Diversity and Social Justice

Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) social work licensing examinations

9 knowledge statements · ASWB 2026 content outline

This competency covers diversity, equity and justice in practice: anti-oppressive and anti-racist approaches, justice principles, identity development and intersectionality, accessibility, truth and reconciliation, exploitation of marginalized communities, privilege, bias and power, and the effects of immigration and refugee status. The exam tests whether you treat the client as the expert on their own culture, examine your own position and bias, remove barriers to access, and act on structural causes, not whether you can recite facts about a group.

You should be able to: You should be able to examine your own position and bias, adapt services for language, disability and culture, apply reconciliation and restorative principles, recognize exploitation, and link individual problems to structural injustice.

Every knowledge statement and its key point

Anti-oppressive and anti-racist approaches

Anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, Mullaly's structural social work in Canada) locates many problems in social structures, not only in individuals, and aims to change those structures while helping the person.

Social, racial, environmental, and economic justice principles

Social justice concerns fair distribution of resources, rights and opportunities (distributive justice) and fair processes (procedural justice); it is a core value in both the NASW (6.01, 6.04) and CASW codes.

Impact of culture, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and intersectionality on behaviors, attitudes, and identity formation

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) means identities such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability and immigration status combine to create distinct experiences of privilege and oppression; assess the whole person, not one label.

Accessibility including language, physical, and cultural access (e.g., translation and interpretation, neurodiversity, American Sign Language)

Language access: in the US, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act (1964) requires federally funded agencies to provide meaningful access to people with limited English proficiency; Canada has official language rights and provincial requirements.

Social justice, truth and reconciliation, and restorative practices related to clients/client systems from historically oppressed and marginalized communities

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008 to 2015) documented the residential school system and issued 94 Calls to Action (2015); the first five concern child welfare and call for reducing the number of Indigenous children in care.

Cultural impacts of exploitation across marginalized communities (e.g., financial, immigration status, trafficking, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women)

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (final report, 2019) found violence rooted in colonialism and issued 231 Calls for Justice; Indigenous women and girls face far higher rates of violence and disappearance.

Privilege and bias and their impact on client/client systems (e.g., implicit bias, microaggressions)

Privilege is unearned advantage tied to group membership (McIntosh's invisible knapsack); having it does not mean one has not struggled, only that some barriers are absent.

Power differential and racial privilege (e.g., internalized racial and ethnic inferiority and superiority)

The worker holds structural power (gatekeeping services, writing reports, reporting duties); name it openly, explain your role and limits, and share decisions where you can.

Impact of globalization, immigration, and refugee or immigration status on clients/client systems and service delivery

A refugee meets the 1951 Refugee Convention definition: a well-founded fear of persecution for race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion. An asylum seeker or refugee claimant is awaiting a decision; immigrants move by choice; undocumented people lack legal status.

Common pitfalls

- Assuming a client's beliefs from their ethnicity or religion instead of asking: a generalization is a starting question, a stereotype is a conclusion.
- Using a family member or child as interpreter to save time.
- Treating cultural competence as mastery of facts about a group rather than ongoing humility and self-examination.
- Focusing only on the individual's coping when the vignette shows a structural cause that also calls for advocacy.

- Reporting or recording immigration status when not required, which can endanger clients and deter help-seeking.

Key terms

Cultural humility: A lifelong stance of self-critique, openness to the client's expertise and attention to power.

Intersectionality: The combined effect of multiple identities on a person's experience of privilege and oppression.

Implicit bias: An automatic, unconscious attitude or stereotype that affects judgment.

Microaggression: A brief, often unintentional slight that communicates a negative message about a group.

Cultural safety: Care in which the client, not the provider, judges that their identity is respected and they are not harmed.

Restorative practice: An approach that repairs harm by bringing together the people affected to restore relationships.

Acculturation: The cultural and psychological change that follows contact between cultures.

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