

Addressing Racism in Social Work Licensing #StopASWB –
Charla Yearwood, LCSW; Cassandra Walker, LCSW, CCTP; Alan Dettlaff, PhD, MSW
Episode 56
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Shimon Cohen:

Welcome to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change, where we bring you stories of real people working to address real issues. I am your host, Shimon Cohen.

Shimon Cohen:

I'm excited to let everyone know that we are now offering our Racial Justice and Liberatory Practice Continuing Education Series at [Columbia University](#), [Michigan State University](#), and the [University of Houston](#). These classes are co-facilitated by me and Charla Yearwood, who has been a guest host and guest on Doin' The Work. Each course is three weeks long with online content and weekly one hour Zoom meetings. Our courses cover social identity, positionality, and defining racism; the history of racism in the United States and that it's always existed; White supremacy, White privilege, racism and oppression and social work; social movements, Black liberation, Black power and social work; using critical race theory and intersectionality and practice; racial justice and anti-oppressive practice; liberatory practice; and be prepared for backlash/where do we go from here. Check the links in the show notes to learn more and register. We'd love to have you.

Shimon Cohen:

In this episode, I talk with Charla Yearwood, Cassandra Walker, and Dr. Alan Dettlaff about the recent report from the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) where they finally release their social work licensing exam pass rates based on race and age. For years, people have been pushing them to release their pass rates by race, and ASWB denied that they even had this data. The report shows large differences in pass rates by race and provides clear data for what many of us have known is a racially biased exam that significantly discriminates against Black, Latinx, and Indigenous social workers. There have been many questions about what makes this exam racist, and ASWB and others have placed the blame elsewhere. We get into all of that in our discussion. We recorded this podcast so we could quickly get information out to folks about this racist exam and continue to be part of a movement to end this exam. So, please check out the conversation and get involved. There are links below to a #StopASWB petition and a recording of a recent #StopASWB press conference, and resources will be updated as available. I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Shimon Cohen:

Before we get into the interview, I want to let you all know about our episode's sponsor, the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. First off, I want to thank them for sponsoring the podcast. UH has a phenomenal social work program that offers face-to-face master's and doctorate degrees, as well as an online and hybrid MSW. They offer one of the country's only Political Social Work programs and an Abolitionist Focused Learning Opportunity. Located in the heart of Houston, the program is guided by their bold vision to achieve social, racial, economic, and political justice, local to global. In the classroom and through research, they are committed to challenging systems and reimagining ways to achieve justice and liberation. Go to www.uh.edu/socialwork to learn more. And now, the interview.

Shimon Cohen:

Hey, Charla. Hey, Cassie. Hey, Alan. Thank you all so much for coming together for this quickly put together interview to talk about the ASWB exam data that came out recently. And so before we get into all of it, I just want to give you each a chance to introduce yourselves. Charla, do you want to go first?

Charla Yearwood:

Yeah, sure. Hey, I'm Charla Yearwood. She/her pronouns. I'm a therapist in private practice in Indianapolis.

Shimon Cohen:

Cassie.

Cassandra Walker:

Hey, I'm Cassie Walker. I am a therapist and consultant. I do tons of stuff in practice in Chicago. Glad to be here. Oh, they/them pronouns.

Shimon Cohen:

Alan.

Alan Dettlaff:

Hi, everyone. Alan Dettlaff. He/him pronouns and I'm Dean of the Graduate College of Social Work at the University of Houston.

Shimon Cohen:

And I'm Shimon. He/him pronouns. Host of the podcast. Let's just start out with what kind of brought us all here together today. The Association of Social Work Boards, who is responsible for these national exams that happen at, it depends on the state, but happen at, it can be at the bachelor's level, the master's level or the clinical level. I think all states have clinical, but some have the bachelor's and master's. They, after years of pressure and denying that they even had this data, finally released a report showing the pass rates by race and age. And this data showed large differences between Black, what they label as Hispanic and Indigenous and White pass rates as well as lower pass rates for older folks. And I'm just going to read some of that data, so we have it and then we'll get into our discussion of it.

Shimon Cohen:

The report uses what's called eventual pass rates. They highlight this first. They take a graphic of this as their main focus, but before we get to that, buried further in the report, are the first time pass rates. The first time pass rates for White people is 84%, Black people 45%, Hispanic 65%, Indigenous 63%. Those are some huge differences. And now, we see then there's eventually passed, which again, they talk about first, where White 91%, Black 57%, Hispanic 77%, Indigenous 74%. And before we get into the whole conversation, just want to point out there that the report never talks about what leads to the eventual pass rates, how many times someone needs to take the test to pass, how much money they spend getting to that pass rate.

Charla Yearwood:

Yeah, it's pretty sad.

Shimon Cohen:

And also again, they denied, they even had this data, so they were lying. They were lying for years.

Cassandra Walker:

Massively lying. Not only did they have the data, they have it broken down all the way down to school. You can find your school's pass rates and data. Those are not better. The only identity that sometimes for certain schools yo-yos with White folks is Asian folks, but as a whole, their eventual pass rate is still only 79% compared to 97 and some change, both 0.7. But that's still a massive discrepancy for something that is being used as one of the biggest deciders of your ability to get jobs and pass after you've already done all of these degrees.

Alan Dettlaff:

I think it's really important to not gloss over how long and the extent to which ASWB lied about this. This is the organization that we, as a social work profession, say we entrust to provide this licensure to social workers to legitimize them. And they lied about not having this data for years, even though when they were questioned about it by deans and directors of social work programs, by other professional organizations, they lied about it for years and said they couldn't provide this kind of analysis because they didn't collect data by race or they didn't collect any demographic information. People started sharing screenshots of the information they were providing on Twitter to show that they were giving their age, their race, all of this data, and they continued to lie about it. I think that's just important to underscore how much this organization has lied to all of us and to the profession for years before they were essentially forced to come clean with the massive public pressure.

Cassandra Walker:

Yeah, and not only did they lie, not only has this been a consistent lie, before testing was even implemented, National Association of Black Social Workers and other identity-specific social work organizations opposed implementation of a test because we have known that standardized testing is a problem. It's biased. It's racist. It's been designed and used that way from the get go and the original promise was a lie. The original promise was, "No, don't worry about that. It will be fair. The test will be an equalizer. We'll make sure of it."

Cassandra Walker:

And you've got folks who are behind the test claiming that there are thousands of people who are ensuring that these biases don't exist. And then the report comes out after over 40 years of people showing issues with this test. The report comes out and immediately we've got issues of up to over 50% racial disparities in these data. If all these people are doing it then they're all failing at their job, at best, and, at worst, willingly, willfully allowing and perpetuating harms and economic hardship on Black and Indigenous and Latine social workers, trying to get in this field and make a living and do good.

Alan Dettlaff:

I think what you just said about willfulness, Cassie, is super important to emphasize, too. ASWB, not only did they lie about it, they've known for years that the test is racist, probably for decades, that the test is racist.

Cassandra Walker:

This data goes back 10 years alone.

Alan Dettlaff:

Mm-hmm. But they kept doing it.

Cassandra Walker:

Yeah.

Alan Dettlaff:

They did nothing about it. They just kept doing it. Knowing they had a racist exam, they did nothing to address it. They lied about having the data and just kept doing it for the purpose to keep certain people out.

Cassandra Walker:

And record profits.

Alan Dettlaff:

Absolutely.

Shimon Cohen:

And in the report, so just two quick things about the report, and then Charla, I'm going to turn it over to you to break down how we interpret these results. But in the report, they never even entertain any small possibility that their test is racist. It's always something else is their analysis. And also, I just think it's really important to point out, too, is they didn't release any data on disability and so, that is something that we also need to see. That said, Charla, we've talked about this before off the podcast, but now, we're going to do it on the podcast, of course.

Charla Yearwood:

Yes.

Shimon Cohen:

How do we start to break this down because there's so many different ways that people are doing it?

Charla Yearwood:

I think it's really important for us to understand when we look at the data, when we look at the report, I think there are a lot of well-intentioned folks who maybe will look at the report, will read the report, and say like, "Okay, there is clearly something wrong. We have Black and Brown social workers passing at one rate. We have White social workers passing at another rate. We have an age discrepancy. What is the problem?"

Charla Yearwood:

And I think in general, the way that a lot of people were taught and know how to evaluate that information is they're used to saying, "Then there must be something wrong with the people who are

taking the test. There must be some reason that Black and Brown folks are not able to pass this test at the same rate that White folks are." And I think it's really important for us to understand the inherent racism of that perspective and point of view. What you are saying, as you go down that path of that questioning, is that there is something wrong with Black and Brown people as to why they cannot sit in the same classes, take the same test, complete the same assignments, do all the same practicums and for some reason, they're not able to pass the test the same rate. There is an inherent assumption in that line of thinking that says, that maintains this idea of racism.

Charla Yearwood:

And this is what's supposed to be so special about social work. We are supposed to understand the systemic level of how oppression exists and maintains in a society. And when we look at this test and we look at this data with an understanding of racism as a system, we can see that the test is created to maintain a systemic ideology about how social work should be practiced, how social work should look and exist in relationship with the community and all of that is inherently tied to whiteness and White perspective of how these things should operate.

Charla Yearwood:

An example of that would be, or a parallel to that would be, that there is a diversity of ideas about community and how people relate to one another, depending on religious backgrounds. Imagine if we allowed for an overwhelming majority of one religious background, which we do, but that's a tangent. If we allow for a majority of one religious background to create an exam of how you should exist in relationship with community and then we tested every one of a multitude of religious backgrounds onto that exam. That is how the social work exam is structured.

Charla Yearwood:

We ask White folks how they think that you should practice social work and then we test everyone on their understanding of White ideology on how social work should be practiced. And I think that White people, many don't even recognize that the way that non-White people approach the work might look different. Still ethical, still within reason of what we would expect from social workers, but it looks different because the relationships are different, but that's not being reflected on our tests.

Cassandra Walker:

Not only is it not reflected, it's not even considered. When you look at the makeup of who's defending, who's creating these tests and everything, it's only recently that when ASWB knew they were in trouble, then they bring in a Black CEO to hide behind, then they create a racial test task force to hide behind. And I think, and even the Code of Ethics reflects this struggle because some of the updates that were made last year this year. I can't remember when it came out, but around fighting racism and things like that being inherent to the job, that was a struggle to get in for years. Because again, what is and isn't "social work," what we do in our practice and how we do it on the test.

Cassandra Walker:

I remember taking both the master's. I can't remember if Illinois used to use the master's or the advanced generalist, but when we did, I took that test for that level and then I took the clinical. And on both of them, the answers always came down to policing. You see a family do something that you're not sure about, call DCFS, make a report, right? Things that harm-

Charla Yearwood:

Exactly, exactly.

Cassandra Walker:

Yeah. Things that harm our communities. And so, when you have questions like that created by people who don't introspect, who don't question what the purpose of this test even is and why these are the questions versus having a test that is rooted in recall and things. Or actually, a verbal board's test that is actually rooted in talking through cases, if that's what we're talking about. When you don't have any of those things, you miss those perspectives. Calling the police is an absolute adamant last resort. If I don't have to, it's not happening. I'm not filing a DCFS report because someone is engaging in a cultural practice like co-sleeping past a certain age or something that isn't understood by people who have never worked with us.

Charla Yearwood:

It also wouldn't be safe for all of us.

Cassandra Walker:

Yeah, exactly.

Charla Yearwood:

If you are a Black male social worker and you're interacting in a certain environment, calling the police might not be your first thing, thing that you do.

Cassandra Walker:

Happened in Florida, died.

Charla Yearwood:

But the test is created by White women and that is what White women do and so that's how they answer the question. The actual measure of the test becomes for Black and Brown folks, "Can I best answer the questions how a White woman would." And that is what they're being tested on. "Can they take on the perspective of White people and generate that through the questions?" And that's why we're talking about bias. It's not because there's some question on there that says, "Are Black people less smart than White people, true or false?"

Charla Yearwood:

That's not what we're saying. We're saying that baked into the question, to the test is an ideology that is held/maintained only by White people. And everyone else must conform to their White understanding of how social work should be practiced, what it should look like to pass a test and get a license. That's racist.

Alan Dettlaff:

I think that really speaks to the history of this profession, too. That's important to point out in terms of just how we got here. This entire profession is founded on the idea of White saviorism. The entire profession started by White, allegedly progressive, women saving mostly children. In the early days, it was immigrant children, helping them assimilate, and then that moved into saving Black and Brown

children, which is what social work is largely now through the juvenile justice system, through the child welfare system. But this whole idea of White saviorism has undergirded the profession since its earliest days.

Alan Dettlaff:

And when you really think about it, so the reason that those questions always lead to mandatory reporting, calling the police, social work essentially is just a mechanism of social control. That's what it has been since the beginning, that's what it is now and that's why the questions have evolved over time to become this. It's all about maintaining an exploitable labor class that social work wouldn't even exist without that population to treat, to call on.

Shimon Cohen:

Adding to what Charla was saying about the way that tests is constructed and there was an article in 2019, Castex and colleagues, Microaggressions and racial privilege within the social work profession: The social work licensing examinations, where they do break down stereotypes in the questions. They show that, for example, there's a scenario and they're talking about a Latino family and they're using stereotypes of Latinos in how they describe the family and the practice issue or whatever the question is actually trying to measure that it could be done without any of that. None of that needed to be in there.

Shimon Cohen:

And what they're saying is, so you're taking it and maybe me taking it as a White person as a White man, I'm taking it. I might not, unless I recognize what's going on with the question, I'm just trying to answer it the right way. Maybe it's not likely going to cause a reaction in me as it would cause someone who is Latino taking that and gets frustrated of seeing once again, these stereotypes of their own people and then how that affects them when they're taking the test as well. And it showed that there's like rampant stereotypes within these questions.

Charla Yearwood:

The funny thing about that is if you go and watch the YouTube videos, where people teach you how to take the test, they tell you to find information like that and cross it off as not a part of the question and extra information that you don't need. But how does that compare to our ideas and what we learn about cultural competent practice? Can you just excuse the fact that someone is a Latino family, when you are offering them care? When you are supporting them through whatever you were supposed to be doing as a social worker. It's a contradiction.

Charla Yearwood:

And again, that's why you have to go back to an understanding of all of the race is system- racism, white supremacy, this is systemic issues. We're not talking about people being mean. We're talking about how ideas get baked into a larger system that force Black and Brown folks to conform to whiteness in order to get crumbs, like a license, to be able to support their community. You are policing Black people from supporting Black people and they have to conform to whiteness to get the tools you deem necessary for them to support their own community. That's the racism.

Cassandra Walker:

Yep. And I remember taking that test and I test really well, but I was so angry the whole time because I would get questions. And the other thing with the test is, and this isn't just social work, but we are

centering social work right now, but these tests have questions on them that don't count. And so, it's also a matter of, you can get questions that are ridiculous because they're testing them. But that will throw you off, but you don't know which ones are the test questions and which ones are the ones that count.

Cassandra Walker:

And so I got questions on my test that used wrong, stereotyped, outdated terminology. I got questions on my test that used disgusting stereotypes about Black and Queer people. And I'm expected to just say, "Oh, that doesn't matter for the test," and keep trucking. And the amount of buy-in to the system and to internalized oppression that that requires for that to be possible is problematic and disgusting in its own right and so harmful. That's also how... because we would be negligent if we didn't mention, it's not just White people defending this test.

Cassandra Walker:

There are plenty of Black and Brown folks that are like, "Well, I passed, so there can't be anything wrong with it." Well, I'm glad that you passed. I'm glad you can make a living. And that doesn't mean that there's nothing wrong with it. I passed, too and I was furious with the entire test because I was learning these concepts and I was paying attention to them. And the test as I was taking it, screamed bias, screamed problems. I checked boxes as in my head, I was like, "If anyone does this in practice, they shouldn't be practicing." And that is harmful to our communities because anyone who practices, like the test, is probably the most harmful social worker you've ever met in your life and that is disturbing.

Charla Yearwood:

Absolutely. I will back you up as another person who passed the exam on the first time. I'm a Black woman who did that. I felt very little pride walking out of that office with that pass piece of paper. I felt like I just sold my soul to get that LCSW behind my name. I was answering questions in ways that I knew would be harmful with people who I had been serving for years. It was embarrassing. It was uncomfortable. And I'm sure there are people who were like, "Well, I felt really good about mine. I really worked hard." And yay for you.

Charla Yearwood:

But if you actually sit down and look at the questions, look at what they asked you to answer and what they actually asked you to say about people who are our neighbors, people who are our families. The test was asking us to make grave assumptions about people with very little information and that is exactly how some people practice. And that's why we have a problem in social work now.

Shimon Cohen:

The other thing with this test is that it's never been shown to actually have anything to do with someone being a good social worker. So, all these people are paying this money to take this test and because they'll say... one of the arguments that keeps coming up is it's to protect the public. And it's like, "Well, what public are you talking about?" And also, they can't show it has anything to do with being a good social worker anyway, so it is literally a hoop that people have to jump through that they make money off of. And some people get included and we know who gets excluded.

Charla Yearwood:

I just want to call out the racism in that. The racism and the idea that, "Well, we have this exam and it's what keeps our profession safe. It's what keeps the bad people out." And then looking at the data and seeing that the "bad people" who are being kept out are the Black and Brown ones. What are you really saying?

Shimon Cohen:

Right.

Charla Yearwood:

Are you really saying that you believe that it's the White folks who are the best social workers that there are and therefore, this test is doing exactly what it's supposed to do? Is that what you're saying? I need people to actually face the racism of what they are concluding. Because they're getting really easy off and they're like, "Well, I just think we need to assess who we let into our programs better. I just think we need to better prepare our Black and Brown students to go out into the community."

Charla Yearwood:

Are you actually saying you don't think that we come with the same set of skills, if not more skills, because we actually look like the people who you deem needing to be serviced. There is inherent bias and racism there. And I think a lot of people are giving themselves the out of skipping over that and saying, "I'm just looking at the data." And that's lazy. It's racist.

Alan Dettlaff:

I think we know the answer to that question though now, Charla because they've known this data for years. The question is, "Does ASWB really think that only White people are competent? Are the people who should be in this profession?" The answer to that is yes. That's what they think because they've known that this exam has been keeping Black and Brown people out of the profession for decades through their racist exam. And they did nothing to change it, so yes, we shouldn't be letting them off hook at all.

Charla Yearwood:

Absolutely.

Alan Dettlaff:

That is exactly what ASWB believes. And not just ASWB, but all of the other professional organizations that have supported ASWB and let them just say, "Oh, yeah, we can't give that data because we don't collect it," without ever challenging them.

Cassandra Walker:

And I think it's important like public safety, it's been, been a dog whistle. It's a racist dog whistle. It's not my public. I don't feel protected. When I teach classes and I have White folks come in wilin' out, that doesn't protect me when I'm on tasks. When I was on an NASW task force and we got the data back of what social workers are willing to say when they're semi-anonymous. Seeing the data from the White social workers in my state, yeah, no, not my public. That's not protecting—

Cassandra Walker:

Those people shouldn't be working with my public because at the end of the day, when we talk about the people that our profession, and many of the helping professions, period, insist upon calling their mothers, fathers, and masters of the field, those people feared us. We were the boogeyman under the bed. We were the people that needed to be protected from. Abraham Flexner, who is the father of modern medical schools and professionalization straight up believed and published that he believed that Black people should not be trained as surgeons and doctors. They should be trained as sanitarians, whose primary job and goal is to protect White people. And that's who these whole model is built off of. And so, it's not protecting the public that we care about. It's protecting white supremacy public.

Charla Yearwood:

Can I? I'm going to say something real bad, in tangent to what you just said. You can look at social work programs and see who are the people who are doing the "dirty work," the frontline work and what they look like. And then who is tenured and has power and position in a program and you can see that pattern, that idea that there are some people who are meant to do the making the decisions and somebody else who's supposed to do the dirty work, that exists in every level of social work.

Cassandra Walker:

Yep.

Charla Yearwood:

Quiet as it's kept. That's the same pattern everywhere.

Cassandra Walker:

Well, and that's the thing is the jobs that you can get either with the lower level license or the license or the non-clinical license, depending on your state, those are actually the jobs that require the most skill and work and nuance and ability to hold complexity. But because we also devalue the people that we call disabled and mentally ill and whatever. The people that we're warehousing, whether it's prisons or nursing homes, that test is not designed to help them. "Vulnerable populations," well, they're made vulnerable by someone. They're not just, "Oops, slipped, fell suddenly vulnerable and don't have the same rights." And this test, that's who's being harmed.

Cassandra Walker:

The public that's being protected is the wealthy White folks. It's the people making the decision. It's the people who have never been licensed, have never had to take the test, haven't seen an internship, a client or any direct service in the last 50 years that are creating these tests. And saying that they are the pinnacle end all be all, and are supposed to take more credit than all of the degrees and the classes and the CEs and the licenses and the teaching and the direct service and the community connections that would actually serve some amount of accountability and safety. But we don't care about that because, "Well, this is the way it is and we can't go and we just don't want to do anything about it." Looking at a couple of specific boards that have been meeting recently,

Charla Yearwood:

I tend to be a jaded person. I've had shame about that at times. I don't right now. In that jadedness, I think that even if it wasn't the academics, the high achieving, they-don't-see-clients-all-the-time social

workers, who are making these calls, it is the coworker White social worker who does not want to see the Black coworkers social worker get a position and get access to the community that she doesn't have. Because she doesn't understand why clients come in and tell their Black coworkers their business, but don't tell the White social workers their business. They don't understand why they have a connection to the community that's not like their connection to the community.

Charla Yearwood:

And because of that, they want to make sure that other Black and Brown social workers do not have the access they do, because they recognize that they know how to play the system, the nonprofit industrial complex once they get higher up to higher levels to use it for their own good. And they do not want that access to be extended to their Black and Brown colleagues, who they went through the program with.

Shimon Cohen:

100%, 100%. Two things I want to make sure we also talk about as we break all this down, is just so it's very explicit, that these state licensing boards that are using this racist exam are engaging in a discriminatory practice. And there is a history of the Department of Justice suing, for example, New York City, because they were using a discriminatory practice in hiring firefighters. It was actually very similar. There was an exam and the pass rates, there were big differences with Black and Latino firefighters, firefighter applicants, and the city removed/got rid of, had to get rid of the exam. And of course, the numbers of who got to be a firefighter went up, so just want to put that out there. And I think obviously, waiting to be saved by the Department of Justice is not probably going to happen.

Cassandra Walker:

But we did it in Illinois on the master's level. We got rid of the exam. We went from several hundred people getting their LSW here to over 3,000 and it's only August. That change happened January 1st. And so, I think it's important to note that there are people making steps, there is— when it comes to the clinical exam because of the higher level of capitalism and insurance companies and things involved in the clinical level, there is a little bit more legal red tape to get rid of the exam and we likely need something to replace it, but again, there are better models.

Cassandra Walker:

We could actually have something that tests something, anything, besides your ability to answer White. And I think that there are some boards who are saying things like, "Well, we can't do anything about the test. It comes down to individuals." And we've already talked about the problem with that logic to begin with. But also if that was true, Illinois would still have a master's level test. There are absolutely things we can do.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. And you make a really good point about the increase in the numbers and with the clinical barrier here with the licensing, this gets into who gets harmed by this. Because it's, of course, the individual test takers who are being racially discriminated against, but it's also the communities where we keep hearing over and over again that there's this shortage of Black and Brown clinicians. And so, Black and Brown communities don't have access to Black and Brown clinicians, well, yeah, because they're being excluded. And then also, so then who do they have access to? White clinicians who-

Cassandra Walker:

People who don't understand.

Shimon Cohen:

Right. Say that again?

Cassandra Walker:

People who don't understand. I do do clinical practice and I specialize in various complex traumas. The amount of my job that is undoing the harms that well-meaning White women and White men have done is significant and it doesn't need to be that way. But again, we are utilizing gatekeeping measures that incentivize folks to think about things as very either/or. And so, they use the manualized therapies that don't have good outcomes for with certain populations because of the fact that it victim-blames people for racism and oppressive experiences that they're subjected to.

Cassandra Walker:

And so, it's really important to note that some people may see this and folks have strong reactions to people that they perceive as earning more or having the ability to earn more, folks with a master's or a doctoral degree. But we're not just here because, "Oh, the social work profession is missing out on all these great people." Social workers are the number one largest group of mental health professionals in a country that is insisting over and over and over and over again, proving that we are in a crisis.

Cassandra Walker:

And you're holding folks with perspectives that may be more helpful than the people who are already here back for no other reason, but to maintain a white supremacist definition of legitimacy and rigor. That essentially boils down to, "Well, we didn't include them before. We can't do it out right now, so now we need to hide it behind the science."

Alan Dettlaff:

I think you both brought up a really important point about accountability, too, that we haven't really talked about yet in terms of which has been really frustrating, in terms of what some of the response are. Some of the solutions that have been proposed, which have all largely focused on fixing the exam, making it less racist. But where's the accountability to ASWB for the harm that they've caused to—decades, as an organization. And how is ASWB going to repair the harm that they've caused to individual social workers, financially, emotionally, their feelings about their practice? How are we as a profession holding ASWB accountable to literal reparations for the harm that they've caused?

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. The one point I keep bringing up in these conversations is the lost salary that people have not—and you look who it is, so. They want to have in their report about the socio conditions that are supposedly causing these pass rates. But then, the same folks most impacted are the ones who are not able to then make the higher salaries. And so, there's like years of thousands and thousands of dollars that people have lost out on, Black and Brown clinicians have lost, social workers have lost out on.

Alan Dettlaff:

Right.

Charla Yearwood:

That's a major gap in the whole report is that it doesn't actually talk about what the consequences of this data has actually meant. There have been real tangible consequences for millions of people across this country for over 20 years based on their own report. They're not talking and bringing that to the forefront. And I think, as Alan said, that has to be at front of what we discuss moving forward, because real harm has been caused.

Alan Dettlaff:

And these aren't unintended consequences. Everybody will speak to unintended consequences of standardized testing or different things like that. ASWB has known for decades that their exam is racist and that their exam is gatekeeping Black and Brown social workers out of the field and they've continued to do it. That's not unintentional. When you know something is harmful and you continue to do it and make no efforts to change that racist practice that's keeping Black and Brown social workers out of the field, that's not unintentional anymore. It's been known for decades and they've continued to do it, and there's been no accountability.

Cassandra Walker:

And at the end of the day, there are some things that just can't be fixed and the fact that people have been forced out of this field. We talked about how we felt after the test. I think the biggest sense of pride and relief I felt was I'm not going to lose my job. And so, ASWB, I don't see it as an issue of how do we fix them, get rid of it, burn the whole house down, and let's create something new because there ain't no way. I don't care if you hire a Black woman to try and cover up and fix your mess, because you finally admitted you're in too deep.

Cassandra Walker:

We see it way too often, and that shouldn't be person's job either to come into the burning house. And so, we need to let it burn. Get rid of it, and we can do something else. We can dream bigger than continuing to harm people and just mitigate it. Individually, harm reduction is great. In this case, we've given them all the benefit of the doubt that existed, and then some. What are we supposed to do? What are we waiting for?

Cassandra Walker:

This level of willful, purposeful, malicious harm. You can't tell me that in 40 years of being called out in the literature, in the webinars, in this, that, and the third. In 40 years, you can't tell me that there weren't any opportunities for a change. They chose not to. And now, ASWB has absolutely proven there are obsolete. And will, if given the chance, continue to harm as much as the social work profession is willing to let them, so we can't let them.

Alan Dettlaff:

I'd even question, why do we need something else?

Cassandra Walker:

Yeah.

Alan Dettlaff:

Why can't the solution literally be nothing? Why do we need this exam to legitimize the profession?

Cassandra Walker:

Unfortunately, legal barriers in insurance companies, which, not a good answer, but that is the answer that unfortunately we face. Because again, we have lawmakers that are in charge of healthcare and so, we may understand these things, we may get more people to understand these things, but they want some "assurances." And for some reason, all the hoops we already jumped through aren't enough. But again, there are such better ways to do this as far as accountability, as far as what it looks like for social work to actually have some accountability to the communities.

Charla Yearwood:

But what we're talking about is the consequences of social work having sold its soul to professionalism.

Cassandra Walker:

Yes.

Charla Yearwood:

When social work decided it was, when they went down the road of professionalism and professionalization and insurances, and that our clinical work needs to look like medical model care. All of those things add to the layers of that we now have to play these games, but these games are never going to work for us because the whole idea of professionalization is already playing with fire. This is bigger and every step when we get stopped, where we can't even talk about the data of this, of the exam, and that there's a bias, we can't actually get to creating a system that could work for the majority of the community. It's slowing us down.

Charla Yearwood:

There is information, knowledge, ways of practicing that the Asian community has that I'm not receiving as a Black social worker, because we don't have space for that. We have to stop hoarding what we've already, what's been done as the way that it has to continue and open ourselves to explore something new or we will all just be smothered out of this profession.

Cassandra Walker:

Well, that's the epistemicide of white supremacy and colonialism. Those ways, those Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latine ways of practicing "aren't rigorous enough, aren't legitimate enough, aren't professional enough.' And yet, but I guarantee every time we find a way to whitewash and we sure do, find a way to make them rigorous enough, don't we. Looking at all the new stuff around somatics. Do how long people were demonized and vilified for trying to talk about trauma and somatics?

Cassandra Walker:

But now, we got some White male faces to put on it, so now we can do it. Just make sure that we don't talk about the fact that sound harmonics and somatics body work and embodiment and natural substances are Black and Indigenous. It all goes back to that because these tests also further the whitewashing of social work history. If we only test the theories with the White names on them, you have to learn the theories with the White names on them.

Shimon Cohen:

A couple things that, I'm just looking at the time as we're wrapping up, that I want to hit on. Also, this has been... I'm so glad we did this. And I think, I hope people who are listening and reading the transcript, give feedback, and this opens up dialogues. And I'm just thinking of some of the typical responses that happen when this information is presented. And if we can just do a rapid rundown of some of them, so people who are following along can catch it.

Shimon Cohen:

For example, of course, there's denying that the test is racist and I think we've gone into that. But then this whole idea of we need to slow down, we need more evaluation, I think we've covered that. This has been going on for 40 years. How much more evaluation do we need?

Alan Dettlaff:

We know everything we need to know at this point, to know that this exam is racist and the entire system needs to be ended.

Cassandra Walker:

For people who supposedly love the literature and the research calling for us to slow down and that we now need to explore what this means, you're ignoring a whole lot of literature. There's 40 years of literature answering those very questions.

Shimon Cohen:

And then this, and we talked about this around professionalism, but this whole idea of like, "Well, we need this to remain legitimate as a profession." And to me, when I hear that, what I hear is "I'm willing to allow a certain amount of racism to keep some so-called legitimacy," whatever that even means because who's it legitimate to.

Charla Yearwood:

The funny thing that would come up if I were doing this with a client. If I had a client who said something like, "I have to do the test, so that I can prove legitimacy," I would ask, "What's legitimacy? What does that mean? Who's setting that definition? Where is that coming from? How did you come to that understanding?"

Charla Yearwood:

I would question how they came to understand everything that they're holding themselves to. We have to do that process. We need to ask ourselves, what are we actually measuring to?

Shimon Cohen:

Absolutely. And then this other one, and Cassie, you did a whole thread on this about this white saviorism of like, "Oh, the White people are going to come do a free test prep for Black and Brown people and we're going to get them to pass the test."

Cassandra Walker:

Yeah. And I'm not going to rehash the whole thread, but it's just more racism. We've all seen this Scooby-Doo episode. We pull off the mask and oh, it's old man racism again. Because it's, again, that

idea that there's something individually wrong with every single Black person you know that's struggling with this test that doesn't like this test. And we're taking this very, very neoliberal-systems-don't-exist task of, "Okay, we just get this test. We just get them to pass."

Cassandra Walker:

Okay, and so, what are you going to do about the psycho-emotional fallout from that test. Because I'll tell you what, that test sure did take up a lot of time in therapy dealing with the having, being forced into the dual consciousness of that test as a Black Queer person. And again, it's one thing if someone asks you to help, but you need to know what your strengths are. Do you actually know how to teach? Do you actually know how to help someone through this test affirmatively without just falling back into the "White is right" paradigm that we are used to hearing our entire lives. It's not the help you think it is.

Cassandra Walker:

It's also that fact of White folks, and especially White women, you will ask people for help. For something very specific, you'll have an ask and then they'll give you the help they think that you need or that they want to give and completely ignore your agency and autonomy. And again, that is just a progressive form of white body supremacy. It's not helping the way you think it is. It's not the slam dunk solution that you think it is. It is embodying and perpetuating the same tired system, the same harms that are a death by a thousand cuts.

Shimon Cohen:

And then the last one that I'm seeing recently, and I think we're going to possibly see more of this is that students should be looking at the pass rate breakdown by schools and choosing where they go to school based on the school's pass rate. Which of course, wouldn't the school's pass rates then be affected by the same pass rates we've been talking about this whole time, that the exam is racist? And also, not everyone gets to pick, not everyone can just move and go to school wherever either and there's costs involved with all of that, too.

Charla Yearwood:

You're right. We can't just say move to wherever and go and do the program. That just doesn't make sense for everyone. That's not an available option for everyone. We also, again, if we look at the exam and we understand that it as racially biased, schools that are having students pass at a high rate aren't necessarily teaching their students better. That means that they have more students there who are able to perform whiteness. They are indoctrinating their students with whiteness at a higher rate. What are we really looking to achieve?

Charla Yearwood:

And again, I think it's important to mention, and we can add this right here. It's important for us to bring together the relationship between the high, as people age, they also performed worse on the test. There was some overlap between that and race. If you are older and Black or you are older and Indigenous, you are less likely to pass than a younger person who was Black or Indigenous. There's some overlap there.

Charla Yearwood:

And I think it's important to understand that in the context of go to whatever school is going to allow you to pass more easily, because what we're actually seeing is that non-traditional students, students

who have more experience in the field, students who did not come maybe the traditional route are also not performing as well. And so, we need to make sure that students from all programs are able to pass because it's an accessibility issue.

Cassandra Walker:

And on that, we've already been having the school choice discussion. Come on. It's the same tactic. We're talking about, "Oh, well, it doesn't matter if it's an extra hour to get there, just go to the better school." That's not a solution. Again, we are talking about a system that exists. We're not talking about what's wrong with the school and why is that wrong? Where did that failure happen? It's again, if the test is testing whiteness, maybe a school that's not teaching that is a good thing, right?

Shimon Cohen:

Exactly.

Cassandra Walker:

Maybe the fact that experience makes you do worse on the test is something that isn't a good thing. The fact that White 19 to 29 year olds are doing the best on the test, yeah, that sounds not good.

Alan Dettlaff:

That whole idea of school choice, also or that's students need to just make better decisions about where they go just reinforces the idea that the racism of ASWB is okay. It takes the problem off of them and says that students need to make better decisions about where they go to school to better prepare them to take the test. That completely takes the responsibility of ASWB out of the picture. ASWB is the problem. The racism within ASWB that they've known about for decades and have done nothing about, that's the problem. Then that's the problem that we need to end.

Shimon Cohen:

Right. And just to be clear, schools of social work have lots of problems with racism and oppression and we've done numerous episodes on here about that and there's a lot else there. But with this, in this moment, that's not exactly what we're talking about. We're talking about a racist test and being specific about that. When we talk about that pass rates of the test aren't where to choose to go to school, even if there is a choice of where to go to school, that just reinforces that there's nothing wrong with the test, as you're saying. And that we know there's a whole lot wrong with the test.

Alan Dettlaff:

And to reinforce something that Cassie said, to any schools of social work out there listening, do not advertise on your website that, "You should come here because we have this high percentage of a pass rate on the exam." That's not necessarily— that's not a good thing.

Shimon Cohen:

I think we've covered a lot on this and just want to make sure that we're not missing something that any of you want to jump in with. And then also before we finish, just to talk about how people can get involved with addressing this issue.

Cassandra Walker:

We've talked about all the things that are going wrong. We've talked about why they're wrong. We've talked about why some knee-jerk reactions might be a problem and so now, we don't want to just leave you hanging. There are things that you can do as we've talked about. You can talk to and put pressure on your local social work boards. You can talk to your social work programs about what they are doing to help add to the pressure to stop ASWB.

Cassandra Walker:

We also have a petition that we are utilizing to show numbers and show support because essentially the vibe is, "Well, it will die down. Social workers are willing to accept this level of racism. We just have to weather the storm." Showing that's not the case is very vital. Also, talking to your legislators, to your attorney general is really important because again, this isn't just a siloed social work issue. This is a access to services is across the board, whether you're talking housing, whether you're talking mental health, whether you're talking palliative care or anything else, social workers, we do all of that. All that stuff is us.

Cassandra Walker:

And so this is really affecting the public and that is another way that you can get involved and work with folks to put pressure. See if we can't get a lovely little class action suit or a government suit against these tests. Which as we've said, there's plenty of proof are harming not only people within the profession, but people in general, because of the services that then get denied due to the people being refused the ability to practice.

Charla Yearwood:

And then if I could just support with what Cassie is saying about getting involved in the community and going to your boards and saying something, speaking, making a fuss. We have to get beyond thinking that someone else is going to be the one who's going to make a fuss for us. More of us need to actually get up, pick up the phone, type an email and contact people and do something. Because there's a small group of us who are trying to challenge ASWB, CSWE, NASW, and the rest of everyone else is just waiting on us to get in the door, so that they can then ride that wave.

Charla Yearwood:

And we need more people to actually be helping us push agendas forward, so we can all practice and have a practice that actually lives up to its values. It cannot just be the same 20 social workers who are making waves over and over again because we pay for that, we pay for that. And more people need to actively become a part of the movement to make change, because it's not our burden to carry by ourselves.

Cassandra Walker:

Your silence is supporting the system and they are taking it that way. They are banking that it's only us saying anything. And that everyone else is fine with it, because if they weren't, they'd be saying something. And that goes, hey, psychology, marriage, family. Hey, all y'all, I know you got these tests, too.

Shimon Cohen:

I'm going to put the petition in the show notes and on the website, and also, some wording that people can use as a sample. Well, I think the petition actually has pretty good wording that can be edited, that could go to an attorney general or to a board. I would also just want to add, because I have been in touch with the board here in Florida. And my understanding is they don't have a meeting until November and it's in-person, which means you got to take the day off of work, probably drive. I'm in Miami and I think it's in Orlando. That's a whole issue because then it's like, "Where are you going to stay and taking a day?"

Shimon Cohen:

And I let them know, this isn't really doable for most people. And also, so there needs to be a virtual option and there should be an emergency meeting that gets called. There should be no reason that we're waiting until November. That they're waiting, I should say, they're waiting until November to address this. If you reach out to your board and you're getting stuff like that, there's layers of oppression on top of layers to even have access to voice and address these issues that we need to also address.

Shimon Cohen:

All right. Well, thank you all so much. Charla, Cassie, Alan, I'm super grateful to all of you for doing this and who you are and what you do in the world. And thanks for doing the work.

Shimon Cohen:

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