

OBJECTIONS TO "IS THE ACSW EXAMINATION VALID?"

We are writing to express our objections to the article, "Is the ACSW Examination Valid?" by Bruce Thyer and Richard Vodde which was published in the Spring, 1994 issue of the *Clinical Social Work Journal*. Our objections are based on the fact that we find the article's methodology to be seriously flawed and its conclusions erroneous. Our assertions are based on the considerations described below.

The authors make much of the fact that their 62 MSW student respondents were able to score significantly above chance (25% correct) when they responded only to the alternatives of 40 multiple-choice questions on a mini-exam contained in the 1987 ACSW Certification Study Guide. The authors apparently believed that removing the stems created a set of stimuli that were "neutral" and thus subject only to the laws of chance. However, it is our belief, upon examining the questions, that a number of the correct answers could have been rationally identified simply because they reflected practice styles and social work values that are well-accepted in the field of social work. If some of the students had practice experience, this task became even easier.

Furthermore, one must also assume that these graduate students (with an average age of 32.3 years) were test-wise, i.e., they had developed test-taking skills over the course of their undergraduate and graduate training. Included in this bag of tricks is the ability to distinguish plausible from implausible distractors either by their length and complexity or by their lack of relevance to the content of the other distractors in the item set. Thus, a plausible explanation for their higher than chance performance may simply have been due to their test-taking skills and their knowledge of preferred values and styles within the profession.

It should be further pointed out that the sample items contained in the study manual were "discards". That is, they were no longer being used in the exam. Discards are generated in any long-standing examination process. They come about either because items become obsolete over time or they do not survive item analysis criteria. In the latter instance, the distractors are usually flawed. Given the fact that the sub-

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jects responded only to the distractors of discarded items would also make it more likely that they would score better.

However, it is the inferences made by the authors with which we have the most difficulty. They stated that the higher than chance performance of the students meant "... that a considerable degree of success in doing well on the ACSW exam consists of factors other than *the content of the examination items* (italics theirs). By definition then, the ACSW would appear to lack discriminant and content validity" (page 109). This logic is flawed on several counts. First of all, the sample of test items contained in the study guide was neither portrayed as nor intended to be a representative sample of the ACSW Test Blueprint (the Content and Abilities Grid—Figure 2, page 11). Thus, performance on the entire examination cannot be inferred from performance on the mini-test. From a practical perspective, the small average improvement of 15 percent over chance is rather negligible. This still leaves 60 percent of the performance range to be accounted for by the knowledge of the test takers. Such a range is entirely adequate to perform that function. The Authors would have a valid point if the cut-score for passing the ACSW were in the range of 40 percent. As it stands, none of the student respondents, even those scoring 62 percent, would have been certified based on their mini-exam performance. One simply cannot make inferences about the content validity of the entire examination from the content of the mini-exam. The content validity of the entire ACSW item pool, of which the test blueprint is a domain description, is based on an extensive national job analysis of over 5,000 MSW practitioners. Such a data base is rare in professional certification. Furthermore, plans are currently underway to update those job data with another national study.

Finally, the data presented by the authors in no way reflect on or are in any way related to discriminant validity. Discriminant validity would be established by determining whether or not the ACSW could differentiate among groups assumed to be different in the abilities and skills tapped by the examination. One way of demonstrating the validity of this inference would be to assemble a group of social workers, accountants, psychologists, and engineers and give them all the same version of the ACSW. If the test tapped abilities and skills relevant to social work activities, the expectation would be that the test could discriminate among the occupational groups and that the social workers would, on average, attain the highest scores.

That studies testing the concurrent and predictive validity of the ACSW should be done, we heartily agree. They should be undertaken as soon as possible. In this, and this alone, we concur with the authors. However, because of its very serious flaws, we question the review process and the judgment of the editors of the Clinical Social Work Journal

ROBERT J. TEARE, STEPHEN M. MARSON AND MICHAEL L. STRATIL

in publishing this article. We fear that the article, if taken seriously, will fuel an inflamed but misdirected debate over the certification process in social work.

*Robert J. Teare, Ph.D.
Tuscaloosa, Alabama*

*Stephen M. Marson, Ph.D., ACSW
Michael L. Stratil, Ph.D.
Pembroke, North Carolina*