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Peter Sobota [00:00:05] And sometimes it just hits closer to home than others. Hi, everybody. Welcome back to the In Social Work podcast from the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. I'm Peter Sloboda and it's good, as always, to have you on. In summer of 2022, the Association of Social Work Boards, the organization that administers the social work licensing exams nationwide. You know, those those little things that are required for many social work jobs released, the social work passing rates that included results reflective of the race and the age of exam takers. It was not pretty, and the implications are massive for our profession and the people we serve. The short story and not so shocking one for advocates, was that black people, older adults and people whose first language is not English have consistently and pervasively suffered disproportionately lower pass rates. Many advocates and professional groups were completely unsurprised given that a swg had previously announced that they did not release this kind of information because they didn't collected in the first place made matters even worse. Once again, marginalized communities of people got the short end, just as exam takers were increasingly nonwhite. In a cultural environment. When social work needs practitioners from these groups more so than ever. Okay, what's going on and what is the solution? Our guest today is Cassie Walker, Alesha CW, who has been a passionate advocate, commentator and writer who has educated about and worked actively to respond to this injustice. They will explain what's going on and advocate for the way forward. Listen for a passionate call to action for our entire profession. Cassandra AC Walker is a black, queer, licensed social worker, practitioner, clinician, activist and podcaster who specializes in the intersections of trauma, identity and mental wellness. They are the founder of the Woke Mental Wellness Podcast. Hi Cassie. Welcome to In Social Work.

Cassie Walker [00:02:35] Hey, nice to be here. Thanks for having me.

Peter Sobota [00:02:37] Oh, it's our pleasure. Thanks for doing it. So let's let's just get right into it. I don't really want to make a lot of assumptions about how much our listeners know about the recent controversy surrounding the Association of Social Work Boards, the body that administers the licensing exams for social workers. Very briefly as you can, because there's a lot to talk about. Who and what is the AWB? And even more important, what happened.

Cassie Walker [00:03:10] Yeah. So the AWB is the, as mentioned, the Association of Social Work Boards. It is an organization that was founded in the face of immense controversy and disdain in about the mid-to-late 1970s and. Basically, they are a collective group, a regulating body in the social work field, and they are the particular body that creates the licensure exams. So at all levels, the Assembly is responsible for creating the bachelors, masters, generalist and clinical exams, which are the different levels of testing and licensure that may or may not be available wherever the Assembly would be. Tests are utilized. And those tests are predominantly at this time utilized in the United States and Canada. So it is at this point an international affair.

Peter Sobota [00:04:14] I'm sorry for interrupting, but I just wanted to make sure at this point that I'm actually clear. HWB is not technically a social work organization. Is that right?

Cassie Walker [00:04:29] They are.

Peter Sobota [00:04:30] They only are.

Cassie Walker [00:04:31] Okay. Yeah. So as WB is specific to social work and we'll get into this more later. There are other bodies for other of the therapy and helping and medical professions that create their tests. HWB is social work specific.

Peter Sobota [00:04:49] Gotcha.

Cassie Walker [00:04:50] And so basically what happened is since the inception of this test almost over 40 years ago, almost 50 at this point, they have claimed to not have racial data. They have claimed to not have past rates broken down by various demographics, race, gender ability, disability, etc.. And then 2020 hit and the pressure on them stopped coming, only stopped coming predominantly from the black organizations and really ramped up to everybody being like so. Been 40 years. How about those test rates? Like, what's what's happening here? And so this year and the beginning of August on a Friday afternoon, hoping no one would pay any attention to anything because they are shady and shit. As WB released. Tom. Testing data. Not only did they released some of the data, they they released a decade's worth. So we know definitively for ten years they've been lying through their teeth about not having it. And more likely there is the CCW E, which is the Council on Social Work Education. They are the. Social work body that governs the curricula and stuff that you will see in any social, any accredited social work programs through colleges and universities across the country. Yeah, they flagged it as this data is not complete. There are things clearly missing. Anyone who looks at it can tell that there are things missing because, one, it's only ten years and two, we don't have any data based on disability, don't have any data on queer communities. And the general assessment, like the data analysis that was included, wouldn't have passed a 101 undergrad course, let alone any kind of real stand up to analysis methods. So from there we had some problems. We now had the proof we have needed that anyone paying attention has known for years that these tests are a mess. And so many social workers across the country, myself included, started to organize. Because the first thought was, okay, here organizations get them like state governments. Let's go, y'all. Y'all are at risk, too, because this is we can see this is really racist. It looks really ablest. They didn't give us enough data to also be able to go through line by line for that. And the original response we got and the reason why the Stop AC WB petition started was because organizations like NSW and even CWA to an extent, their first initial response was one, we'll we'll let state chapters decide what to do because they're trying to pass the social work compact and they didn't want to jeopardize it. And SBB has a lot of power they don't deserve and to internally. Because it's a small world and people talk and anything you say in your organization is likely not actually private. Was the sentiment that well, it's just the same people is always getting pissy on Twitter it'll blow over so any as took that stance at first. The national chapter I happen to live in Illinois and the Illinois chapter is actually a real one. They are social workers that live by the values of social work the majority of time, and so they were on it. Other chapters very much were hoping to be able to bury their heads in the sand. As many of the mainstream social work organizations unfortunately, do when it comes to doing right by black social workers and other social workers of color. And so we start a petition. As of. The day that we are recording, we are recording this in November of 2022. The our petition has over 9000 signatures. Multiple states have begun to walk back their use of the test and both the now finally National S.W. came out earlier this month or at the end of October, finally disavowing the tests. Stating that they no longer affirm the test being part of the upcoming Cross-State Social Work Compact. And Dawe well for months has noted that they no longer consider the use of the test to be a valid measure of anything because it's never been an invalid measure of anything. And so that's kind of what's happened. That's where we are. We have there are a lot of organizations. From

multiple levels of social work and more broadly, college and university. National Board of Deans and directors, I think talking about this and.

Peter Sobota [00:10:34] That has actually been on this for quite some time, they have been complaining and pushing. I think they have been part of the, you know, the stick.

Cassie Walker [00:10:43] That they were part of the push to get the data in the first place. And so there are a lot of I, I don't want to make it sound like I am doing the right thing and everyone else is sitting around messing around. No, there are a lot of people that contributed to this push and even like maybe not as much as they like to pretend, but even some of the bigger organizations have been, and I think CSB has, with all its flaws, has really stepped up in this area to be like this. This data, it's not complete. Like, wait, we don't have access to the raw data. We're just supposed to take your word. Yeah. And so there's a lot of people working on this. And the fact of the matter is, is where we are right now is reckoning with the fact of what the National Association of Black Social Workers said back in the sixties and seventies when they opposed the creation of AWB and the test in the first place, which is that these tests harm us. These tests are a result of not actually dealing with a identity crisis in social work and the desire to be seen as a true profession and title protection and all of these things that create this kind of gated class that in all actuality doesn't help us to do the work we need to do.

Peter Sobota [00:12:13] Yeah, so that was a great thank you. That was a great overview of August before August and in in the next three months, if we spend some time drilling down into a little bit of all of that. Yeah. Okay. So I think what I'd like to do is kind of just really dig into some of the weeds here, because I think the weeds are in some ways more disturbing than the actual outcomes. And then we get we've got to save some time to talk about like, okay, now what what to do and I know you're ready to go there, so I'm sure we'll get there. So if this is okay with you, I mean, the disparities were pretty shocking. And I don't have the numbers at the at my fingertips, but my hunch is that you do.

Cassie Walker [00:13:03] I do.

Peter Sobota [00:13:05] Remembering like first time passes. And I don't even want to bring up multiple things because that's just I think that's deceiving. But if you have that in front of you or with you or off the top of your head, could you just kind of lay out what the disparities actually were? And the report that came out nice.

Cassie Walker [00:13:24] Yeah. So. You can find the NSW Bee Report on their website and there are links to it. And links to the document all over the place as well. And so part of I'm going to say this up top. As we're talking about these data, there are different numbers for every level of test. I for now am going to be focusing on the clinical exam and I'm going to tell you why that is, because the clinical exam is the most commonly used exam. Illinois got rid of the master's level for our LSW, so our provisional license no longer has a test requirement and other states have already done that or are in the process of doing that. Now, when we talk about the clinical level, however, part of the struggle here is that the clinical is then we get into insurance reimbursement and issues. And so as of today, yeah, as of today, I do not I am not aware of any any state in the US that has successfully gotten rid of the clinical level exam. So if you're like, but what about the bachelors? What about the masters? Not all states use them. Not all states use them the same. Some use the masters, some use the generalist. It. There are four different tests and it's a mess. So just just being aware. And then when you look at this, you will also note that the presentation of the data is so incredibly disingenuous. It's just the graph. Like, even though the analysis

tells us the best measure we have is the first time pass rate, all of the majority of the lying graphs and the bar graphs and all the flashy infographics that SBB made and put out. Yeah, they're all eventual pass rates because that looks slightly better. Still abysmal, but slightly better. And so even the presentation of this information as you're scrolling through the data of this test is a mess because it's like, okay, well I need first time pass rates because you said it's the best, but all of your graphs, all of the primary infographics that you see first are eventual pass rates because you're trying to make yourself look better. So I suspect at best.

Peter Sobota [00:16:11] And my recollection is they don't even tell you how many times people took it either.

Cassie Walker [00:16:15] Correct. Part of the data that's missing, we don't have an average number of tests taken to succeed or anything like that. So going into the data, like I said, even I'm I have the report in front of me and even I'm struggling to find the first time pass rates because it's buried in these charts but. The discrepancies are vast and distressing in that black test takers. Have a first time pass rate of it's 53, I think.

Peter Sobota [00:16:56] 53. I thought it was in the eighties.

Cassie Walker [00:16:58] Oh, for black test takers, only 53% passed the first time.

Peter Sobota [00:17:04] Yes. And for whites, I think I were in the 80 seconds.

Cassie Walker [00:17:08] Oh, yeah. Yeah, absolutely they are.

Peter Sobota [00:17:11] And that's a bit of a discrepancy. It's a bit of a discrepancy. Yeah.

Cassie Walker [00:17:18] Just a just a tad. Here we go by ethnicity and gender. So we've got the last two black test takers. Ah, depending on your gender and everything. Somewhere between below 40 and and about 45 ish for first time between men and women. Again, gender has not been broken down beyond men and women. And then over here, white test takers. There's much less of a discrepancy between gender for white test takers. And they're both. Both are over 80% multiracial folks do next best. There is no breakdown of what multiracial constitutes in this data. And so their next best sitting women are sitting right below that 80 mark, around the 79, and men slightly below that, closer to like 70, 77 ish. And then. Right. It's just all downhill from there. Asian folks fair next best. Followed by. A kind of neck and neck race by Latino folks next. And then indigenous with black people doing the worst. This data, while disturbing, unsurprising.

Peter Sobota [00:18:46] But isn't assessing though I mean that is that was going to be part of the drawdown is the August release was at least in the world that I live in was was kind of defined as a bombshell. But really, if you think about it, it really wasn't a bombshell. It was kind of a confirmation of what many people knew. But just didn't have the truth in their hand. You know, the the evidence, if you will. So who was shocked? I mean, that's white people. You didn't hesitate, like.

Cassie Walker [00:19:23] You know, I mean, and so I wrote a thread on this posted both to Twitter and LinkedIn and, you know, the the knee jerk reaction that came out of out of social workers, predominantly white and white passing. Social workers was we just got to help our black colleagues pass the tests. And I was like, okay, so hold on. Let's let's talk about your racism showing. Let's talk about your savior ism. And let's slow down a hot

second here, because if we have a test with these kinds of discrepancies, the question isn't how do we force people to take this racist ass test? The question is, okay, so what does it mean that people are passing a racist test? What kind of practitioners are we putting out? And what does it mean to have a test that is so ubiquitously problematic that. We have not listened to decades of people telling us that there's a problem with this task. Until the organization got guilted enough to put out some amount of data that they analyzed themselves that they clearly are still hiding stuff from. And so that that like people who were like, oh my God, I never would have guessed are not paying attention. That's who was surprised. People who aren't paying attention. And no, it's not. I got plenty of. Hate and vitriol from other black social workers who have bought into the test myth that this test somehow makes us a better or more viable as a profession and need to feel some sort of way because they can pass some test regardless of whether the test is actually a valid measure of anything or not. And so it's not exclusively white folks, but I think that there is, again, a massive discrepancy because the people making the test are also overwhelmingly white. When you look at how the test is made and.

Peter Sobota [00:21:31] Don't I mean, again, I'm going to defer to you because I really do think you're by far the expert here. But it's also my I think understanding, at least, is that when questions and potential questions are constructed, they are solicited from practitioners and people in the field, and they are almost. Overwhelmingly white people, 77%. Okay. That's okay. That sounds right.

Cassie Walker [00:21:59] So and that might actually be low. No, I think that is I think that is the most current number. Again, because as WB is a nonprofit, they do have to have some level of transparency, not nearly the level that they're supposed to. They are grossly untransparent for the kind of organization that they are. The level of secrets they keep is abysmal, and people who have law degrees should probably look into it because it seems kind of illegal to me, but. What do I know? But. But regardless, with that piece is like, buried in some of the information you can find about how they make the test. Is that information of who is making the tests, how they're validating the tests. And it's all a. Self-perpetuating racist cycle. So the way the test is made in the first place is you get a kind of. Hand picked. Committee of people who are designing the test. Up until recently has been overwhelmingly white. And since AWB doesn't particularly like to pay people for their Labor in that regard, a lot of times it's volunteer, which then also creates a racial gap because of what we know about socioeconomic status and how. I can't afford to fly to Texas and create a test with zero pay for all of the time I'm missing with clients. That's just not how that works. And so that's how people make the test. You kind of apply and then they kind of handpick people into a committee and then they look through the questions again, the folks looking through and testing questions. 77 point something percent white. And then they put the potential questions that past those levels into the test. So when you're taking this test, keep in mind there's a certain amount of the questions that you're answering that don't count.

Peter Sobota [00:24:15] If I could just jump in, because I just want to give you an idea here. Hmm. I'm listening to you and I'm thinking, okay, if I'm a person of color and I'm taking the exam, I'm going to think like a white person.

Cassie Walker [00:24:33] Oh, that's exactly what you're told to do.

Peter Sobota [00:24:35] You're told to do that.

Cassie Walker [00:24:36] That's the best advice I ever got when I was doing test prep. Oh, geez. My black social work colleagues, ever all of us were told the same thing, which is, if you want to pass this test, you cannot think like yourself. You cannot use your experience or your knowledge. You need to think like a white person. The variant on that, some people, some of the colleagues I know were told to think like a white person in a utopia. Some people were told to think like the most unsympathetic Karen you could imagine. And we all passed. I passed. I passed my first time taking the test, both of them, because I had to take the Masters and I obviously took the clinical and everything and I passed. And the the entire time was cognitive dissonance. Because when you take the test, Right. If you are like as a practitioner who has been doing social work before, I even went to my social work program, right? Like you're just sitting there and you're like, I would never do that. This is wrong, but this is the answer they want. You're like, Oh God, that's terrible. But that's what they want because the test wants you to call the police. This house wants you to report families and the test wants you to be very judgmental of people. And that's a problem. It's the test isn't even good social work practice. And some of the people defending the test have admitted they are not licensed. They have never been licensed, they have never practiced, but they are making the test. And the test has never been validated. It has never been shown to correlate to better outcomes as far as discipline or anything like that. And so we have this test that B is basically meaningless, but that has all of this clout that for some reason we have bought into the idea that the test means more than the six or more years of education and the internships and the clinical hours and the supervision and the use and all of this other things that we have to go through. But it's the test. It's the test that keeps us safe. And it's a lie.

Peter Sobota [00:26:58] Yeah. And that's what Illinois has done, right? At least at the at the lowest of youth level, is that it takes that model, the one that you just articulated and said, okay, you're eligible for licensure based on that. Yeah. Yeah. Interesting. So, you know, I was thinking about talking with you this morning.

Cassie Walker [00:27:17] Hold on one thing. One thing. I think I really need to touch on this because it's really vital when they're validating the tests. They, one, are not using the appropriate kinds of. Testing. And two. They throw out the data from low quality. Test takers, which is basically people who don't pass. That's part of why it's so self-sustaining. So all the people who got those questions wrong but are like black, they're if they didn't pass the test, data doesn't get acknowledged. In deciding whether or not a question is bunk and there is no notification of people who pass by one or two points, if the question they that made the difference is a question that is later found to be biased, they are never notified and there is no recourse for those people. So I felt like that was really important to note here. Yep.

Peter Sobota [00:28:16] But you will get the opportunity to take the exam again.

Cassie Walker [00:28:20] For another 200. And I think it's \$80 now. 60?

Peter Sobota [00:28:24] Yeah, I think he's like going 75 here in New York. But and actually, that leads into something I want to feed you because I know that you just have no opinions about anything. Cassie So I just thought I would I would just send this one to you because I was thinking about it this morning. You know, for me, at least one of the tried and true mechanisms or adages for when you're trying to understand, like the latent functioning of something that seems awful but allows it to exist when you're trying to understand that an injustice and abuse of power is to follow the money. And so you just hit on the let's call it let's call it to 75, to be fair, per exam. Which is required, which is the

essentially the ticket to a livelihood for many social workers and all sorts of other things. By the way, more money in terms of the clinical licenses and all that. But also, I wanted to find out. I wasn't positive that AWB was non profit, but I kind of looked it up.

Cassie Walker [00:29:42] Yeah, you would think so. Based on their numbers.

Peter Sobota [00:29:46] 6 million. Annually. On administering and developing the exam. And annually what I found was \$800,000 per year for study materials. That seems like a lot of money.

Cassie Walker [00:30:05] I think your estimates are actually low because great. They had I believe the and again there's a so hashtag stop as WB like there's a bunch of us working on it and we have been looking we've been digging into these things and I believe. A couple of my colleagues dug into their financials and found that they have as of tax year as of, I think last tax year or something. I think they've got like \$33 million in their coffers. Oh, yeah. Because more and more people keep taking the test and the test costs keep going up and their operate like the things they do. Like doesn't it doesn't change a whole lot. And it's not like they provide a whole lot of value or aid. Yeah. So their, their money, besides giving themselves raises, it doesn't particularly go up. And so they, they have millions upon millions of dollars. And for a test that again, is a mess. And part of the problem here is you've got an organizing body or a regulatory body who has amassed enough power where they feel comfortable, strong arming states to do as they wish. So they're strong arming state governments. They are basically completely on line. Nobody is looking at them. Nobody is regulating them. And they are making money hand over fist over keeping this task a problem, because again, they didn't tell us how many times people are taking this test.

Peter Sobota [00:31:48] And and here's the the kind of cynic in me in addition to all that. Providing a really draconian gatekeeping function for certain kinds of folks who now more than ever, we say we need to serve the needs of other marginalized and disenfranchized people. So at the very time we say we need more, for example, black social workers.

Speaker 3 [00:32:19] Mm hmm.

Peter Sobota [00:32:20] Our most essential mandate for admittance into the game. Mm hmm. Is explicitly keeping those folks.

Cassie Walker [00:32:31] Yeah. Know how many un filled social work jobs there are because they require a clinical license? But I've got a colleague in D.C. who's like, Yeah, we have work that's not getting done and we have people we have housing vouchers that are going unclaimed because we don't have the staff to give them to people. I'm you know, I'm in Illinois and I'm in contact with state legislators and and other decision makers in the state who are like, yeah, we want to know what to do here because we're allocating more money than ever to mental health initiatives. But we don't have the workforce to implement this stuff we're trying to fund. And and so we're really talking about, you know, who else doesn't pass this test? Bilingual people. MM You understand how many bilingual social workers we need? How many? And there's no options to take this test in any language other than English. And the only accommodations given are a dictionary.

Peter Sobota [00:33:50] Yeah, I saw that.

Cassie Walker [00:33:52] And I'm just sitting here like the test. Like the wording of the test is a mess. As a native English speaker, like, I can't imagine I can't imagine trying to take this test. Thumbing through a dictionary the whole time with the same emetic. What the hell kind of social work is that? It's not. And that's again, we're talking about a field that likes to tout its ethics and what we do and what we're supposed to. And our.

Peter Sobota [00:34:19] Core values. Yes.

Cassie Walker [00:34:21] But our regulatory bodies are not adhering to our core values. Social work conferences are coming back with zero COVID mandates. So we're not like, what is that? We have these tests that people are like, Well, but we have to have the test we need to test. It keeps us sick, Does it? Because I still see all in this field. I've been a part of these coalitions and I have seen the things you are willing to put on a survey. It's not keeping us safe. This test isn't doing anything but creating a massive, expensive barrier. I. I can't see the amount of people who contact me for services. We are burning people out. We are drowning people in work and people are getting compassion fatigue. They're leaving the field completely, both because they can't pass this test. But then once you do pass this test, the amount of work is heartbreaking.

Peter Sobota [00:35:16] And I and I can even I can't I can't imagine what it's like to take the exam, do poorly on it. Exactly. In many ways, as I guess I was supposed to do poorly on it. And I can't imagine the shame and the and the guilt and the kind of lack of our. That comes with, of course, not passing the exam, but then hearing it was built so that you really didn't pass it.

Cassie Walker [00:35:48] Yeah, I think anyone listening needs to understand that people lose their jobs because they can't pass this exam. There are people who are in management positions who have been in this field for ten, 15 years who can't pass this exam because also the older you get, the worse you do on the exam. I saw use of the exam for a feel for for a area of practice. Do you want where experience negatively correlates to how you do on the exam? You know, there's got to be something wrong there. Like, give me a break. The most experienced people are doing the worst. Are you kidding me? And you all want to defend this mess? No. We need good practitioners. And good practitioners are not passing this exam easily. Or if they are, they are turning off everything they know about good practice in order to do so. Because that's exactly what I did. I sat there and I turned off the side of my brain. That is like a good, compassionate, ethical practitioner. And I turned on the part of my brain that is like. I know what this test wants me to say. Click, click, click, click, click, click, click.

Peter Sobota [00:37:08] Yeah. Yeah, it's really kind of hard to know what to say to that. Would it be okay with you if for just a second we switched gears? Because I think I want to acknowledge a something that I think is very real in our profession for all of us as social workers. Not everybody is lapping up what you and I are talking about right now. I think we need to acknowledge that that people are defending the test. When you and I spoke informally earlier this week, we talked about Nick Waters story in The Times. He got a lot of support for that.

Cassie Walker [00:37:51] Yeah, of course he did.

Peter Sobota [00:37:53] Yeah. So not everybody's with us. Let's put it that way. I read as w these are, I think, their original statement and they basically refuse to consider that the

test was problematic. You can help me. Please do. This is systemic and institutional racism. This is the result and the burden of years and years of racial trauma.

Cassie Walker [00:38:19] And yet they don't include themselves in that which I find to be particularly interesting. Me and some other colleagues working on STOP as WB campaign, Simon Cohen, Jen Hirsch and Alex Remy. We all created like we we wrote a response and the Times didn't want to publish it because they don't publish responses and they're like 600 words. And it's like, Yeah.

Peter Sobota [00:38:48] Well you have to write your own opinion. Page Yeah, yeah.

Cassie Walker [00:38:51] And it's like, but, but the amount of things this got wrong is more than 600 words long, like just fact checking. You would take more than 600 words because you all don't bother to figure out whether or not people know what they're talking about anyway. So the point being that the as WB continues to exclude themselves from being a system or from being a part of a system which again, that doesn't pass first social work curricula like you would fail your classes congratulations you you you you failed and so as WB exams themselves and even now they're making they have made a very laughable disingenuous call for research looking at upstream issues and they will they're funding it but they are only funding are only accepting research that does not look at themselves. Yeah. And so they're trying to pollute the body of research because one of the things that we have been doing. Is showing all of the different there's an entire body of literature, even without access to the data, which should be able to be accessed by people who are clearly doing the work that needs to be done. And it's not. But even then, there's an entire body of research that talking about all the ways this test is a problem using practice tests, using exit, you know, exit interviews, all kinds of stuff. And so they want to they want to say, oh, this is systemic racism, but they don't want to say, yes, our test is systemically racist. This is a function of how systemic racism is happening. They want to be like, oh, it's you know, the the first thing they said as part of the analysis before their follow up stuff was, oh, it's stereotype threat. It's it's you know, like it's because it's because black people think they can't pass the test. And I'm like, so what's in your test that is bringing this up for people? What about your test is eliciting the the the threat level at this ubiquitous amount Over half is a lot. That's a lot of people. So across the board, across the country, across schools. What is in your test that is creating this problem?

Peter Sobota [00:41:26] Generally when when people push back at you, like, for example, a common pushback that I've heard is, Oh, come on, we've known forever that all standardized tests have a disparity. Why are we getting so worked up about this? That's how they all are. I can I wish people could see your face right now, but they can't. Would you like to gather yourself before you react to them?

Cassie Walker [00:41:54] My friends. My fellow social workers. My. Fellow people who give a damn about where we are as a society. You're correct. We have known for a decades that standardized testing is a problem. So why are we still using it at all? Like the point here is not to be complacent in a oppressive colonial racist status quo. The point is to make it better. And so that pushback holds no weight with me because those are the same people that I like. But yo, slavery's mad profitable. Why would we? Why? Why wouldn't we? We've known forever that it's kind of harmful, but the money. Yo, it's. It's. It's not an excuse to not do better. If we know better, we should be doing better. The fact that you're okay. With your black colleagues being admitted from being able to survive in this capitalist hellscape of a society we have. But you are willing to call yourself an anti-racist practitioner and try and sit in the room with black clients and not understand why they don't

want to talk to you is maybe why we need to figure something else out. But besides the test, because it's very clear that your scope of practice isn't where it should be, and perhaps you should take a see and reconsider the idea that, Oh well, I passed, so you should too. Listen the amount of like I am not I am not that old. I'm not. I'm really not. I sound way older than I am. And it's because I've been through some stuff in my life. And just because I survived it, just because I continue to survive, it does not mean I will ever in my entire life, wish the vitriol and racism and hardship and poverty and abuse that I have suffered on someone else because of the idea that what I survived is So you should too. That's pretty damn ablest. That's. That is incredibly. Horace. That's a horrific way to go about the world, and especially in a field of practice, in a profession, in a whatever you want to call social work or any other helping area. Is. Pretty damn antithetical to what it is we are supposedly doing here. And so, again, there's pushback to everything. There is push back to the fact that I, as a black, queer, non-binary, mentally ill, ill person, should exist, let alone be a therapist and a speaker and a writer and a gamer and all of these other things that I do in my life. And just because there's pushback doesn't mean that we neglect the obligation as people living in a world together to do better and to care about each other. My question to that the wo. But we know. So why bother? When did you lose your hope? When did you lose your humanity? What happened?

Peter Sobota [00:45:46] Well, when the status quo works for you. You don't have to have hope, right? Things are pretty good.

Cassie Walker [00:45:54] Gain some imagination, folks. Please. Please.

Peter Sobota [00:45:58] Yeah. So how about this? Let's veer now, maybe a little more practically, because I know you have a lot of opinions about this is okay, the cards are on the table unlike any time they have been in the last 40 or 50 years. Now what? So it's interesting listening to you two and other social workers, because here in New York, New York state. Licensure is a relatively recent thing. We had certification forever, and so we fought a a long, winding, contentious battle for licensure and all of the so-called good things that that come with that. Right. Okay, that's that. The exam is I think I said this earlier, is essentially the standard proof of competency. In at least New York State and many others. The instrument appears incredibly flawed to be generous. And as WB appears to have known this for a long time.

Speaker 3 [00:47:11] Mm hmm.

Peter Sobota [00:47:11] That's a kind of a messed up thing. What needs to change? What's the way forward? You've hinted at this. I know what Illinois is doing, but I know you have some opinions about this.

Cassie Walker [00:47:23] One thing that I say and I have this on my it's it's the pin tweet on my Twitter and it's something that I say in trainings and just when talking to people and that is liberation and healing. Are the writing of fiction into reality against all odds. And for that you have to imagine and create what is at the time beyond belief. And this is one of those situations where the lack of imagination and creativity is strangling us. HWB does not need to exist. It just doesn't. And we may need to take some time to get there. But. This organization was fought against since its inception. I don't think that this is one of those decolonized moments. The sometimes decolonizing something is abolishing it because it is the colonizing agent. It is the thing the colonization spreads from. And so I don't see why there isn't something that is perhaps what is to be tried to purport that it is. Maybe that can exist as far as an organization that helps to facilitate licensure. Which

licensure. Also, we may want to go back to certification instead. We can look to other countries. You know, a vast majority of countries don't have testing the way we have testing. They're not as infatuated with this grossly racist, ablest form of certifying, well, nothing but pretending to certify competence. We really need to start with getting rid of the test. We really need to take a look at what it is we're trying to do here, what it is that we are hoping to get from this task. And why is it that all of the mandatory schooling and continuing education and supervision and signing up with the government and things. Why? Like why those don't count? Why does a test hold so much more weight?

Peter Sobota [00:49:54] And as you know, I'm sure that the recent trend in social work, higher education, is toward a competencies based model. So more and more what we are measuring or attempting to measure and address are competencies. So if you get, quote, the MSW, for example, you should be chock full of having demonstrated competency around all of those things in the past.

Cassie Walker [00:50:23] And we've been DiCarlo has been doing a lot of work and others of like looking at the different models of certification. Right. I'm not even going to use licensure at this point because I, I also have a complicated feeling about right now, licensure is a particular state having ownership of my ability to make a living. And I really think that's also something we need to look at. Probably problem. I don't understand how something that is supposed to be for public safety can vary so wildly across a supposedly united country with a federal government that I can drive 3 hours from my house and no longer be qualified to practice. That seems completely absurd And like it's more about, you know, like moneymaking and brand management than it is about public safety and accountability for practitioners. And because there's no community, there doesn't have to be any community. You can live somewhere and not know anyone. You can live somewhere and practice in a completely separate realm full of people that you don't even fully consider to be human. And so I think that we really need to look at what we're trying to do here, what we are actually wanting to be. And reconsider the way that we're going about it, whether that is by still having licensure or certification or whatever you want to deem it, having some sort of registration system, but having it such that it works across the country so that there is actually a way to know if someone is a bad actor without having to wait six months because your application is just sitting in the ether in a new state. But there's portfolio models, there's oral exam models. There is simple. Hey, you. You did the thing, and there's the expectation that you'll continue taking SIU. So you're just licensed.

Peter Sobota [00:52:38] And what's interesting is that that portfolio approach that you were just talking about, that's how schools of social work admit students, especially given that more and more schools are dropping. The Gary G. A standardized test.

Cassie Walker [00:52:55] Go figure.

Peter Sobota [00:52:56] Go figure. And we're dropping that and we're evaluating the whole person. And then, of course, if you get yourself into an MSW program, we don't give you the comps model at the end. Has been dead for 40 years. We look at a person over time demonstrating their skill set and their competency in a variety of ways, none of which in and of itself is the one thing that will make it all fall apart. And yet then when we license people, we do this.

Cassie Walker [00:53:32] Exactly. What's also interesting about this whole thing is, you know what I had to do? I had to do a I had to do internships. You know what I did in my internships? I, ah, I practiced social work. Wild. I know.

Peter Sobota [00:53:49] Mm. Under supervision. Hopefully. Good, active, timely supervision. Yeah.

Cassie Walker [00:53:55] I was very lucky. And I had good supervision. Most many do not. And I think that. That is an aspect, too, of a lot of times when when we're looking at like, oh, how do we fill gaps? Like people go to interns and it's like, okay, so you're okay with these unlicensed people practicing, but not those ones. These people are not a threat to the public and going to run wild across the field, harming people willy nilly. Because they're not in school. But these people who have been working for 15 years and have a proven track record of proper ethical practice, they because they can't pass a test, are not okay. Like it's it's just wildly. It's just adamantly ridiculous. It's patently. Unfair and unexamined assumptions. What we. What we are worried about.

Peter Sobota [00:54:56] It doesn't help us do our work together collectively. That's where we have the power, right? That's where we have it. You know, we've never been a profession that is rewarded with with with like this gigantic social status that comes with high salaries or exorbitant salaries. And so we're like most people who are disenfranchised to a certain extent is that we've got to gather together. Our strength is in our numbers and our skill set and this kind of stuff. Prevents.

Cassie Walker [00:55:28] Before we end, I do want to make sure I acknowledge this is not uniquely a social work issue. All of the therapy professions have tests in use which are bullshit. The E, triple P, part two, the Marriage and Family therapist. They all have similar issues or are similarly nontransparent. And if our. Power is in the people in the numbers. I would worry less about defending a test and more about figure out a way to form a union and figure out why it is that private practice folks aren't allowed to do so because the insurance companies have lobbied so hard that it would be a trust. But that's a different podcast. But I do think it is important.

Peter Sobota [00:56:29] It's a different first year and who's going to wrestle with the fact that right now social workers and it's been this has been a number of years now that we are actually the most numbers in terms of providing counseling and therapy services.

Cassie Walker [00:56:45] Yeah.

Peter Sobota [00:56:45] Not all psychology.

Cassie Walker [00:56:46] Yeah. Not only that. So social workers are the number one provider of mental health services in the country.

Peter Sobota [00:56:54] Right. That's what I meant. You said it better. Thank you. And shorter.

Cassie Walker [00:56:58] We social workers are also largely the people who are managing and administering programs for housing, for food, for children. The family policing system has gotten a little bit away from social workers, but those jobs were originally us, too, for better and for worse. But the things that we are doing and the things that we are called to do are so numerous and we are like consistently being like, Oh, use social workers, use social workers. But then we have our own organization bodies that are like, maybe we keep the the MELANIE ones and the ones that that don't speak American is a problem. And maybe we should consider that like that is antithetical to what we are

supposed to be doing and we reconsider a social work that allows that to happen. And any organizations that are complicit or willing to accept that status quo also should perhaps be considered suspect and on the chopping block.

Peter Sobota [00:58:09] Well put. So. Cassie, to kind of wrap up our conversation, I'm going to ask you for your permission to ask a personal question. And if not, we can certainly back off. You know, I'm kind of struck and I really do believe this, that this is not, for example, just like an intellectual exercise or one of the many social justice issues that I'm sure you care about, but it's also highly personal. So I'm just thinking, you know, as a person and a professional who is at the wrong end of these disparities, I just wonder what is the personal resonance?

Cassie Walker [00:58:51] So I think one thing I want to denote and I want to be very open and honest about this for this particular disparity, I'm not on the wrong end of it. I have my license. I have the option to be like, It sucks for you. Give me my supervision money, baby, like I have. I do have that option. That is an option that is open to me. I am very lucky. And in that I was brutally taught how to think white. And I have that cognitive dissonance and that racial trauma and yet snark. I have that racial trauma. And I passed my test on the first try. So in that regards. By all means, I could choose that this issue doesn't affect me. On the other hand. I am someone who goes to therapy. I am someone who lives in a community and I am someone who believes and believes in liberation. As such. My friends haven't passed this test. My colleagues, students I know clients, friends have not passed this test have been impacted negatively. The anxiety, the shame, the trauma, the disgust. And so I do think that this is something that to me, yes, I do take it personally because I am so sick of being lied to. I am so sick of being weaponized by systems that want nothing more than to see me and people like me dead and disenfranchized. So I think that maybe things need to be a little more personal. I think that the colonial white supremacist notion that we need to be cold, detached and rational is actually a bad thing and not a way to live life. And that if we did care more about each other, that this would be personal to more people too. Because at the end of the day, what we are talking about is something that once again, you may not be black, but I guarantee you, you probably struggle finding a therapist. You may not be English as a second language. But my guess is, is that you have struggled with the question of who do I call when I see someone who needs services? So we are talking about something that affects us all because at the end of the day. Injustice. Anywhere. Is an US problem.

Peter Sobota [01:01:23] That might be the perfect place to end. I read as the call to action. I like your call to action a lot better. Cassie Walker, thanks so much for sharing your voice and your ideas and your experience with us. And it was just a pleasure to spend an hour with a powerful and compassionate colleague. Thanks again for taking the time.

Cassie Walker [01:01:53] Thank you. And take care of your take. Take care of yourselves and others. Go play some games together.

Peter Sobota [01:02:00] People Will do. Will do, Cassie. Thanks again to Cassie Walker and to you listeners for joining us. The In Social Work podcast. Here is our director and media savant Steve Sturm, and Nick De Smet, our wonderful graduate production assistant. Say hi, Nick.

Cassie Walker [01:02:20] Hello, everyone.

Peter Sobota [01:02:22] I'm Peter Sobotka. Happy New Year and see you next time, everybody.