

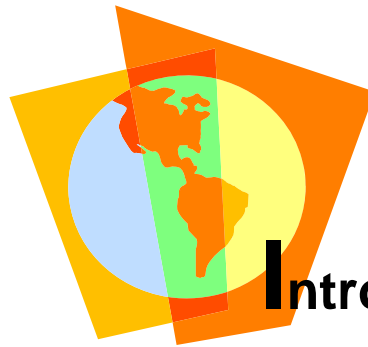
September 2004

An Investigation into Alternate Licensure

A stylized graphic of a globe with continents in orange and green, set against a yellow background, all within a larger orange pentagonal shape.

A Report to the
Minnesota Board of Social Work

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Introduction

MANY FOREIGN-BORN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER SOCIAL WORKERS ARE FACED WITH A DILEMMA, a dilemma now burdening the Board of Social Work. In order to do their job, immigrant social workers must clear the hurdle of licensure examination. Yet for many the exam is an insurmountable barrier that prohibits them from providing needed social services.

Stories abound in this report of workers engaged in extraordinary efforts to either pass or avoid taking the exam altogether. It is insufficient for the Board to say that it can simply skip this transitional generation of Hmong or other foreign-born social workers. The Board cannot wait for second-generation immigrants who are more familiar with mainstream cultural norms, more adept at the skills required for test-taking, and more likely to think and behave like the dominant culture. Services for immigrant cultures are needed now, and immigrant social workers stand ready to act. Inasmuch as exams contain a real bias against a group of social workers, our ethical obligation to social justice requires us to pay attention and resolve this dilemma now. Inasmuch as the exam is parochial and excludes information on diverse populations, it must be revised.

Three ideas may assist the Board as it considers this dilemma: 1) the differences between oral and written cultures, 2) the differences between equity and equality, and 3) the complex interactive nature of the phenomenon of exam failure.

The first idea is that **there is a genuine difference between oral cultures and written cultures**. Generally speaking, immigrant and American-born cultures relying on oral communications emphasize the *story*, the *process*, and the *context*. Conversely, cultures relying on written communications emphasize *factual detail*, “*objectivity*,” and, with regard to licensure, the minutia arcane knowledge of professional practice. For the most part, those born in an oral culture mistrust the written tradition, which can get caught up in seemingly irrelevant detail, thereby missing the context. Since licensure exams are based on the written tradition, they pose an immediate hurdle to many foreign-born social workers, who must first adapt to a fundamentally different way of thinking when taking the exam.

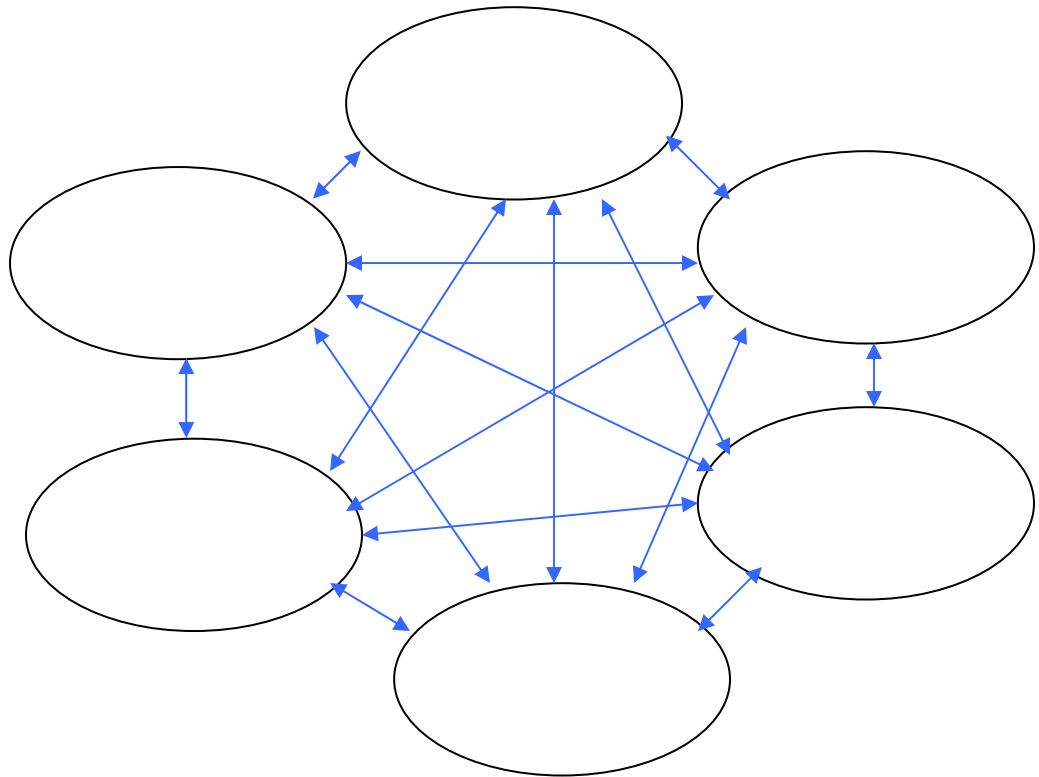
This report documents the “once-removed” quality of exam-taking for minority candidates. For many of these licensure candidates, exams require more than linguistic translation; they involve a cultural translation as well. For example,

multiple-choice tests confront the candidate with a series of right or wrong answers – a reflection of the dominant culture’s emphasis on precise detail. The world appears more complex for a person of color, with shifting meaning as one moves from majority to minority culture. These daily cultural shifts are generally unnecessary for those in the mainstream culture because whites can generally ignore the world of minorities as they navigate through daily life. In contrast a minority person must be aware at all times of which culture, which context, and which process is operational—and this necessary awareness can distract from attention to detail. People from oral cultures are exhausted by licensure exams because they need to guess what a white person might say in response to each question. This task further inflames resentment toward the exams, a resentment that sometimes blindsides those who operate in the majority culture. For example, most of the minority individuals interviewed for this report considered the exams to be clearly unfair, while many in the dominant culture made no such observation; for them the exams were culturally benign and even-handed.

This difference in perception, especially as it concerns “fairness,” affects the decision about proper Board action. The second idea for understanding the dilemma involves the concepts of **equity** –treating people differently to obtain similar outcomes – and **equality** – treating all people the same. The Board will need to consider whether it is better for the hurdles represented by the licensure exams to be the same for all, or whether they should differ according to circumstance. If the Board believes that licensure exams are outside culture, that they test for culturally neutral phenomena, then the Board will lean more heavily in favor of equality. If the Board believes that the exams are culturally biased, then it will lean more heavily in favor of giving cultural minorities a leg up. For many minority persons, equality is a trap set by the dominant culture which, while appearing even-handed, serves as an impenetrable glass ceiling. In this study the reader will see that the Texas Board of Social Work has solved this dilemma by making an exception to conventional licensure available to all.

The factors affecting passage or failure of the licensure exam are complex, multifaceted, and interactive. Because social phenomena stubbornly refuse to conform to simple cause-and-effect logic, the Board must organize its thinking in terms of **systems rather than simple cause-and-effect logic**. In many cases clues are hidden from the observer as well as the observed. Common sense dictates that exam failure is the product of many interactive forces, as illustrated in Graph 1.1. This research shows that the reason for the disparity in passage rates is ultimately a function of many interacting factors.

Graph 1.1: Diagram of Possible Interaction of Factors in Licensure Examinations



Exam Format: This factor involves the way the various examinations look. Should they be in multiple-choice format, or should there be another format, or a variety of formats? The bar for lawyers involves long written answers to tough questions. Some other exams are clinically-based. Still others involve elaborate scenarios and decision trees. The choice of exam format involves covering the concepts as validly as possible at the price a board can afford.

Exam Construction: How do we know the concepts examined are truly those germane to the practice of social work? Minority social workers may engage in a different kind of practice with their minority clients than with their majority clients. It is reasonable to suggest that these contexts and settings may be different from mainstream practice, and possible that the present process has failed to detect this kind of practice.

Educational System: Although the Council on Social Work Education works hard to rationalize the teaching of social work, some variation exists between programs. This is a good thing, as different programs emphasize different aspects of the profession. Generally speaking these differences are not sufficient to skew passage rates. It may be that social work programs are treating minority students differently than a majority students, allowing the minority student greater latitude when grading because they feel the need to compensate for deficits. The interaction between educational system

I'm angry at my school of social work for not preparing me better.
 -- Alternate Licensee

and foreign-born student may be important. It seems reasonable to suggest that teachers or programs vary in their ability to teach to these students.

Language: Eastern or ideographic languages use a different structural logic than Western languages. This difference in understanding language can be a large barrier for Asian students operating in English, especially if English is learned later on in life. The technical language of professional practice can throw a candidate off, as can the linguistic subtleties of multiple-choice questions.

Cultural Orientation: Oral cultures experience the world differently than written cultures, and observers have commented on misunderstandings emanating from the interaction between Eastern and Western cultures. Consider Rudyard Kipling's lines "East is East and West is West, and never the twain will meet." Today we are more optimistic, but as international businesspeople can attest, there remain large differences in orientation between the two cultures.

Individual: Individual differences in temperament, intelligence and emotional maturity (among many others) predict different outcomes when taking a professional examination.

This is not our language, but we are trying so hard to abide by the rules and regulations of this country.
Alternate Licensee

Summary

In chapter one this report will set out the dilemma now facing the Board. Chapter two will explore the fundamental question: Is there a disparity among native and foreign-born candidates? Chapter three will look at exam construction and the opinions of those involved in social work licensure, and professional licensure in Minnesota and nationwide. The report will consider the subjective experience of taking the exam in chapter four, and in chapter five set forth some alternatives for the Board to consider as it moves toward making a decision.





Chapter 1: The issue

Introduction

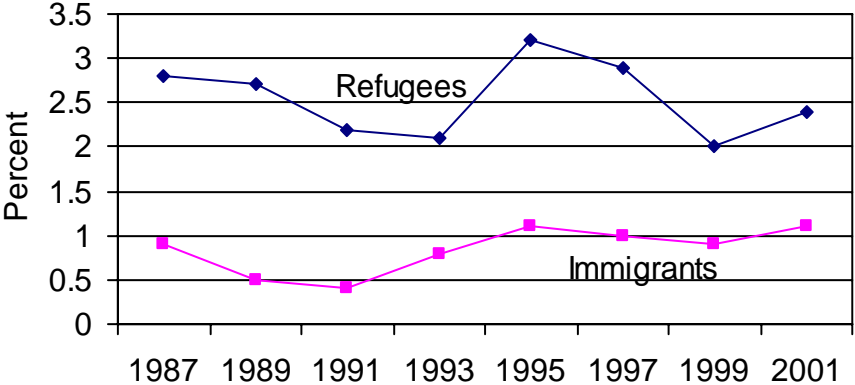
I want a
license. I
don't want to
avoid getting
a license. I
want to do the
right thing.
-- Alternate
Licensee

THIS COUNTRY CALLS ITSELF A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS, and yet it seems each generation of Americans must be reminded anew of the meaning of this proud heritage. Children and grandchildren of immigrants who have achieved citizenship, who have found the American dream and gained political or economic power, have also throughout our history crafted legislation limiting opportunities for those who enter after them. The issue facing the Board of Social Work is whether the written licensure represents a legitimate professional hurdle that protects the public or is it a wall that unfairly limits immigrant access to the practice of social work. It is our obligation as thoughtful citizens to examine the process for evidence of bias, and it is our professional duty as social workers to seek both social justice and client protection in the systems we oversee.

The story of twentieth century American immigration is punctuated by the end of the Viet Nam war in the mid-nineteen seventies. With the closing of that sad chapter came the flood of refugees holding a higher claim to the conscience of a nation than other immigrants. Southeast Asians loyal to the American cause in Viet Nam fled oppression by the North Vietnamese after the withdrawal of American troops. South Vietnamese immigrants were the first to enter the country; soon after came the Hmong mountain people who fought with honor alongside CIA agents in Cambodia.

Minnesota has been a nexus for post-Viet Nam Southeast Asian immigration, owing to a number of factors that speak well of the state's accepting attitude toward those who are different from the dominant culture. As Table 1.1 suggests, while the percentage of all US immigrants entering Minnesota over the last 15 years is relatively low, the percentage of all *refugees* coming here is much higher than any other state. Minnesota is first in the nation in number of Somali immigrants, second in the number of Hmong immigrants, and has the highest proportion of refugees nationwide. Over the next winter, Minnesota will experience the highest influx of Southeast Asian refugees of any state owing to the settlement here of the last large group of Hmong finally arriving in this country.

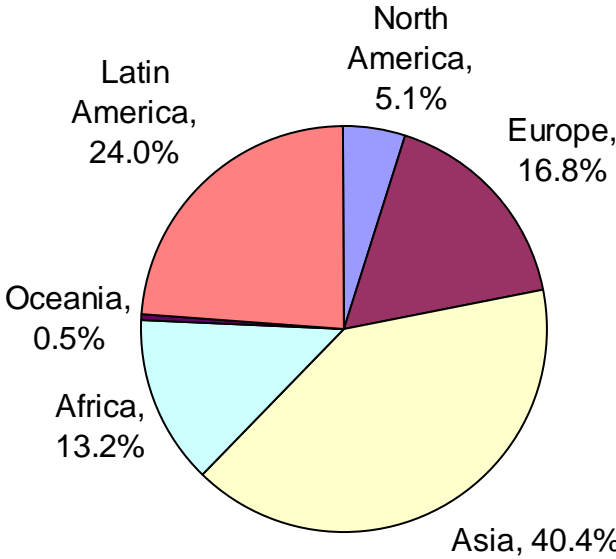
Table 1.1: Proportion of All US Immigrants and Refugees Coming to Minnesota, 1987-2001



Source: Immigration and Naturalization Service

As shown in Table 1.2, the largest proportion of those who are foreign-born in this state come from Asia (40%), followed by immigrants from Latin America (24%).

Table 1.2: Origin of Foreign-born Minnesotans

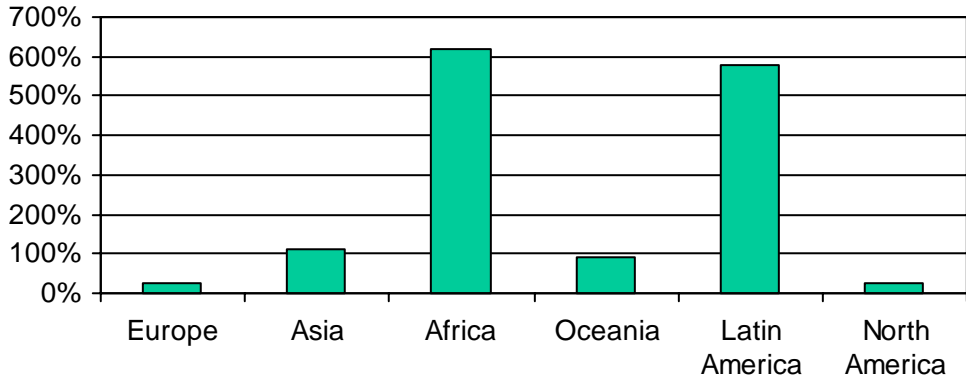


Source: US Census, 2000

Finally, while the state hosts a large number of Asian immigrants, immigrants from Africa are increasing most rapidly, at 610% over the last decade. As shown in Table 1.3, since 1990 Africans constitute the largest percentage increase in state immigration, followed closely by Latin Americans (570%). This suggests that

Africans and Hispanics will soon be facing the same challenges in cultural transition that now affect Southeast Asians.

Table 1.3: Percent Increase in Immigration, by Country, 1990-2000



Source: US Census, 2000

The Issue

Five or more years ago a group of Southeast Asian immigrant social workers began sharing with one another their common experience of taking the licensure examination. The experience was one of frustration at repeated sittings and failures to meet the minimum passing score. By many accounts, applicants would miss the passing score by only a few percentage points. The stigma of failure was prompting some foreign-born English language learner social workers to give up on the exam or avoid taking the examination altogether by seeking county employment. The social workers approached the Board, and then the Minnesota legislature, to seek a satisfactory end to their concerns. The Board, at first in opposition, later joined the interest group in shaping legislation that forged an alternative category of licensure unique to both social work regulation nationwide, and to regulation through licensure across other professional boards. In essence, the legislation stipulated that social workers who were categorically eligible (foreign-born, English language learners who had failed the licensure examination) could achieve licensure through alternate means, as described by the Board, below.

Alternate Licensure Overview, in the Words of the Board

“Applicants who fail any level of ASWB licensure examination are informed of the FB/ESL alternative licensing provision. Applicants are required to complete an addendum application form to verify their intent to apply through the alternative provision. If this form is submitted within 30 days of the Board’s notice no additional application fee is charged.

As of June 29, 2004, no applications for alternate licensure have been denied.

-- *The Board of Social Work*

“In addition to submitting the addendum application form, the FB/ESL alternative licensure application process requires that an applicant 1) meet all licensure requirements, 2) has taken and failed the required level of ASWB social work examination since January 1, 2000, 3) must verify their foreign-born status by submitting a legible copy of a document, including an English translation, if available, such as birth certificate, passport, baptismal certificate, or ‘green card’, 4) must attest to speaking English as a second language on a form provided by the Board, and 5) provide Letters of Recommendation & Experience Ratings from two licensed social workers and one professor from the applicant’s social work program who can attest to the applicant’s experience and competence.

“The Letters of Recommendation & Experience Ratings requires that the two licensed social workers and professor 1) describe the applicant’s scope of practice by circling either a ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘no information’ response to list of practice methods which correspond to the statutory definition of ‘social work practice’, 2) submit a narrative, ‘Letter of Recommendation’ to attest to the applicant’s competence, and 3) certify the applicant’s social work experience, competence, and recommend the applicant for licensure.

“As of June 29, 2004, no applications have been denied. However, out of the 48 total applications received two applications have been closed because all required information was not submitted by the required deadlines, and one applicant was determined ineligible for the level applied for, due to insufficient supervised practice hours and was granted another level of license. Out of the 48 applications received to date, 42 licenses have been granted, the other applications are still open pending receipt of all required documentation.”

Summary

Alternative licensure has emerged in Minnesota as a way to meet the needs of immigrant social work clients, and social workers who have sought and failed to achieve licensure. The legislation is unique across the country, and owes its origin to the initiative of immigrant social workers who desire to overcome a serious barrier to professional achievement and service.

What follows is a summary of how the licensure examination originated, and how it is formed today. Next this study reviews the experience of taking the examination. Finally, the report lists some recommendations gleaned during the course of the research.



Chapter II: The disparity

Introduction

The first task of this research was to determine if foreign-born English language learners were indeed failing their licensure exams at a higher rate than native-born applicants. Ultimately, two non-parametric statistical procedures were conducted (Chi-Square) on exam outcome (Pass/No Pass) by race, and a series of t-tests were conducted to determine if a significant difference existed between exam scores for majority and Asian-American candidates. The Board of Social Work supplied the researcher with a dataset of all candidates who signed up for any of its exams during the fifteen-plus year history of the Board. Owing to problems with data recording over time, some of the early data are missing. Nevertheless there is enough data to determine with a great degree of confidence the answer to this question.

People are
scared
because they
don't want to
take their
exam and fail
it.

-- Alternate
Licensee

A Note on the Data

The data given to the researcher was based on applications for licensure exams, and not on applicants themselves. This means that an applicant is listed as many times as he or she has applied to take an exam. If the same applicant applied for the ASWB Basic exam, and later the Intermediate exam, and still later the Clinical exam, there will be three lines of data recorded--one for each exam. Likewise, if an applicant applied three times to take the same exam, three lines were recorded. The unit of analysis in this dataset is the examination, not the individual. The researcher compensated on the t-test data by selecting only the first sitting for any exam, per a suggestion by ASWB.

The frequencies in the cross-tabulation (Table 2.1) give an overview of the data of interest to the Board. In toto, something more than 11,000 applications are recorded. Applicants who self-reported that they were Caucasians constituted 80 percent of all applicants. Eleven percent (N=1265) of all applicants did not report race, or their race data was lost. (A review of the names of those candidates not reporting race found only two names that might be identified as Southeast Asian). Of all candidates

applying for any social work licensure examination, 2.5 percent failed to show for the exam, 11 percent had no outcome reported for the exam, and overall almost 10 percent failed the exam.

Table 2.1: Cross-tabulation of Exam Results x Race, All Applications for Examination (N=11,153)

Race		Exam Results				Row Total
		No Report	No Show	Failed	Passed	
African American	Count	40	24	130	149	343
	% within Row	11.7%	7.0%	37.9%	43.4%	100.0%
	% within Column	3.2%	8.7%	12.5%	1.7%	3.1%
	% of All Cells	.4%	.2%	1.2%	1.3%	3.1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	Count	39	17	180	100	336
	% within Row	11.6%	5.1%	53.6%	29.8%	100.0%
	% within Column	3.1%	6.1%	17.3%	1.2%	3.0%
	% of All Cells	.3%	.2%	1.6%	.9%	3.0%
Caucasian	Count	957	199	546	7230	8932
	% within Row	10.7%	2.2%	6.1%	80.9%	100.0%
	% within Column	76.0%	71.8%	52.6%	84.3%	80.1%
	% of All Cells	8.6%	1.8%	4.9%	64.8%	80.1%
Hispanic	Count	27	7	39	75	148
	% within Row	18.2%	4.7%	26.4%	50.7%	100.0%
	% within Column	2.1%	2.5%	3.8%	.9%	1.3%
	% of All Cells	.2%	.1%	.3%	.7%	1.3%
Multi-Racial	Count				6	6
	% within Row				100.0%	100.0%
	% within Column				.1%	.1%
	% of All Cells				.1%	.1%
Native Am./Alaskan Native	Count	27	5	25	66	123
	% within Row	22.0%	4.1%	20.3%	53.7%	100.0%
	% within Column	2.1%	1.8%	2.4%	.8%	1.1%
	% of All Cells	.2%	.0%	.2%	.6%	1.1%
Race Not Reported	Count	169	25	118	953	1265
	% within Row	13.4%	2.0%	9.3%	75.3%	100.0%
	% within Column	13.4%	9.0%	11.4%	11.1%	11.3%
	% of All Cells	1.5%	.2%	1.1%	8.5%	11.3%
Column Total	Count	1259	277	1038	8579	11153
	% within All Rows	11.3%	2.5%	9.3%	76.9%	100.0%
	% within All Columns	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	11.3%	2.5%	9.3%	76.9%	100.0%

Analysis

Two Chi-Square analyses were conducted to find out whether foreign-born English language learners fail licensure exams at a rate higher than majority culture persons in the Board dataset. There is no variable that can positively determine foreign-born or English language learner status or distinguish licensure candidates who are born in this country, so some assumptions were made about the data in order to proceed with the analysis. The following assumptions are clearly not true, but were used to provide a conservative estimate of outcome by population:

Assumption #1.

- A. All of the 336 applicants who self-reported Asian-American were foreign-born English language learners; and
- B. All non-Caucasian applicants were foreign-born English language learners.

Assumption #2. All of the 8932 applicants who self-reported Caucasian were native-born.

To determine the effect of multiple applications and failures by the same person, an analysis was conducted of retakes by both Asian-Americans and Caucasians. A five percent random sample of Caucasians was reviewed and it was found that about 4% of the cases were repeats. As shown in Table 2.2, among Asian-Americans approximately 50% of the exam applications are retakes. If we disregard all but the last exam taken, the passage rate jumps almost twenty percent, from 30% to 47%. Even considering this optimistic analysis, the passage rate for Asian-Americans is still nowhere near the passage rate for whites, which is 80%.

The “what would you do first?”
questions are hard because one is
stuck between a textbook answer
and one’s actual practice
experience.

-- Alternate Licensee

Table 2.2: Asian-American Data Checked for Exam Retakes

Exam Category	All Exams (n=336)		Only Last Exam (n=182)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percent
No Data	39	11.6%	20	11.0%
No Show	17	5.1%	4	2.2%
Failed	180	53.6%	72	39.6%
Passed	100	29.8%	86	47.3%

Do Foreign-Born English Language Learners Fail the Examinations at a Higher Rate?

In comparing Asian-American candidates to white candidates in a 2 x 2 table (Table 3.3), a Chi-Square analysis ($p < 0.01$) shows a significant disparity between passage rates for the two races. This suggests that a candidate self-describing as “white” is 2.6 times more likely to pass a licensure exam than a candidate self-describing as “Asian-American.”

You can get a split personality when you have to live in your own culture and the majority culture.
 -- Alternate Licensee

Table 2.3: Chi-Square Analysis of Race (White/Asian) x Exam Outcome*

Race	Exam Outcome			
	Pass	Fail	Total	
White	Count	7230	546	7776
	Expected Count	7075	700	7776
	% Within Row	93.0%	7.0%	100.0%
	% Within Column	98.6%	75.2%	96.5%
	% of all Cells	89.7%	6.8%	96.5%
Asian	Count	100	180	280
	Expected Count	254.8	25.2	280.0
	% Within Row	35.7%	64.3%	100.0%
	% Within Column	1.4%	24.8%	3.5%
	% of all Cells	1.2%	2.2%	3.5%
Total	Count	7330	726	8056
	Expected Count	7330.0	726.0	8056.0
	% Within Row	91.0%	9.0%	100.0%
	% Within Column	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of all Cells	91.0%	9.0%	100.0%
	Count	7330	726	8056

*p<.05

A second Chi-Square analysis was conducted on white vs. all other racial categories (Table 2.4). In this analysis, whites were 1.2 times more likely to pass any exam than all other categories of candidates. Table 2.4 shows the results of the Chi-Square (p<.05). Under this scenario, whites were only 1.2 times more likely to pass any licensure exam.

Table 2.4: Chi-Square of Race (White/All Other Races) X Exam Outcome

Race		Exam Outcome			Total
		Pass	Fail	Other	
Caucasian	Count	7230	546	1156	8932
	Expected Count	7076.1	856.2	999.7	8932.0
	% within Row	80.9%	6.1%	12.9%	100.0%
	% within Column	84.3%	52.6%	95.4%	82.5%
	% of Total	66.8%	5.0%	10.7%	82.5%
All other	Count	1349	492	56	1897
	Expected Count	1502.9	181.8	212.3	1897.0
	% within Row	71.1%	25.9%	3.0%	100.0%
	% within Column	15.7%	47.4%	4.6%	17.5%
	% of Total	12.5%	4.5%	.5%	17.5%
Total	Count	8579	1038	1212	10829
	Expected Count	8579.0	1038.0	1212.0	10829.0
	% within Row	79.2%	9.6%	11.2%	100.0%
	% within Column	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	79.2%	9.6%	11.2%	100.0%

Are Asian American Candidate Scores Significantly Different from Those of White Candidates?

A t-test conducted on each exam score by “white” or “Asian American” race, used only the first sitting for any exam, as suggested by ASWB. For example, if a candidate took a Basic exam twice, failing the first time and passing the second, only the first sitting was used in the formula. Results of the t-test follow on Table 2.5.

Table 2.5: T-test of Exam Score Means, Caucasian (10% random sample = 799) x Asian American (n=215)

ASWB Exam	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>T</i>
Basic				244	8.63**
White	177	80.42	5.73		
Asian	69	71.52	10.22		
Intermediate				183	8.09**
White	128	81.1	4.58		
Asian	57	73.3	8.52		
Advanced + Clinical				95	3.87**
White	80	78.58	4.55		
Asian	17	73.41	6.76		

**Significant at the $p < .01$ level

The white pool of applicants was reduced to a 10% random draw to better equalize the numbers with those of self-reported Asian American examinees. The number of applicants appear in the first data column, followed by the exam score mean for White and Asian American candidates. The exam score standard deviation is located in the next column, followed by the degrees of freedom and the t score for the test. Exams are in the rows, with the Advanced and Clinical exam scores were combined to make the numbers in that test larger. All t-tests showed significant differences at the $p = .01$ level, indicating that systematic (rather than random) elements are responsible for differences in exam scores. **It is most likely that elements associated with race are involved in the exam score differences.**

Summary

The data clearly indicate that the exam passage rate is substantially higher for whites than for non-whites, and is much higher for whites than for those reporting “Asian American” on the exam. More specifically, whites have significantly higher scores at all exam levels when compared to Asian Americans.

The lack of a variable identifying foreign born English language learners presented a threat to the validity of the quantitative findings of this report. Nevertheless, the race variable “Asian” and the constructed variable “all non-white” stands as a conservative

option to finesse this problem. If native-born Americans with Asian backgrounds were included in the “Asians” category, as they undoubtedly were, then this group would likely inflate the passage rate for all Asians. Likewise, foreign-born English language learners constitute a small percentage of all non-white applicants. Native-born minorities should once again inflate passage rates. Despite this threat, passage rates for minority candidates remain between half and two-thirds the passage rates of whites.

The Board should consider a six-month review, like Ramsey County has.

-- *Alternate Licensee*





Chapter III: The social work licensing examinations

Introduction

SOME TIME JUST PRIOR TO 1958 MEMBERS of the Southern Minnesota chapter of NASW developed and circulated a draft for a model social work licensure law. This was the profession's first attempt to create licensure legislation. The Minnesota draft was quickly picked up and endorsed by the main body of NASW. The outcome of that early Minnesota effort is that today every state in the Union has some form of social work licensure or certification on its books.

I don't like the fact that I have to have an alternative license.
-- *Alternate Licensee*

Despite the state's early leadership, it was not until 1987 that our legislature passed a practice act for social workers. The lag time between conception and legislation reflects the fact that social work licensure in Minnesota is a controversial issue. Some practitioners consider licensure to be a mainstay of our professional character, while others dismiss it as a troublesome appendix in the body social work. Some argue that the very existence of licensure encourages frivolous complaints by vindictive clients; others claim it fails to adequately protect citizens against misconduct by unscrupulous workers. Non-clinical social workers wonder if licensure is merely a way for clinicians to qualify for third-party reimbursement. Others insist licensure is proof of our willingness to take responsibility for our profession. Most social workers assume positions that are more moderate, but it is not uncommon these days to hear licensure portrayed as either a savior or a demon.

More than any of these descriptions, licensure reflects social work in all its glory and insecurity. It reflects the profession's natural evolution, its ongoing problems with defining our wide range of practice, and the historical split between social work as cause or social work as function that has yet to be resolved.

There is no doubt social workers most often work with vulnerable people who need protection: the poor, children, elderly, and others who are marginalized by society. Vulnerable people are in greater need of protection than clients who may already be empowered to demand their rights or even bring a worker to court if they are not satisfied with services.

In addition to its [asserted?] public protection function, licensure performs an essential gatekeeping function for the profession, working to ensure that only

[objectively?] qualified social workers engage in the difficult and delicate task of working with vulnerable citizens during times of crisis.

In addition to regulating those who use the title “social worker,” licensure laws provide minimum standards for competent practice. The statute accomplishes this by providing the public with a legal definition of social work practice, penalizing those who improperly call themselves social workers, raising the standards of practice, establishing accountability, and providing a legal rationale for further professional development. (Gandy & Raymond, 1979).

A major concern for social work reformers is that licensure perpetuates a paternalistic, authoritarian structure in the profession. It raises the ethical debate that has plagued the profession since before the turn of the twentieth century: How can social workers engage in real systemic change toward an egalitarian society if we ourselves embrace the exclusionary practices of the dominant system, including regulation? Clearly, there is room for critical thinking about licensure.

The Life of a Social Work Exam Question

The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) is the national organization that oversees construction and revision of the various examinations used by our state. ASWB takes responsibility for validity and reliability of findings through ACT, its testing agency. ACT and ASWB use conventional item construction and validation methodology.

Every seven years or so ASWB sponsors a job analysis, out of which emerges the examination blueprint: the proportion of knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to practice social work. This survey data on what social workers actually do is adjusted by volunteer social workers who review the percentages of attributes associated with each level of practice. The product is the exam blueprint: a content determination for each of the various exams.

In the Words of ASWB (from their website)

“Once all this groundwork is done, the difficult part is to fill in the blueprints with questions that 1. fit, 2. are pertinent to the profession, 3. are just hard enough but not impossibly difficult, and 4. do not present unfair obstacles to candidates of different genders, ethnic groups or geographic locations, or for whom English is a second language.

“At any one time, there are 30 - 50 people all over the country under annual contracts to produce exam questions for ASWB. They are chosen for a mix of demographics, trained in a three-day weekend session, and sent home to write. Working with them are three item development consultants, who edit, advise and sometimes reject items.

“The next step for the item is the Examination Committee. No matter how hard the writer has tried, or how much additional work has been put in by the consultant, the Exam Committee is more than likely to find changes to make. A distractor is weak;

another distractor is too good, and may be arguably correct; the item depends on a law that is not nationwide or too obscure to be fairly used; or someone argues that the entire question is a giveaway. Only when there is general agreement is the question accepted.”

Observing the Organization

A recent meeting of the examination committee was observed for this report. Members of the committee divided into two groups, corresponding to 1) the LSW, LGSW, LISW, and 2) LICSW examinations. Participants, who themselves represented a variety of racial and ethnic groups, watched while exam questions were projected on a screen. The same questions were found in notebooks in front of each committee member. Participants discussed each item and evaluated questions for relevance to the examination. Included with each question were the item statistics, so participants could see the overall difficulty level, as well as difficulty level for each general racial and ethnic group. During the discussion, it was clear that committee members were concerned about inappropriate item discrimination based on race or ethnicity. Discussion of questions was extensive, serious and pointed. Some items with “good statistics” were eliminated by committee members because members felt the item unfairly disadvantaged a member of some group. **In every case, the subjective judgment of the committee members trumped the statistical evaluation of the item.** If members believed the item was unfairly discriminatory, the item was removed from the pool.

Problems with the Examinations

It was clear to the observer that examination committee members were committed to fairness in the examinations reviewed. It was equally clear that both ASWB and ACT are committed to producing the most fair and equitable examination possible. Nonetheless, present structure may be inadvertently biasing the examination.

ACT and ASWB do an excellent job of tracking item statistics based upon self-reported racial or ethnic status. But the categories may be too broad for meaningful analysis. For example, the category “Asian-American” does not distinguish among Southeast Asian ethnicities, and there is no demographic question pertaining to immigrant status or English language ability. Finally, at every point in the process where human judgment was sought or applied, the individual or group may have been inadvertently insensitive to the perspective of new immigrants.

The ACT representative to ASWB has indicated she is in favor of adding questions on immigrant status. This may be an opportunity to learn more about the topic and determine once and for all the effects of the exam on immigrants.

The Texas Alternative Method of Examining Competency (AMEC)

The State of Texas Board of Social Work is the only other entity in the nation providing alternative licensure similar to that of Minnesota. The Texas provision is designed for *any* candidate who has the required education but cannot pass the

I'm sure I failed the exam because I used my Hmong mentality.
-- Alternate Licensee

examination. These candidates must find a board-approved social work supervisor within their agency who will conduct supervision, and over the course of one year complete the following (from their website):

1. Sign a formal contract attesting to their understanding of the elements of AMEC.
2. Attend supervision at the rate of 1 hour of supervision for every 30 hours of work.
3. Provide the Board with a professional portfolio containing
 - a. Eleven separate 3-5 page typed, double-spaced papers, each one covering a separate, specific core content area of social work practice;
 - b. A daily journal of the probationary licensee's activities and supervision for the probationary period;
 - c. A 7-10 page typed, double-spaced case analysis covering the probationary licensee's work with a typical client during the probationary period;
 - d. A 3-5 page typed, double-spaced self-evaluation completed by the probationary licensee which includes an analysis of the licensee's professional knowledge, skills and abilities;
 - e. Quarterly evaluations completed and submitted to the board by the supervisor regarding the probationary licensee's development;
 - f. An evaluation of the supervisor's supervision skills completed by the probationary licensee;
 - g. A notarized affidavit from the supervisor attesting to the readiness of the probationary licensee's ability to perform as a professional social worker based on the knowledge, skills and abilities observed during the supervision period.

Additionally, Texas makes provision for social work candidates whose degree is from a foreign institution where English was not the primary language. The Board's executive director indicated that the Texas Board gets many requests for qualifications through this legislation.

ASWB and Its Affiliates Think About ESL Issues

As shown above, ASWB sincerely works to eliminate bias from its exams, and at its most recent conference discussed changing items to reflect increased readability. For example, the group is avoiding long lists within a single sentence, relying more heavily on items that end in a question, and making other stylistic changes to improve clarity. These changes will be slowly infused into the examinations.

Generally speaking, state boards do not have formed opinions on the topic of bias toward immigrants. When queried, boards either were silent or denied any discussion on accommodations for ESL candidates. In at least one state (Utah), English is designated the official language, making it a violation of statute to accommodate for English as a learned language. New York State is just beginning to consider accommodation on its exams for various limitations, including limited English competence. In summary, for most boards the issue simply had not yet appeared on their radar screens, and so the boards were not even considering the question.

I personally don't like special treatment because I've worked so hard to be like everyone else. It's too bad that some individuals are struggling with this test, but I think they just need to better prepare themselves for the test.

Conventional Licensee who is Hmong

Summary

Within the profession of social work licensure is both loved and hated. At its best licensure represents an effort to protect the public as well as preserve the integrity of the profession. Licensure examinations are normed and validated according to conventionally-accepted methodology. The ASWB exam committee overseeing question construction is comprised of diverse social workers with regard to gender, race, and sexual orientation, and from all areas of the profession. Despite attention to detail and increasing sensitivity, the exam may nonetheless contain threats to validity and reliability that may bias the exam against foreign-born English language learners.

Texas offers a comprehensive approach to those who fail the exam. First, the approach is universal, stressing equality over equity. Second, it involves a much more comprehensive evaluation of the candidate over the course of a year than the present Minnesota model.

The most frustrating thing is that this test is holding us back. We've gone to school and passed our courses. We want to practice.

-- Alternate Licensee



I took it four times, and each time I got like a 72, 73, 72, 73. It stays there, you know? I thought each time: "Maybe you got it!" I'm really bummed out. I feel like I don't want to go into these feelings any more because I got really, really sad. I got really bummed and I felt like, "I'm going to give up social work." At the same time there are a lot of needs out there.

Alternate Licensee



Chapter IV: The experience of taking the examination

I'm not against tests. I understand we live in a society where each individual must be measured against a standard.

-- *Alternate Licensee*

INDIVIDUALS RARELY FACE THE STARK SUMMATIVE EVALUATION characterized by a professional licensure examination. Even in an educational setting, there are mitigating circumstances that can temper a course's final examination. It is the unusually hardy soul who can withstand the summary judgment implied when failing a professional examination and maintain objectivity in the face of such ego injury. It is natural to resort to ego defenses such as projection when faced with that failure. As a consequence one may be dubious when confronted with criticism by those who fail, because we know that we ourselves would be tempted to use the same rationalization if faced with the same ego insult.

The one who listens to complaints by candidates who fail is faced with this dilemma of credibility: To what extent is the complaint legitimate, and to what extent is it the result of a defense against an ego injury? Claims of legitimacy are bolstered when the complaint is nearly universal, and also when the same concern comes from more neutral sources such as experts in the field. And, as is the case with complex social phenomena, the analysis does not need to be merely two-valued; one can hear both ego defense and legitimate complaint in the same sentence.

Attitudes toward the professional examination fall along a continuum between two poles: first, that the exam represents an externally-derived objective measure of a candidate's competence; and second, that the exam is merely a measure of a candidate's ability to navigate the dominate culture. Because the truth is rarely all one thing or another, it is reasonable to suppose that reality lies somewhere in the middle, and shifts over time.

Those who ascribe to the "objective measure" pole are numerous and easy to find. The weight of traditional thinking can be seen in the way professional licensing exams are structured throughout the nation: the alternative licensure provision now in place is virtually unique to social work, and absolutely unique among other professional licensing exams. Administrators from professional licensing boards outside of social work and others involved in licensing other professions are mostly

thoughtful but always rejecting of the underlying tenets of the “culturally-based measure” group. The Minnesota Board of Medical Practice is typical: the board fully complies with ADA requirements for accommodation of test takers, but no more. The board is implacable in its assertion that the licensure candidate evince “**a working ability in the English language sufficient to communicate with patients and physicians and to engage in the practice of medicine.**” Satisfactory completion of the licensure examination is used as evidence that the candidate has “a working ability in the English language.” The medical board rejects any idea that the licensure exam is culturally biased.

Those on the other side are often similarly polarized. Academics who have studied the subject insist that these exams are so culturally-biased they should carry a disclaimer stating the fact. Typical among this group is University of Minnesota linguist Tim Dunagin, who states that cultural context is the exclusive reason for exam failure among Hmong candidates.

Of those foreign-born, English language learners interviewed, only a few expressed reservations about the alternative licensure provisions now in place, though one suggested that pressure from the community made it difficult to speak out against alternative licensing. This individual expressed the same concern as those in the “equality” camp: that the **alternative provision made second-class citizens of all minority social work licensees**. Another individual asserted that, “Taking a watered-down version of the test is stupid and degrading. I personally don’t like special treatment because I’ve worked so hard to be like everyone else. It’s too bad that some individuals are struggling with this test, but I think they just need to better prepare themselves for the test. I believe the problem is with the individual and not the group.”

Some licensees were moved that the Minnesota Board of Social Work uniquely makes provision for ESL candidates. One respondent went on to say that it is not the Board’s fault; rather, **it is the fault of the educational programs**, which inadequately prepare minority candidates for the licensure examination. This observation supports statements by some professionals that in the classroom foreign-born English language learners may be getting less of an education, or even a different education from others. A Hmong respondent went on to point out that minority candidates generally, and **Hmong candidates specifically, tend to “ghettoize” themselves by either working for Hmong agencies, or with Hmong clients in a mainstream agency**. This, the respondent pointed out, insulates them from more generalized social work skills needed for majority culture clients. When the individuals are examined, they rightfully protest that the skills tested are not the skills they use with their clients.

Most respondents agreed with the majority-culture supervisor who stated,

*My limited exposure leads me to suspect **structural issues** [involved with failure]. The therapist from our agency who could not pass the exam was fluent in English, skilled at diagnosing severe mental illness, writing treatment plans (in English) and an effective therapist. Despite these assets she was*

I don’t like people to see that we’re being treated special. Any changes in the test should be across the board.
-- Alternate Licensee

unable to pass the exam after several tries. I am aware that she did use study guides. I am anticipating two Hmong therapists who are preparing to take the exam will have similar difficulties.

A number of respondents thought that **candidates who had come to the US at an older age were having greater difficulties**. This makes some logical sense; inasmuch as the exams test a candidate's ability to navigate the dominant culture, the longer a candidate participates in the US culture, the better able that candidate should be in discerning that culture.

One interviewee appreciated the use of the Hmong dictionary, but virtually all others said the dictionary was at best a psychological boost, and did not help them when faced with unfamiliar words. This was owing to the fact that many unfamiliar words do not appear in Hmong. Looking words up in the dictionary wasted precious time for these candidates. This view was reinforced by the majority-culture supervisor who stated, "Numerous times I ... have been invited as a speaker [on mental health topics] with a Hmong translator who hesitated at various times and used the English term because the Hmong language did not have a comparable term."

A number of respondents suggested that the examinations be given in Hmong, or administered orally through a tester. One respondent, a majority-culture supervisor, told the following story about a Hmong candidate for another licensure exam:

I recently read the exam to a Hmong participant. I would read the question and then ask her the answer before she looked at the choices. She knew over 90% of the right answers. We then looked for the answer she had stated among the choices (which wasn't always easy given the complex wording).

The implication was that the process of reading the item to the candidate and then eliciting the answer improves the candidate's performance. Another respondent, a Hmong individual, suggested that the Board

...offer the option of having the test conducted orally in the Hmong language or English language. Testing in the Hmong language may eliminate the language barrier and test the actual knowledge while testing in the English language will address one's inability to take standardized tests.

One thoughtful respondent, a college professor who had failed the examination, commented that by its very nature there may be no way to eliminate cultural bias from the licensure exam. As a consequence the person suggested that the exams be labeled as such. The respondent spoke of the "split personality" needed to navigate the majority culture plus one's own culture: the respondent volunteered that the daily exercise was "exhausting and somewhat disorienting." The respondent's conclusion was that because different cultures cannot be reasonably expected to pass the same exam, accommodation must be made for the outsider. The respondent concluded that oral tests provide a more valid measure of knowledge, and that candidates should be examined for their ability to produce receptive (reading, listening) or productive (speaking, writing) English.

Another professor who had failed the social work exam by two points asserted that language was the major issue. The respondent had been in this country 20 years, and was still learning English. Additionally, the professor claimed to use “Hmong mentality” on the exam, which meant that the professor’s own cultural orientation caused the person to miss some questions. Ultimately, the professor concluded, the exam fails to validly test social work skills when mediated by a majority culture system.

A majority culture respondent who is a therapist in the Upper Midwest reinforced these sentiments, observing,

I know nothing about the social work exam. But I have seen English language learners struggle with standardized assessment when they have high academic and classroom success. I would come at any assessment from the language and literacy perspective. Academic language has a whole different set of vocabulary and syntactical language as compared to communicative language.

Another respondent stated that the language problem appeared even when qualifying Hmong translators. Written and “street” Hmong were sufficiently different that otherwise-qualified translators were failing the state interpreter exam.

A majority-culture nurse spoke of similar problems with the nursing students she supervises. She reported that discussions among nurses indicate that extra preparation courses and individual attention, as well as nursing program tests that mimic the multiple-choice format of the examination, seem to help. (“Additional tutoring” was also a theme for a number of majority-culture social workers who supervise minority workers.) An employee with the Minnesota Board of Nursing indicated that the way the exam is given electronically may help ESL candidates. Independently, an ESL nurse provided verification for this speculation:

[My friend] took the longest to complete it. Others had their computers shut off and they left, but hers kept going and going and going. Finally, she realized that when she had answered a question incorrectly, fairly soon after she would get another question very similar to the one she missed. Due to this realization, she took extra care and deliberated carefully about her choice of answer. Finally, long after she was the last person in the room, her computer shut off and she was finished. She was certain she had failed the test. She had not... she passed.

Previous Local Research on Licensure

About five years ago two Minneapolis social work researchers interviewed social work licensure candidates and found the following in their interviews of six foreign-born and one US-born candidates, some of whom had not passed the exam. The themes from their study were as follows:

When you're one point short it's a killer. I got out of the exam feeling so fine. I was at the stopping point and I was also thinking that I did it. And then I got one point short. That's a killer.

-- Alternate Licensee

1. *Time allotted for the exam:* While at least one candidate from this study suggested the extra time allotted was valuable, others said that it was too long to sit for the exam, resulting in exhaustion rather than increased opportunity to excel.

2. *Structure of the exam:* “A few respondents” complained about the amount of reading on the exam, and one respondent commented that his or her culture did not emphasize the written word. One respondent commented on the confusion engendered by the multiple-choice structure of the exams.

3. *Exam content:* respondents were split on the question of text-based questions vs. practice-based questions. Paradoxically, one respondent complained that the exam was too “focused on life scenarios and not on concepts or theory learned in school.”

4. *Cultural appropriateness:* All respondents commented that the exams were biased in favor of the dominant culture. One remarked, “The test seems written as if they don’t want diverse people to pass.”

5. *Money:* Virtually all the respondents commented that the cost for the exam process was too high, and for those who had to retake the exam, the cost was exorbitant.

The Voices of those Who Fail the Exam

Comments were collected during the course of this research from a variety of respondents who have utilized the alternative licensing option. A review of the interviews revealed the following themes:

1. *Difficulty generalizing from personal experience to the questions on the exam:* Similar to the findings from the study just reviewed, most exam takers complained that the questions were textbook-oriented, and not oriented to real practice, or at least *their* practice. This textbook orientation has implications for culturally-based practice: if the practice of social work in minority communities is both out of sync with mainstream practice *and* insufficiently covered in the literature, then minority social workers generally and immigrant social workers specifically working with similar populations would not find their practice style reflected in the exams.

2. *Structure of the Questions:* Most interviewees commented that multiple choice questions were very difficult to answer, and the “What would you do first?” questions were especially tricky. Again, for practitioners who are cultural minorities, there is not a single reality from which to draw one’s responses. Cultural minorities are accustomed to occupying two worlds – theirs and the majority world. As a consequence, and especially for oral-based cultures, the “one correct answer” implied by multiple-choice questions is very difficult to maneuver. Finally, those who are newer to the English language and American culture have a much more difficult time distinguishing between the “distracter” and the correct answer.

3. *Psychological reaction to the exam:* Respondents commented on the variety of emotions generated by exam process. Most evinced in one way or another the frustration of studying for multiple sittings and still not passing. Others commented that they were doing the “right thing” by working toward their license and as a consequence getting hammered emotionally by multiple failures. The psychological strain around anticipating the exam was increased by the awareness of other immigrants who had failed. Some commented on the inevitable feelings of shame and humiliation felt after multiple attempts to pass the exam.

4. *Cost:* No one likes the cost of the examination, but the added costs to those forced to retake the exam are quite high. Most often these costs are combined with the costs of the preparation sessions offered and other commercially-available study guides.

Following are some of the more typical or more poignant stories from respondents:

*“I feel a bit frustrated. It has been many years that I’ve taken the social work exam. I’ve used a study group. The group instructor told us, “always remember the authors writing the exam across the nation are middle-class white people, and when you take this exam you have to place yourself in that context.” **And I remember sitting in the group and saying, ‘Wait a minute. For one, I’m not white. I don’t know what middle class is. English is not my language or first language. How can I put myself in the mind of someone else different?’** In the back of my mind I said, ‘Okay, I’ve already flunked.’ In fact, I did not pass the test by three or four points. I took it again, and failed again by the same number of points. I studied my weak points, practiced on the practice test, and still fell short by several points. I’m not saying I deserve to pass, or that I want to be grandfathered in. I understand we are serving the public and need regulation. **I just need a real chance to pass.**”*

*“My school of social work taught me to take the test right away after graduation so you could test more easily. I took the test. You know, I felt really confident about this situation. I felt really bad when I learned I hadn’t passed. I continue to feel I was well prepared that day. The second time, I asked myself ‘what do I need to prepare myself?’ I looked through the materials, through the areas I was weak in from the first time. I still failed. My answers didn’t match what the standardized testers wanted me to say. **They asked me, ‘what would you do first with this family?’ and I’m thinking about a Hmong family, an Asian family – how do I approach them? I don’t think this test is sensitive to cultural issues.**”*

*“I took the test right after graduation from my MSW program. At the graduate level I had more field experience than in my undergraduate program, but **the test was more textbook-oriented, and not field practice oriented.** It is not a situation I encountered in my field practicum. A kind of question was ‘**how would you respond to this family?**’ and **I’m thinking there are different responses depending on whether the family is African-American, or Hmong.** Another kind of question is ‘What would you do first?’ What I would do first depends on what kind of job I had, what my personal experience is, what my cultural background is. I felt I had to leave that all behind. **All that mattered was the textbook.** They refer to a lot of theories, and yet I might not use that theory or my setting might not call for that. I find the exam to be*

very technical in this way. I talk to colleagues for whom English is their first language, and they have the same struggles.”

“I think the multiple choice questions are very tricky. The ‘what would you do first?’ questions are hard because one is stuck between a textbook answer and one’s actual practice experience. Rather than asking, ‘what would I do first?’ you have to ask yourself ‘what would the textbook say you do first?’ Those questions throw you off. **They should consider an essay version of the test. I think that would be helpful.** You could end up doing an essay version and somebody could score that. And the questions: you should have somebody in the field writing these questions. When I took my clinical exam, I thought they would focus on the diagnostic stuff. The test was more management questions, you know: ‘What type of management would you need for this?’ I was expecting a big chunk of the test would be more clinical. **I’m not saying you should make the test really easy where everybody passes. We all take pride in being licensed.**”

“I’m not against tests I understand we live in a society where each individual must be measured against a standard. At the same time I’m looking holistically. I worked in social work for eight years throughout the process of taking the exam – I worked with Hmong, Hispanic, black and white. I’m a social worker. I should be able to pass the test. A holistic view of student learning would include talking to the supervisor, talking to the student about his knowledge, not just use a computer screen for a test. I used every moment of my time studying, and I still didn’t pass.”

“I thought I did very well, I mean I was satisfied with my exam. I took the extra two hours for the ESL examinees and that gave me time to work through the test. I was comfortable after I finished. It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. I said to myself, ‘let me see my score,’ and bam! I didn’t make it. **I was a little upset. Sometimes the questions were tricky, and I think there was a language component, because I felt sure I’d nailed it – I figured I’d done much better than passing. I missed by six points. It was difficult for me.** I had passed the LGSW exam, and then I didn’t pass the LICSW exam. It was the technical nature of the questions. You know, some of the categories of mental illness are not very familiar where we come from. You have the general category of, well, ‘he’s crazy!’ So, when you start separating it into all these various categories of mental illness, it gets a little confusing to those of us who have not been raised from youth in this country. My English is pretty good; I understand the literal aspect of the test. But when you come to the technical mental health questions, it becomes a little bit more involved for us.”

“I don’t argue with the Board of Social Work: that’s what we should know. But we can’t absorb it all and take in everything we learned in our social work program. For me, even though I might have got it at school, through the classes, **I have to absorb everything: learning to write, learning the concepts, learning the methods, learning the system, learning the policies, everything.** It’s hard to get everything in. The other thing is that we didn’t grow up here. Others had these concepts when they were young. We didn’t have that. They read all this information around them, through TV, and the media and everything.”

*“I do understand that as a profession they have to have some minimum level of qualification to be put in place, to ensure a higher level of service. Otherwise it becomes like a loose cannon. How do we test for it? That is the question. I don’t know that have the answer but I can say this. **Social work programs can try to teach about the world being a global village.** It’s good here the way they do it, but there are some other ways that we can learn from other people. So, we need to move the tests in that direction a little bit more so. This country’s absorbing a lot of different groups – cultural groups, religious groups. **Every day more people come in here. And we’re going to work with them as social workers without the understanding that there are these cultures out there.** And definitely, when we test we should look at that. I don’t want anything handed to me. I would rather be able to pass the test and if they just made it take into account the diversity of the profession now: some of that is crystal clear.”*

*“I think having a written or clinical exam is a good idea. If the examiner can’t understand your answer you can elaborate. I think it is a good way to go because then they can put you in a clinical social work position during the test. And then maybe you can explain what step you can take, just explain yourself, the reason why you are doing that, and they might be able to see your point. **But now with the paper exam, nobody’s going to be able to see your point and know your cultural background.** I think if we had the opportunity to do that because then I have to explain more and they have time for me. I will explain the best that I can in my own way. **I would like to tell the examiner, “I would do it this way. That may not be the answer you’re looking for, but this is how I feel with my people.” That way they can take into consideration it’s effective with the population we work with.** It may be a lot of work but that way they can take into consideration why we answer the question we answer. If changing the test is too much work for the Board of Social Work, I would like to see the alternative to continue for people who want to advance now, in order for them to be effective in helping people who need the service. Like in my community, I don’t see a lot of people go for higher education and therefore if we don’t have this we can’t do assessments or diagnosis.”*

*“I understand that in the state of MN, there is a shortage of social workers who are culturally and linguistically competent to serve for newcomers. I do believe that one of the reasons for the states not being able to have social workers with the talent is the current licensure exam. **Although I happened to pass the LSW exam, I noticed that some of the questions on the exam were Eurocentric and not relevant to the all ethnic groups. Maybe people of European American background would not notice them, since they grew up in the culture. However, people like myself whose background is different, could sense them.** People may think that the candidates who are also newcomers tend to fail the licensure exam due to their limited language proficiency. It is not the language that kept them from passing the exam. It is the current licensure questions that are not relevant to people from non-European culture. To increase the number of social workers from immigrant community, it is necessary to keep the current licensure exam. **I had to shut down my own cultural perspective when I was taking the exam because I was scared of failing the exam if I answered the questions based on my social work knowledge that is interwoven into my cultural background.**”*

Other comments about the exam from interviewees follow:

I took the test right after I graduated and found out it was very difficult, mostly because of linguistics. I also found the questions to be at the wrong level – like DSM questions on the LSW exam.

I was told at a study session, “Remember, a lot of the question writers have not been in the field for a long time. Basically, they are professors and everything is in a textbook. And these question writers are white.” On top of all that, being foreign-born, learning the English language, makes it hard.

How could the test be improved? More practice oriented questions.

The most frustrating thing is that this test is holding us back. We’ve gone to school and passed our courses. We want to practice.

The test is totally different from the work we do. I’ve been doing family outreach for four or five years and I took the test two or three times, and I still didn’t pass.

The biggest problem is credentialing: not everybody has the social work credentials, county workers, for example. I know people who avoid the license because they’re afraid they’ll not pass it, and they go to the county instead.

I have an alternate license, I like to do a good job. I will continue education and improve in order to be more effective in serving clients. But some people avoid getting a license because they’re afraid they’ll be sued. So they don’t go for continuing education and things like that.

I’m irritated that I had to struggle to get a license and others don’t bother because they work for the county.

People are scared because they don’t want to take their exam and fail it; We have people who are going to the county so they can avoid the exam. There’s too much pressure, and the money you pour into it. It’s stressful.

I want a license. I don’t want to avoid getting a license. I want to do the right thing. But don’t take away the alternative licensure – that would make it all wrong.

For some of us taking the exam, English is not our first language. This is not our language, but we are trying so hard to abide by the rules and regulations of this country. If they take alternative licensing away it will be more of a hindrance for those of us coming to this country.

You don’t necessarily have to be able to define mental illness in your job. You have to be able to work with the person, at least at the level we practice. We don’t diagnose, but we try to work with the person at the level we met them. So, I can work

*with you whether or not I know the definition of your mental illness. **All I really need to know is where to find a solution to help you.** I don't need to know your diagnosis. All I need to know is to find the applicable resources to be able to work with the client. The exam is asking questions we don't need to know the answers for.*

*You sit in there and you are stressing over time and this is not your language and then they all look the same. **You could have gone to the state with no worry about licensing. But here you are. You are sticking your neck out there to get something and they are making it so difficult to get.** If it's basic, why not make it basic, so that there is no need to perish?*

I feel like the quality of my license is kind of low, lower than passing my own exam, you know. I feel kind of bad. But what can I do?

Sometimes the scenario's too long and by the time you finish reading through them it makes you jumbled.

***"What would be the first thing you do?"** Now, that's very subjective. You can eliminate one, but the other three things you would do in that situation now becomes a matter of personal judgment. What is the most applicable thing to do first? It's very subjective. In some situations what you might choose to do first may not be what I will do first. But we still arrive at the same goal. It's just that you do number two first and I chose to do number one first.*

***I just got my LICSW license. You know I feel so happy about it. I took advantage of alternate licensure because it was there.** And I'm encouraged that it continue for other people. I don't want to be the one that climbed up the ladder, and then took the ladder out from the others. It's important that others be encouraged. For the time being let's keep this method until we find a way to fine tune the exam.*

In addition to interviewing alternate licensure social workers, the research included a focus group of white, conventionally-licensed social workers. Here are their responses:

I found the exam very arbitrary as well. What I found to be amazing is that the questions were super-white, all across the board. And even the way in which they're presented, in terms of language, I really had to sit with it at times. And I'm educated and I write well and I was born here. And I always think about that when I have such a hard time doing things, about those who don't have these advantages.

I just think that people who speak another language are at a disadvantage. And it has nothing to do with their intelligence. It has nothing to do with their skill.

I think there's two different issues. One is the language piece, and another is the test itself. I think it's really poorly written. I don't think it really tests what I know as a

*I think we need to be progressive in this area, because this country is only going to have more people from other cultures.
-- Conventional Licensee who is white*

social worker. It's guesswork a lot. So I wonder the language piece is already difficult and the field is so broad.

I almost think it should be compartmentalized, you know, like if you want to work with this population then take this exam: children and families, hospital, elderly and nursing care facilities, I'm working in managed care with insurance.

I think test-takers should be able to consult with a native English-speaking colleague. I think that's the accommodation you should make. *You know, it's a strange system we have, and if you come from another country it's like being in a whole other universe. It's unbelievable to understand all these systems. And then to help all the people that they are having to help, I think we need to make things easier for people, not harder.*

My concern is that people are going to be sort of stretched, whatever community is served. People get it – the word travels fast. And if you can go nowhere in social work, you then have no social work. That's how it is.

I think we need to be progressive in this area, because this country is only going to have more people from other cultures. We are in a field that's supposed to serve those people. So maybe we need an oral exam by two LICSWs. Maybe professors or graduates from a school they didn't attend. I'd be fine with something like that.

In-depth supervision is extremely helpful. *It may even be helpful to make that supervision requirement longer. Extend it three years instead of two plus have the person sign off on it. I don't think people are opposed to having to work a little harder to get this. When the supervisor signs off, they have to write a very thorough review of strengths with a patient and how the person has improved those strengths, how they've improved limitations over that year. I think it's well worth our time, because we have populations that need to be serviced. I just think the license needs to be feasible to obtain. People in this community, they will not go to schools of social work, they will not work in this field.*

Summary

There is a demarcation between exam professionals for whom the exam represents an external measure of competence, and immigrant and white examinees and academics who believe that the exam measures cultural integration.

Interviewees who have failed a social work exam are eloquent in their description of the pain experienced, but also about the injustice felt. Ideas for exam improvement include presenting the exam orally or in the first language. Educational institutions need to do some soul-searching about their inadvertent participation in exam failure.

The next chapter will review some recommendations for change.



Chapter V: Recommendations

The Board of Social Work must decide if Alternative Licensure is to continue as is, be eliminated, or continue in some other form. As it contemplates action, it is well to keep in mind the ideas presented in the introduction: the differences between oral and written cultures, the differences between equity and equality, and the complex interactive nature of the phenomenon of exam failure that defies simple cause and effect analysis. Additionally, if the Board decides to modify the present alternative licensure system, it should review the Texas model of alternative licensure as one option. Finally, the Board ought to consider the structures around the examinations: the educational system preparing students for the exams, the opportunities for additional support and preparation, and the structure of the exam itself.

Recommendations by both majority and minority social work examinees included presenting the exam orally or in one's first language, and eliminating confusing questions such as "what would you do first," or complicated scenarios. Academics and supervisors involved with minority therapists concurred, suggesting that this would be a way to reduce bias based on culture. Examinees were interested in a clinical exam emphasizing client interaction.

Various other professional boards had little insight into the issue facing the Board, but a representative from the testing company hired by ASWB, seemed open to exploring options such as a more in-depth study of immigrant passage rates, including item analysis of this group's exams. The Minnesota Board should consider following up on this openness, and working with ASWB to understand the phenomenon more thoroughly.

Conclusion

This report has examined the phenomenon of disparity in passage rates for majority and minority social work examinees, and found that a disparity between the two groups exists. The reasons for the disparity include linguistic and cultural problems encountered by foreign-born English language learners. There is also a suggestion that educational backgrounds and years in this country influence passage rates.

Appendix I: Response to This Study From The Association of Social Work Boards

August 20, 2004

Mr. Frank Merriman, Executive Director
Minnesota Board of Social Work
2829 University Avenue, SE
Suite 340
St. Paul, Minnesota 55414-3239

Dear Frank:

Thank you for giving the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) the opportunity to comment on *An Investigation into Alternate Licensure: A Report to the Minnesota Board of Social Work*, completed by Dr. Ralph Holcomb. We were pleased to be able to provide Dr. Holcomb with information on the validity and reliability of the social work licensing examination program and to give him access to the ASWB Examination Committee.

ASWB appreciates the Minnesota Legislature and Board of Social Work's concerns about the difficulties immigrant populations for whom English is a second language appear to have in passing the standardized, multiple choice, social work licensing examination. Licensure examinations are considered "high stakes" because failure can prevent someone from practicing a profession that he or she has intended to do and worked toward doing.

Candidates for social work licensure in all ASWB member jurisdictions in the United States and Alberta, Canada must be able to achieve a passing score to demonstrate having the minimum knowledge necessary to practice. The national social work examinations determine whether an individual possesses the basic competency to practice safely without the risk of harm to the public. They provide a national standard, marking a threshold below which practice should not be allowed to fall. Without the examinations there can be dire consequences for a very vulnerable population – the consumers of social work services. Any consideration of alternative licensure options must be seriously made in light of the public protection function of licensure.

The report on *An Investigation into Alternate Licensure* seems to approach the questions of disparate passing scores for populations different from the majority with an emphasis on the professional perspective of social justice, rather than on the public protection and regulatory functions of a licensing board. Although the social justice and equity issues are eloquently stated in the report, the roles and responsibilities of

regulatory board members are separate from that of professional interests and priorities. A licensing board is charged with determining who is qualified and has at least minimum competence to practice. The responsibility of a regulatory board is to the public, specifically to the clients receiving services, not to the profession being regulated.

The same caution applies to the extensive documentation of people's experiences taking one of the social work licensing examinations. While heart-rendering, the difficulties reported have many and complex origins – public education, economic and social opportunities, social work education, majority culture – that cannot be adequately addressed by a regulatory board or a licensing examination.

As the board considers this report, it also needs to carefully evaluate the information it contains. For example, some of the testimonials include factually incorrect information about the examinations themselves. As Dr. Holcomb acknowledges, test takers' impressions of the examinations are valid, but occasionally, frustration can color perception. Any discussion of the perceived content or style of the examinations needs to be weighed against actual test content and item writing conventions.

In chapter two of the report, "The disparity," the data analysis is problematic. Using all reported scores to the Minnesota Board of Social Work for all test takers, including those people taking examinations multiple numbers of times skews the data. ASWB always reports pass/fail rates to its member jurisdictions by first-time, repeat, and total test takers because the true pass/fail rates are those for first-time test takers. This is because once an examinee fails a test the chances of failing again are greater, and therefore the pass rate for repeat candidates is lower than for first-time candidates and the total group. Including all the tests taken by all candidates for social work licensure in Minnesota influenced the overall pass/fail analysis for all groups.

Carving out exceptions to requiring a passing score on an examination is not recommended. Once a board begins accepting something other than a passing score, it essentially deprives its licensees and the public of the benefits of a widely used and accepted examination. Social workers licensed through such a loophole will be unable to move to other states or other jurisdictions without retaking an examination; the social workers already licensed under the more rigorous national standards are now lumped in with those whose knowledge, skills, and abilities are below national standards for minimum competence; and the public is deprived of a measure of protection. There is also the equity issue for other licensees from other groups and the majority group who are required to pass an examination.

An examination insists that a person who wants to practice social work demonstrate a basic knowledge of the profession, responding to an across-the-board measurement beyond which school granted the degree or who his or her references might be. The national social work licensing examinations are a concrete means to measure minimum competence, to assess a level at which it is safe for a social worker to practice without violating a very basic precept, one that holds as true for social service and mental health practitioners as for medical doctors: First, do no harm.

It is our opinion that to meet the board's responsibility to public protection, if there is any exception considered to requiring a passing score on the national social work licensing examinations, the alternate license should be restricted to work only with the population group to which the licensee belongs.

Thank you again for allowing us to comment. We remain committed to helping our member jurisdictions address the issues with which they are confronted. Please let me know if you have any questions or need additional information.

Sincerely,

Donna DeAngelis, LICSW, ACSW
Executive Director