tool for evaluating applicants' non-cognitive skills and should be used in conjunction with USMLE scores for optimal prediction of resident performance.

Association of Social Works Boards Exam

For social work, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) is predominately used as a competency assessment. The Exam is a standardized test designed to measure the minimum competency acceptable to practice social work. It's used in various jurisdictions, primarily in the United States, and some regions in Canada.

The ASWB Exam comes in four different levels: Bachelors, Master, Advanced Generalist, and Clinical. Each exam includes 150 scored multiple-choice questions and 20 non-scored “pretest” questions. The primary goal of the ASWB Exam is to serve the purpose of public safety. The ASWB exam functions as a gatekeeper to the profession, ensuring that licensed social workers have the necessary knowledge and skills to practice safely and effectively. By setting a minimum standard of competency, the ASWB Exam aims to protect the public from unqualified practitioners.

While the ASWB Exam is not widely adopted in Canada, many jurisdictions have expressed an interest in using it or plan to begin using it.

Province	Exam Use
Nova Scotia	No use of exam
New Brunswick	Intends to use exam for its advanced practice registration
Prince Edward Island	No use of exam
Newfoundland and Labrador	Utilizes exam for social workers returning to practice
Ontario	Intends to use the exam for entry to social work and social service work practice
Quebec	No use of exam
Manitoba	Uses exam as part of its substantial equivalency program including applicants from unaccredited Universities
Saskatchewan	Uses exam as part of its advanced registration
Alberta	Uses exam for clinical registration and for practitioners returning to practice
British Columbia	Uses the exam for all those entering the profession and for clinical registration

Challenges to the Exam

On August 5, 2021, the ASWB put forward a report to build more transparency and accountability in the administration of social work exams. In response to George Floyd's murder, growing calls for racial justice, and mounting pressure from educators the ASWB released data related to pass/fail rates based on race, gender, and age. The data showed major race-based discrepancies in first-time exam pass rates.



Table 1: First time test takers, all exams, 2018-2021

Race/ethnicity	Pass Rate - 1st Try
Asian	67%
Black	41%
Hispanic	60%
Multiracial	78%
Native American/Indigenous peoples	65%
White	82%

Data source: <https://www.aswb.org/exam/contributing-to-the-conversation>

ASWB Analysis of Pass/Fail rates

The ASWB has stated that the data is not complete, more research is needed, and their leadership is committed to evidence-based decision-making regarding equity, diversity, and inclusion. The initial conclusion of their report is that the discrepancies are related to stereotype threat.

Stereotype threat is said to be felt by members of a stigmatized group who find themselves in a situation where negative stereotypes provide a possible framework for interpreting their behaviour; this theory suggests that the risk of being judged considering those stereotypes can elicit a disruptive state that undermines performance and aspirations in that domain. This situational predicament, termed stereotype threat, continues to be an intensely debated and researched topic in educational, social, and organizational psychology (Spencer et al., 2016).

The ASWB paper does not provide a thorough exploration of the application of stereotype threat theory to the exam. Furthermore, recent research suggests that the impact of stereotype threat may have been overestimated (Picho-Kiroga et al., 2021; Warne, 2022; Whaley 2018). Despite this evidence and potential implications for public policy decisions by stakeholders (Forscher et

al., 2022), existing studies investigating such efficacy are based on relatively small sample sizes with varied operationalizations making it difficult to determine whether there is enough proof in favour or against engaging with stereotype threat theory in these settings.

Intersectional Approach to Regulation

The Nova Scotia College of Social Workers (NSCSW), in its regulatory framework, adopts an intersectional approach. This approach necessitates an acknowledgment of, and a proactive stance towards, redressing the deeply entrenched legacy of white supremacy within the realm of social work practice. Historically, this field has normalized and privileged whiteness, often to the detriment of other cultural practices and knowledge systems (Badwall, 2013; Cermele et al., 2001; DeGrace & McBain, 2019; Gooding & Mehrotra, 2021; Hanna et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2021; Lerner, 2021; NSCSW, 2019; Weinberg, 2020; Weinberg & Fine, 2020).

For more than five decades, Indigenous and Black scholars and activists have scrutinized systemic racism within social work, unveiling its ubiquitous presence across practice, research, and education (Hanna et al., 2021; Lynch et al., 2017; Odera et al., 2021; Singh, 2019). While the Association of Social Work Boards' pledge to unmask institutional racism constitutes a significant progression, it is critical to acknowledge that racism operates on multiple dimensions.

To effectively dismantle racial injustices and inequalities, it is incumbent upon us to scrutinize our colonial past, whilst concurrently engaging with present power dynamics. This requires focus towards understanding how these dynamics have disproportionately advantaged white individuals at the expense of racialized communities. This intersectional perspective necessitates a dual examination of personal biases and broader systemic issues related to oppression and privilege.

To construct systems that authentically embody racial justice, it becomes crucial to recognize and rectify historical endeavours explicitly designed to displace racialized groups—endeavours that have entrenched white privilege (NSCSW 2019).

The NSCSW emphasizes the importance of this intersectional approach in combating institutional racism and is committed to intersectional examinations of secondary assessments. This commitment is aimed at fostering a climate of equity and inclusivity within the realm of social work regulation and practice.

The ASWB Exam Through an Intersectional Lens

The ASWB Examinations, as standardized tests, are embedded in a historical context that is fraught with controversy and has significant present-day implications. During World War I, Carl Brigham, an advocate of eugenics, pioneered a testing system designed to segregate soldiers into battalions based on race and test scores. This system later inspired his work in educational evaluation. Brigham, concerned about the growing diversity of America's student body due to immigration from non-white countries, maintained that standardized aptitude tests could help solidify societal class boundaries. This vision culminated in the creation of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), initially intended to gauge mental aptitude rather than merely academic performance. Over time, the function of standardized testing underwent substantial metamorphosis; from a tool to differentiate between individuals deemed "desirable" and those considered "feeble-minded," it evolved into a mechanism to identify academically gifted students regardless of their background (Gates, 2019). Despite its contentious past fading into obscurity, this legacy continues to mold our system today, often privileging some while discriminating against others.

There is growing concern that the ASWB privileges eurocentric ways of knowing (Castex et Al, 2019). To develop the exam, the ASWB conducts a comprehensive survey-based 'Analysis of Social Work,' executed six times since 1981 to achieve an accurate representation of practice. However, according to 2017 data, the majority of U.S. and Canadian social workers who participated in this analysis identified as White (79% & 85%, respectively). This demographic skew tilts the scales toward the perspectives and values of these individuals. While the ASWB strives to eliminate potential bias from the exams, there is evidence suggesting that these efforts have not yielded the desired results.

From an intersectional perspective, it has been documented that social work

work practices and standards often revolve around whiteness. For instance, in mental health delivery, there is a reliance on the medical model, which often overlooks socioeconomic and political factors, including racism, that impact mental well-being (Brown et al., 2020). The social construction of "normalcy" is frequently distorted by dominant definitions, with strong racial stereotyping evident, as highlighted in Cermele, Daniels & and Anderson's article "Defining Normal: Constructions Of Race And Gender In The DSM-IV Casebook" (2020). The Canadian Association of Social Workers reports that Black and Indigenous children continue to be disproportionately represented in child protection cases (Hallberg & Smith, 2018). This disparity can be traced back to Eurocentric definitions of family structure applied by social workers without adequate consideration of cultural differences. Robert Wright has eloquently described how these seemingly innocuous models have led to discrimination against households for not conforming to a white standard (NSCSW, 2019). These practices are then likely reflected in the practice analysis.

Evidence of this is further delineated by Castex et al. (2018), who revealed a disconcerting reality: social work students from marginalized backgrounds often enter the field driven by a passion for justice, only to encounter new obstacles in the form of microaggressions on ASWB license examinations that can hinder them from achieving licensure. Castex et al (2018) conclude that the ASWB's licensing exams, as significant gatekeeping mechanisms of the profession, effectively perpetuate a white-privileged profession.

This conclusion is now corroborated by the ASWB's released data, signalling an urgent need for change and reform in the regulation of social work.

Reconciliation and the Role of Regulators

In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) highlights the importance of cultural competency training for all healthcare professionals, including social workers, to ensure culturally safe practices (NCBI, 2023). Such training significantly improves knowledge of Indigenous Peoples' histories and protocols (NCBI, 2023). Health regulators, such as the British Columbia College of Nursing and Midwives (BCCNM), have pledged commitment to redress harm to Indigenous Peoples within the healthcare system, which includes establishing clear accountabilities for cultural safety within leadership teams

Furthermore, these regulators are working with national councils to ensure adequate inclusion of competencies regarding cultural safety, humility, and addressing Indigenous-specific racism in their policy frameworks (BCCNM, 2023). Health Canada's 2023-24 Departmental Plan also emphasizes the need for modern regulatory oversight and the recruitment and retention of providers who can deliver culturally safe care in rural and remote areas (Health Canada, 2023).

Critical Thinking and Social Work Competency

The competency of social workers is fundamentally rooted in the capacity to think critically. According to Weisman and Zorando, 2017, critical thinking is not only a basic competency for educated individuals, but it's also a responsibility that social workers must uphold due to the nature of their work. The ability to make informed decisions "on the spot" is a critical aspect of social work practice, further emphasizing the importance of critical thinking skills within the profession (Belchior-Rocha & Casquilho-Martins 2019).

Critical thinking allows social workers to navigate complex social, economic, and political contexts, enabling them to provide quality services and navigate roles of privilege and power effectively (NASW, 2022). These skills encompass problem-solving, logical reasoning, and the ability to critically evaluate the distribution of power and privilege in society to promote social and racial equity (Schmid et al, 2022).

However, standardized exams may not adequately measure these skills. They often focus on factual recall rather than the ability to apply knowledge in context, engage with the complexities of real-world scenarios, or reflect on their own biases (Samson, 2018). Therefore, while such exams can test for certain competencies, they may fall short in assessing a social worker's critical thinking skills, which are vital for effective practice.

Standardized Tests with Statistical Evidence of Racial Disparities are an Infringement on Charter Rights

As the literature review reflects, mechanisms to assess competence are being called into question as well. With recent evidence of disparities in success rates

in Ontario's Mathematics Proficiency Test by the Ontario College of Teachers infringes upon section 15 of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This finding brings into question many practices surrounding traditional genres for assessment - ultimately highlighting an urgent need to address racial inequity within this realm. In the decision, Barkhouse et Al, 2021 wrote:

There were reasonably available alternatives to the MPT that on their face appear to be less impairing and at least as effective in achieving the goal of improving student achievement in math. These include requiring a minimum number of hours of math instruction or a math course in B.Ed. programs, requiring an undergraduate math course as an admissions requirement for B.Ed. programs or waiting to see the effects of the other parts of the Respondent's four-year math strategy.

The Respondent's efforts to address equity issues related to the MPT do not meet the minimal impairment requirement where there are other options available that would not impair anyone's rights. Racialized teacher candidates who have been disproportionately unsuccessful on the MPT should not have to keep retaking the test. There is a cost to retaking the test in time and money for those who are least likely to be able to afford this and there is no undertaking that going forward, teacher candidates will not have to pay to retake the MPT.

There is an under-representation of racialized teachers in Ontario schools. Racialized students benefit from being taught by racialized teachers. The deleterious effects of the MPT on racialized teacher candidates who have been disproportionately unsuccessful on the test outweigh its benefits.

Further Background on the Credibility and Validity of Exam

Finally, the validity of the ASWB exam to measure competence has also been called into question. It is essential to understand the political and social context of a given community for ethically sound social work practices and competencies to develop. Research has demonstrated that due to cultural differences from region to region, standard psychometric techniques are not reliable when it comes to validating professional licensing examinations (McClelland 1985). Moreover, there is no evidence suggesting such exams do



either. Albright & Theyer (2010), articulate that practice tests provided by ASWB (which articulate questions that could be asked in the exam) are seen as too transparent or guessable - making them an inadequate assessment of competency. Finally, there are historical concerns raised about ASWB's lack of accountability, transparency, and validity in their testing practices. The organization has accumulated considerable wealth in the use of the exam since 2008, yet, despite many calls they have failed to provide independent researchers with proper data for verification (Woodcroft, 2016).

Profession Regulation and Racial Justice

The Supreme Court of Canada has concluded that it is difficult to overstate the importance in our society of the proper regulation of our learned professions. The primary purpose of the establishment of self-governing professions is the protection of the public. This is achieved by ensuring that only the qualified and the competent are permitted to practice and that members of the profession conform to appropriate standards of professional conduct.

Role of Regulation in Addressing Racial Justice

As a regulator of the social work profession in Canada, recognizing both the social work profession's colonial roots and current practices and our mandate to protect the public is at the forefront and center of regulatory agendas. Accordingly, self-regulation of professions has been questioned in its ability to protect both communities and practitioners from racism (Weinberg, 2020; Tanchak, 2020). Multiple reports have now echoed this sentiment by showing that many existing regulatory efforts need review or reform.

Specifically, the Turning the Tides Report, stemming from the Mass Casualty Commission's investigation in Nova Scotia, revealed systemic inadequacies in the dentist's board's oversight concerning community safety, particularly for vulnerable groups affected by socio-economic marginalization and systemic racism. The findings emphasize the need to challenge traditional assumptions about regulation and the need to be more proactive in promoting community safety and well-being, especially for marginalized communities who are at higher risk of experiencing poor treatment and unethical or illegal behaviour (MCC, 2023).

Further goals must be set for protecting public interests for racialized which include active risk management through increased involvement with external stakeholders surrounding any potential risks--real or perceived (Tanchak et al., 2021). As such a call resounds throughout Canada to modernize regulations towards achieving real progress on anti-racism practices.

Conclusion

The Nova Scotia College of Social Workers (NSCSW) is keen to move towards a national competency assessment, however, we hold that the current standard, the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) exam, has significant flaws. The NSCSW asserts that standardized exams are deeply rooted in white supremacy, with their practices and analyses often dominated by white beliefs and values to the exclusion of other knowledge systems (Badwall, 2013; Cermele et al., 2001; DeGrace & McBain, 2019; Gooding & Mehrotra, 2021; Hanna et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2021; Lerner, 2021; NSCSW, 2019; Weinberg, 2020; Weinberg & Fine, 2020).

There is an urgent need for a competency assessment that fully encapsulates the critical thinking skills required for social work, taking into account socio-economic and political contexts which are essential for effective practice. Standardized exams obscure these contexts and thus fail to assess a social worker's ability to navigate complex, real-world situations.

Moreover, as reconciliation takes center stage in the delivery of health care, it is crucial for a national competency assessment to evaluate a social worker's skills and knowledge in this area. The NSCSW's continued efforts towards a fairer, more inclusive competency assessment are indicative of a commitment to addressing systemic racism and fostering equity within the profession.

The NSCSW has several key questions regarding the implementation of a National Competency Assessment.

- Exploring the differences between summative and dynamic assessments, how can we assure that assessments effectively evaluate profession-specific knowledge, skills, and values, coupled with the competent application of professional behaviours in contextual situations

- It's crucial to balance the need for a assessment with respect for individual rights. What measures can be taken to ensure that a competency assessment do not infringe upon Charter rights?
- How will this national competency assessment prioritize reconciliation? It's important to consider how this tool can be used to promote healing and unity.
- How will the assessment evaluate an applicant's ability to think critically? Given the complexity of social work.

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