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Journal of Progressive Human Services

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Letters to the Editor Regarding NASW Press Censorship Issue

Dear Dr. Leighninger,

As the co-editor of a human services journal, a social work academic and a social worker of many years, I was shocked when I learned about Dr. James Midgley's disturbing experiences after submitting an invited guest editorial on international social work to the journal *Social Work*. The specifics of what ensued are recounted in your discussion, so I will not repeat them here. I do, however, want to raise my voice in protest of how Dr. Midgley's editorial was treated by the National Association of Social Work (NASW), the publisher of *Social Work*.

There are several aspects to these events which are particularly disturbing. One is that a thoughtful and well reasoned critique of foreign policy associated with neoconservative members of the Bush administration would be seen as so threatening by NASW that the names of many of these individuals would have been deleted following their administrative review. Another is that this administrative review and alteration took place without consultation with *Social Work's* editor or with the author. Moreover, while editorial and peer review of scholarly professional journals is standard procedure, administrative review by professional associations such as ours should not be. The fears behind NASW's political censorship can only be imagined. NASW has engaged in political advocacy and critique in the past, so this decision is both confusing and extremely unsettling.

As noted, Dr. Midgley withdrew his editorial from *Social*

Work after NASW refused to reinstate the deleted names. It is important that Dr. Midgley's original editorial is being printed in full by *Sociology and Social Welfare*, along with protests about its treatment by NASW. A forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Progressive Human Services* (JPHS) will also include a narrative by Dr. Midgley, detailing this experience and calling to the profession to scrutinize and debate just what it means by advocacy and the promotion of social justice.

Sincerely,
Marcia B. Cohen
Journal of Progressive Human Services

Dear Dr. Leighninger,

I have been asked, as the editor of a journal and a member of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) to comment on the situation relating to Dr. Jim Midgley's manuscript. I approach this state of affairs from a belief in the NASW Code of Ethics, particularly the role of advocacy that is stated there (NASW, 1999).

Advocacy for social justice is one of the key aspects of the profession of social work and one that sets it apart from other helping professions. The NASW Code of Ethics mentions the need for social workers to conduct advocacy to promote social justice many times and in different ways (NASW, 1999). Part of the goal of NASW is stated on its web site as "to advance sound social policies" (NASW, n.d.) which, at its core, must be considered a form of advocacy.

Advocacy, while it means many things, certainly means being able to observe what is going on and to report to an audience what one has observed, as well as making one or more recommendations for what the audience should do. This can be as complex as developing a plan to improve social services, testifying at a legislative hearing and announcing the conclusions at a press conference. Or it may be as simple as talking to colleagues, trying to sway their votes on Election Day.

For academics, advocacy may involve more finely developed research reports, closely reasoned arguments based on a knowledge of history and current events, or even using classes to teach others how to conduct advocacy. Many times, academics, such as myself and Dr. Midgley, write with the hope that our work will be published in the best journals in the social work field, such as *Social Work*, the largest circulation social work journal in the world. *Social Work* has a low acceptance rate, and this, combined with the large circulation, means that any article seeing the light of day in this journal has a good chance of being read and thus being influential.

What one says in a *Social Work* article has a better chance of being used in an effective advocacy effort—that is, that article can be used to share observations and to make recommendations for what social workers across the country

should do. Therefore, it seems incumbent upon the NASW Press, as part of the larger NASW enterprise, to support efforts to report accurately what is being done that is seen as counter to the social justice aims of the profession. Accurately reporting what is going on must necessarily mean that the names of the architects and perpetrators of a social policy disaster should be mentioned.

As long as there are empirical grounds to support such an argument, I believe Dr. Midgley should be able to name the names and try to get their game to end.

But wait, one might say, organizations such as NASW must be careful to stay clear of the Internal Revenue Service, which enforces the rules and law regarding advocacy by nonprofits. If the main journal of the organization tries to take a stand against a certain leader or political party, won't this potentially bring forth the enforcement division of the IRS, which can revoke any nonprofit status the organization may have?

If this is a valid concern, then the NASW Press may have an obligation to protect the overall organization and remove offending comments from a manuscript. But there is little reason for the press staff to believe such a concern is valid.

First, NASW is not a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, so the need to be careful about advocacy is extremely limited. Second, among the fine print of *Social Work's* page of information about the NASW Press, a disclaimer is clearly stated: "Opinions expressed in the journal are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of NASW" (NASW Press, 2005, p. 194). Finally, the NASW Press promotes itself as delivering "professional information to more than 250,000 readers through its scholarly journals, books, and reference works" (NASW Press, 2006). What could be more "professional" information than the names of people who helped develop policies with documented negative impacts on vulnerable populations?

In conclusion, if NASW considers itself an organization that demands advocacy from its members, NASW and its related organization, NASW Press, should support the advocacy that emerges, so long as it is well-grounded in facts and falls within other professional parameters. It appears that what has happened to Dr. Midgley's manuscript is an example where diffusion of professional research and advocacy has been

lessened for invalid reasons. As a result, NASW members have been needlessly deprived of information that would help them in fulfilling their professional responsibilities.

Let us hope that this is an isolated case and one that is not repeated. It certainly is an issue that social workers should be aware of and provided an opportunity to voice their opinion regarding. The Chair of the NASW Publications Committee is Dr. Barbara White, Dean, School of Social Work, 1 University Station D3500, University of Texas, Austin, TX 78712-0358. I encourage readers to engage in some advocacy of their own.

Sincerely,
Richard Hoefler, Ph.D.
NASW Member and
Editor, *Journal of Policy Practice*

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Dear Dr. Leighninger,

I do not understand why Professor James Midgley's guest editorial was not allowed to be published in the journal *Social Work*. First, it was a guest editorial, and NASW could have printed in the journal that it disassociated itself from Professor Midgley's views.

Second it was not clear to me as to who actually made the decision not to publish the editorial? More importantly, was the leadership of NASW involved, e.g., the publications committee in consultation with the editor of *Social Work* and the author? What was the process in making the decision? If there was no such process, was there censorship by the NASW management rather than by the social work leadership?

Third, Professor Midgley provides an important message for international social workers regarding the issue of unipolarism versus international cooperation and reciprocity.

Fourth, if the editorial was not published due to the fear of offending the government, I have these questions: Is the current management of NASW consistent with the ethical and human rights notions of social workers around the world who are advised to speak out about challenges to human rights? Is NASW maintaining a leadership role pertaining to human rights, or is it reactive to whatever the current views of the government might be?

Tony Tripodi
Moses Visiting Professor
Hunter College School of Social Work
Dean and Professor Emeritus, Ohio State University
Former Editor of *Social Work Research*
Former Co-editor of *Journal of Social Work Research and
Evaluation: An International Publication*
Editor of *Pocket Guides to Social Work Research Methods*,
Oxford University Press

Dear Dr. Leighninger,

Among the greatest anxieties of those concerned with the erosion of civil liberties under the present administration has been censorship. Under the guise of protecting the populace from terrorists, this administration has used its influence to pass new legislation and rules, reconstitute regulatory commissions and engage in various forms of retribution (such as tax audits) against those who would criticize their actions and positions. Mass media outlets under the ownership of mega-corporations have tended to toe the party line to the point that some so-called "news" programs seem more like spokespersons for the administration than neutral reporters.

Although less well known, this administration's policies have also had a restrictive impact on academic practices. In the education field, several scholars have expressed their concern over the conservative, narrow view of scientific legitimacy promulgated in regulations and laws such as the "No Child Left Behind" legislation. This climate of "methodological fundamentalism" is viewed by some as a reaction to recent approaches (e.g., queer studies, feminist research) whose inquiry practices are openly value-based and critical of current policies.

Together, these developments have produced an environment in which the free expression of ideas has become risky. Yet, if academic journals do not resist such tendencies, they can have a chilling impact on the integrity and legitimacy of such publications. Perhaps most chilling is when, even in the absence of specific regulations, journals begin to exercise censorship of information they believe might be offensive to the administration. The exercise of such forms of censorship is reminiscent of Foucault's "disciplinary power" in which people become their own overseers. If our professional journals, and in particular social work journals, begin to operate in this fashion, true academic discourse eventually may cease to exist. Yes, it takes courage to print information that may not sit well with those in power and to possibly incur their attempts

at “discipline.” But alternatively, if we become domesticated in this fashion can we still call this the social work profession?

Stanley L. Witkin
Former Editor-in-Chief, *Social Work*

Dear Dr. Leighninger,

The National Association of Social Workers is unique among professional social work associations. As a 501(c)(6) tax exempt organization, in which are housed a Political Action Committee (PAC) and a government relations program with registered lobbyists, NASW has some restrictions and regulations regarding our combined activities, including our publications, that other groups don't have. While we do encourage a free exchange of ideas, we do so with certain obligations. This has very rarely posed a problem for NASW. Additionally, like any corporation, we always reserve the right to review the content of publications, reports, or correspondence and to request modification if we feel it could have an adverse legal effect.

In the instance of Dr. Midgley's editorial, the issue centered around requirements regarding reporting of the association's government relations and PAC activities. After deliberation, we asked Dr. Midgley to make very slight modifications to his editorial, primarily removing the names of government officials. We felt that request was modest and that doing so would not diminish his editorial, but would allow us to stay within the standards and regulations we follow.

Dr. Midgley strenuously objected to the request, and indicated that he would publish his editorial elsewhere if we required any changes. He also contacted several members of our Board of Directors and asked them to intercede on his behalf. We held up publication of the journal until our national Board of Directors met. As requested, the board discussed the situation and concurred with the decision to ask Dr. Midgley to make the necessary modifications. Dr. Midgley withdrew his editorial.

I do feel compelled to say that I believe this issue has been misconstrued. The notion that NASW is reluctant "to take on the administration" or "to stand up to the right" is simply uninformed. We do it every day through our advocacy, through our lobbying, and through our PAC work and grassroots organizing -- but we do it in appropriate ways and within legal and regulatory requirements. With minor changes, we were

ready to publish Dr. Midgley's guest editorial. We're sorry that couldn't happen.

Elizabeth J. Clark

Executive Director, National Association of Social Workers