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Letters to the Editor

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Letters to the Editor

Authors

James Midgley, Harris Chaiklin, Wilma Peebles-Wilkins, Jeanne Marsh, Michael Sherraden, Howard Karger, Cheryl A. Hyde, and David Stoesz

Letters to the Editor

Dear Dr. Leighninger,

Thank you for kindly inviting me to comment on Dr. Betsy Clark's letter which was published in the December issue of the *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*. In her letter, Betsy explains her position on the affair of the guest editorial. I have told Betsy that I understand the challenges of her job and did not wish to put additional pressures on her. I also understand the wider political pressures facing NASW and do not deny that caution needs to be exercised when material containing politically risky content is reviewed for publication in NASW journals. However, we have an honest difference of opinion about the procedures that should be followed when deciding on the inclusion of politically risky content. I respectfully disagree with her position, and the existing policy, and have told her so.

I was not intending to respond to Betsy's letter but it unfortunately contains factually incorrect statements which I cannot let pass. Betsy writes that, "After deliberation, we asked Dr. Midgley to make very slight modifications to his editorial, primarily removing the names of government officials." She goes on to say, "Dr. Midgley strenuously objected to the request, and indicated that he would publish his editorial elsewhere if we required any changes."

I am sorry that Betsy's memory is clouded on this issue. The fact is that I was never asked to make any changes or given any opportunity to discuss the issue or to reach a compromise. The first communication I had from NASW about the problem came out of the blue in an e-mail from a NASW staffer, Ms. Schandale Kornegay on May 3rd, 2006, who informed me that the inclusion of the names of certain neoconservative

intellectuals and government officials in my guest editorial had been reviewed by the association's leadership and that it had been decided that the editorial will run without the names and this is a final decision. It was clear that there was to be no discussion on the matter and that I would be afforded no opportunity to compromise. I had no choice except to withdraw permission for NASW to publish the editorial. However, I immediately wrote to Betsy and the NASW President, Elvira de Silva hoping more fully to debate the issue but neither responded. However, I did receive a letter of apology from Jorge Delva, the editor of *Social Work* who wrote to me after a meeting of the journal's editorial board. In his letter he expressed regret that I was not consulted on the matter. After repeated efforts to communicate with Betsy, I also received a generous apology from her for the lack of consultation. Both letters confirm that I was not consulted or given an opportunity to discuss the NASW leadership's concerns.

It is unfortunate that I am being characterized as a pig-headed author who refused to agree to a minor copy change. This is simply not correct! I should also point out that I never asked anyone to intercede on my behalf. Instead, I was and still am committed to advocating for an open the debate on the issues arising from the disagreement over the guest editorial. As a loyal NASW member and recipient of several NASW awards (and I may add, co-editor of three books published by NASW Press), I believe the issue of how politically risky content in NASW publications should be adjudicated deserves wider discussion among NASW's membership. In compliance with the Code of Ethics, I also believe we have a responsibility to engage in advocacy and accordingly, I approached colleagues in leadership positions in NASW in an attempt to have the issue debated by the Board. Although they were able to have the issue discussed, no decision was taken and, as I understand it, the procedures used to review material submitted for publication in NASW journals were not modified.

Although I gave up on the hope that the NASW leadership could be persuaded to change its decision on the guest editorial, I have not given up on my efforts to have an open debate on the policies and procedures currently used to review politically risky content. In view of the outcome of the 2006 Congressional

election, it now seems somewhat strange that we should even be discussing the issue of censorship. Clearly, the climate of fear that the Bush administration created in earlier years has dissipated and I doubt whether my guest editorial would have been rejected had it been submitted later this year. However, this is not the real issue. The real issue is whether professional associations should censor politically risky material and, if so, how this should be done.

It is, in my view, unacceptable that material accepted for publication after due editorial and peer review should be subjected to administrative and legal review without any consultation with editors, editorial boards or authors. I believe that this issue should be widely discussed, particularly by members who write for NASW. If the issue is not resolved, there is a risk that they may in the future decline to submit material to NASW out of concern that their work may be subjected administrative and legal review without editorial or peer oversight and full consultation with authors. Even worse, there is a risk that future articles published in NASW journals may be viewed as having passed the scrutiny of NASW censors and that their content is politically safe and unthreatening to the interests of those who hold political power. If this happens, few critical social work scholars will want to have their work published in NASW journals.

If the issues arising out of NASW's decision to censor my innocuous guest editorial, and the association's existing review policy as outlined by Betsy Clark are scrutinized, debated and resolved in a satisfactory way, our disagreement will have been worth it.

James Midgley
School of Social Welfare
University of California, Berkeley

Dear Dr. Leighninger,

When I was asked to comment on the exchange between Jim Midgley and Betsy Clark the first thing I did was to look up the definition of politics and check the law. Among the many meanings of politics the most pertinent is that it is, "the art or science concerned with guiding or influencing governmental policy" (Merriam, 2006). In the relevant section in the Internal Revenue Code under 501 (c) it says, " ... an IRC 501(c)(4), IRC 501(c)(5), or IRC 501(c)(6) organization may conduct political intervention activities and may establish and control a separate segregated fund to conduct exempt functions under IRC 527, so long as political intervention is not its primary activity" (IRC 501 (c), 2006). IRC 527 refers specifically to political organizations.

The dictionary definition contains two different implications about politics. One is active. In the practice of politics there is only art. The other is passive. The only science of politics is to study it. This leads to interpretations of the law which appear contradictory. Open Secrets organization says that 501 (c) (6) organizations "... are not supposed to engage in any political activities, though some voter registration activities are permitted" (Open, 2006). While the ban is proclaimed as total there is also a very active exception identified.

The point of all this parsing of politics and the law is to make clear that what the Code is talking about is active intervention in the political process. The Code allows some latitude but doesn't indicate how much. Reading the editorial against this standard I did not find a hint of any political activity. The editorial is a rather abstract academic policy analysis. That is, it is passive science with no indication that Midgley is urging anyone to do anything related to engaging in a political process. There is a global warning that social workers should guard against the dangers of unipolarism but this, too, is not attached to any behavior recommendations. *Policy analysis is not political activity under the law.*

I wondered how consistent NASW was in forbidding even a hint of political activity in *Social Work*. It did not take long to find an exception. Steen (2006), in an April 2006 editorial whose title has the phrase "a call to action" says, "The Bush

Administration has sought to weaken the definition of torture and limit the application of torture prohibitions to narrow circumstances" (2006, p. 102). This is political analysis at a level which is objected to in Midgley's editorial. The editorial goes further and urges social workers to join Amnesty International and the American Civil Liberties Union. NASW professes a desire to get along better with Republicans. To sanction an editorial which attacks the president and urges members to join groups that the administration generally disagrees with is, on its face, political action. Just examine the PACE endorsements in the last election to put to rest the idea that NASW has any intention of forming alliances with Republicans.

In this dispute, the who said what's and when's are irrelevant. There is a larger issue. This is an example of a problem that has become endemic in our society—the lack of trust. That such a loyal member of the politically correct establishment as Jim Midgley became a victim may surprise him and others, but not me. His sin was to write a direct and straightforward analysis of how he viewed our present situation. He did not use the language of politics. Orwell defined it thusly, "Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties...— is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" (1961, p. 367). Perhaps if he had used more "political" language he would have fared better.

The lack of trust permeates all levels in our society. This starts at the top. People have little confidence in the presidency or congress. Politics has come to revolve more around personality than issues. Meacham (2006), in a review of James McGregor Burns book on presidential politics, says that one of his central arguments is that, "... the proliferation of presidential campaigns centered on the candidate, not on a larger party has turned politicians into free agents more interested in their own survival on election day than they are in governing once they are in office" (2006, p. 3).

NASW reflects a special case of this emphasis on personality. The organization is not run by people embedded in their craft. It is substantially manned by technical specialists interested mainly in organizational maintenance. Strangely, the leadership is political to the core. During the 1930s in the

midst of a depression and with labor union strength at a low ebb, John L. Lewis, a Republican, helped create a Congress of Industrial Organizations that won strikes and forged strong unions. One of the rules of the CIO was that no one could take on a leadership role if they did not start out as a worker. As time went on, unions changed these rules and hired specialists without factory work experience. They also became more political. I wonder if their current weakness comes from abandoning first principles.

The people who run NASW cannot distinguish between political analysis, a legitimate function, and political activity, a forbidden function. Mechanic (2006) has noted that when legislators pass laws to solve problems and bureaucrats write regulations to interpret them, there is a high likelihood of unintended consequences. He says that new malpractice regulations have forced doctors into expensive defensive medicine, mental health laws make mental institutions release patients inappropriately, and protection of human subjects laws have made it difficult for people to participate in research. Editorial interference can be added to this list. In the recent past, the editors of such distinguished journals as *The Journal of the American Medical Association* and *The New England Journal of Medicine* have resigned over conflicts dealing with their editorial independence. Midgley's experience is not unique. Even though this conflict arose without the editor's knowledge, there is no evidence concerning what he intends to do.

Midgley's answer to all of this is to say that NASW is insular. He proposes to open things up for debate. This is a gentlemanly and academic response. It will take more than discussion to correct this problem. Once battle lines are drawn around issues such as this one, it is seldom that one side or the other changes in the short run. NASW is, alas, not insular but very much a part of the institutions that have brought this society to lose faith in public and private institutions. To change this something more is needed—a new politics.

Midgley was judged by people who have little idea of how policy analysts think and write. They have a lawyer's mentality that avoids even possible exceptions. In this instance, they saw something that wasn't there. There is a dearth of NASW leadership that knows how to inspire people and bring about

change. We face devastating problems in our areas of professional expertise. For example, extensive damage has been done to children and their families because of major deprofessionalization and withdrawal of resources for child welfare. Little effective action is visible on these fronts. Anyone who ever heard it will not forget John L. Lewis, during one of his monumental battles with management and the government, summoning up Shakespeare and saying, "A plague on both your houses."

Sincerely,
Harris Chaiklin, Ph.D.
Professor, *emeritus*
University of Maryland
School of Social Work
Baltimore, Maryland

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Dear Dr. Leighninger,

Given the political agenda and lobbying program of NASW, I certainly respect NASW's need to protect organizational interests. However, censorship seems to go against the grain of journalism. It may well be that NASW needs to consider an organizational disclaimer for publications which do not represent the views of NASW and are the sole views of the authors who are entitled to express opposing views.

Sincerely,
Wilma Peebles-Wilkins
Dean Emerita, Boston University
Former Editor, *NASW Children and Schools*

Dear Dr. Leighninger,

The censoring that went on in the case of Jim Midgley is very consistent with the interference I received from the Publisher when I was Editor of *Social Work*. In response, I encouraged the Executive Director to (1) hire professionals to run the Press, (2) have consultants come in to advise re: direction, or (3) outsource the Press altogether. I continue to think this would be a good idea.

Sincerely,
Jeanne Marsh
Former Editor
Social Work

Dear Dr. Leighninger,

At the moment I happen to be in China, where scholars do not always report data or say what they think about particular policies, key people, or statements by the government. Chinese scholars adapt to these unfreedoms; they self-censor and do as well as they can. But no scholar thinks this is ideal. I do not point this out to criticize China, which has a very different history from America and is gradually opening up. The question I have for the editors of *Social Work* is whether this kind of restricted discourse is something they are aspiring to? The editorial by Jim Midgley is naming actual publications, ideas, initiatives, public intellectuals, and major policy makers. What is the problem here? If we cannot talk openly about public matters, publications, and key people, it will be more difficult to come to clear understandings, build knowledge, and make good decisions as a nation. Democracy depends on transparency and open discourse for its very survival.

I cannot help but recall earlier periods in the United States when social reformers like Ida B. Wells and Jane Addams took on major corporate and political interests in promoting rights, community development, peace, and internationalism. No weak-kneed self-censorship from these ladies. Is it time for NASW to take stock of its foundations and reset its bearing?

Sincerely,
Michael Sherraden
Editor
Social Development Issues

Dear Dr. Leighninger,

From 1937 to 1942, a long-forgotten magazine called *Social Work Today* (no relation to the current *Social Work Today*) was publishing articles on unionization, foreign policy, race and class. At its height it had about 6,000 subscribers and was well-respected by social work notables such as Bertha Reynolds, Mary van Kleeck, Grace Marcus, Grace Coyle, Mary Simkhovitch and others. Contributors to the magazine included luminaries like Frances Perkins, Roger Baldwin, John L. Lewis and A. Philip Randolph. A left-wing magazine, *Social Work Today* was closely allied with the nascent social work union movement of the 1930s. When the magazine ceased publication in 1942, Bertha Reynolds noted that "with the death of *Social Work Today* a light has gone out of social work."

Two principals in *Social Work Today* were Jacob Fisher and George Wolfe, who ended up being harassed and blacklisted by the McCarthyites in the early 1950s. At the time, NASW (established in 1955) and its predecessor the American Association of Social Workers said and did nothing. Social work professional organizations were conspicuous by their silence. Presumably, Fisher and Wolfe were not the only social workers who were victims of the McCarthy era. In the face of repression, these professional organizations retreated into arcane discussions about casework and group work, and preoccupied themselves with esoteric but heated debates around the functional versus the diagnostic schools of therapy. In fact, social work organizations did not raise their heads until the relative safety of the 1960s. When safe, they became vociferous advocates for the poor, the downtrodden, and the disenfranchised. In short, being fearful of including the names of government officials in Midgley's editorial is hardly an historical precedent; it reflects a long-standing commitment to sitting out the heat.

If dissidents were rounded up in concentration camps, social work organizations would lobby to make sure they had enough blankets. Perhaps this is behind Elizabeth Clark's statement that "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.” I suppose NASW would also lobby for blankets in “appropriate ways and within legal requirements.”

Character—or the lack thereof—shines through in adversity. It’s easy to be tough in a liberal democratic milieu that respects civil liberties; it takes much more courage to stand up to a paranoid right-wing administration composed of zealots like G. W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Karl Rove and John Bolton, who get nourishment from ideologues like William Kristol and Gary Schmitt.

Maybe now that the Democrats control both Houses, NASW will feel safe and come out from under their blankets to give a little squeal. If a Democratic president is elected in 2008 they might even muster up the courage to roar, at least until the next hostile administration takes power. In the end, one can only hope that NASW finds the gumption to forego the censor’s ink. Long live courage!

Sincerely,
Howard Karger
Professor
Graduate College of Social Work
University of Houston

Dear Dr. Leighninger,

In Lewis Carroll’s classic – *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, our heroine begins her journey by falling down a rabbit hole. Upon landing, Alice explores a most peculiar world where up is down, large is small, crazy tea parties are arranged, a smiling cat fades away, and a Queen commands “Off with her head!” There have been many interpretations of Lewis Carroll’s work, and one that I have come to appreciate is that this is really a cautionary tale about the importance of ideas (even nonsensical ones), the need to recognize differing views, and the

necessity of debate and discourse. Attempts to squelch any of the processes, as the Queen tries to do to Alice, is antithetical to human growth and understanding. We are enriched by the lively exchange of perspectives, thoughts and opinions.

So I was saddened, and exasperated, to hear of what had transpired between Jim Midgely and the staff at NASW Press. As I understand the situation, Jim submitted an Editorial—which is, by definition, an *opinion* piece. Personally, I thought the editorial was, given the topic, quite measured and balanced (indeed, if I had any criticism, I thought Jim was too fair—but that’s for another letter). Yet Jim apparently made the “mistake” of naming some policy makers; all well-known for their design and endorsement of particular stances. They are public figures and if one follows their positions, it is quite apparent that they are proud of their work. Jim wasn’t stating anything new; he wasn’t “outing” some closet intellectuals. Rather, he was doing what any responsible educator ought to do—he was making a connection between the responsibilities that social workers have, given our endorsement of social justice, and some well-known foreign policy positions. In turn, readers are free to disagree with Jim. And I believe that Jim would welcome such a debate, knowing that he and anyone else who participated with an open mind would probably learn something new and benefit from the exchange.

Censorship is the publishing industry’s version of “off with her head.” And with logic reminiscent of the conversation found at the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party, Betsy Clark has attempted to explain it away by suggesting that Jim (and others) don’t really comprehend all the complexities of the situation, and besides, it wasn’t THAT bad because it was just some minor changes and by the way, NASW already does some advocacy. Well, here’s what I do understand: what NASW Press staff did was wrong. Jim’s Editorial should not have been altered. “Minor” changes do matter, if for no other reason than it makes it easier to trim away greater pieces of information in the future. Lobbying for issues doesn’t provide you with the capital to then engage in censorship.

Some may be saying that I, and others, are making a big deal out of nothing. To them, I would say that integrity is eroded through seemingly small incidents such as this, until

eventually no one is allowed to express an opinion. If, as social workers, we truly embrace justice and dignity, then we also need to preserve forums in which varying views can be presented. That's all Jim was doing. He was trying to get us to think.

Sincerely,
Cheryl A. Hyde
Temple University
Past Editor, *Journal of Progressive Human Services*
Editorial board member of 5 social work and
social science journals

Dear Dr. Leighninger:

Absurd as NASW's abstemiousness with respect to Jim Midgley's critique of neoconservatism in international development, the incident represents little more than a hypocritical hiccup compared to the corruption, ineptitude, and mediocrity that suffuses *Social Work's* editorial practices. These are serious accusations, to be sure; but, the Midgley incident reveals mischief of a decidedly more malignant nature: chronic editorial failure.

Corruption: Half of the October 2000 issue of *Social Work* featured articles that were solicited by the then-Editor-in-Chief and could not have been vetted according to professional editorial standards. Of the four invited articles, each of which rhapsodized about postmodernism, three were received on May 4, 2000 and accepted on May 9, 2000; the fourth was received May 8, 2000 and accepted May 9, 2000. The remaining articles in the issue were peer-reviewed, typically received sometime in 1998 and accepted for publication in 1999. The Editor-in-Chief, in other words, used *Social Work* as his own ideological billboard, rushing essays he favored into print while bumping other articles in line for publication, manuscripts which had been vetted through the normal peer-review process. This misuse of

editorial policy exacerbated *Social Work's* backlog which provoked the ire of one reader who complained that the eleven articles in a subsequent issue of the journal averaged 35.3 months in gestation, "virtually three years!"¹ In response, the new Editor-in-Chief, promised "expanded issues" to reduce the backlog.²

Ineptitude: And what has been *Social Work's* promise to improve its efficiency in distributing articles to the professional community? In 1986 I conducted a survey of ten professional journals to determine the time from submission to acceptance/rejection as well as the period from acceptance to publication. On both factors, *Social Work* ranked last, requiring 24 months, averaging twice as long as other journals, to process manuscripts. The most timely journal was the *American Bar Association Journal* which conducted the entire process in 4.5 months; closer to health and human services, the *American Journal of Nursing* required 15 months, while the *American Journal of Public Health* only 8 months.³ By contrast, the April 2004 issue of *Social Work* required 40.8 months, or 3.4 years, to move an article from submission to publication. Even if the article had been accepted, the April 2004 issue of *Social Work* exceeded the previous 24 month period for publication: the lapse between acceptance and publication was 27.7 months, or 2.3 years. For the July 2006 issue, the period from submission to publication was reduced to 37 months, still longer than that of two decades earlier. During this time frame the advent of electronic technology would be expected to abbreviate, not increase, the period from submission to publication. Compared to other professions which have accelerated the distribution of information to their professional communities through electronic publishing, *Social Work* continues to resemble a time capsule.

Mediocrity: John Pardeck and Roland Meinert's analysis of *Social Work's* editorial board and consulting editors raised warning flags about the scholarship of the journal's editors. Between 1990 and 1995, half of the editorial board and 19.1 percent of the consulting editors had not published a single article recorded in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI).⁴ A recent analysis reveals a similar pattern. Over the entire span of their careers, half of the members of the editorial committee

of *Social Work* have published four or fewer articles, as had one-third of the journal's consulting editors. The weak scholarship of so many of the editors of the profession's flagship journal contradicts *Social Work's* commitment to building an optimal knowledge base for the profession. If scholarly achievement is not the basis for editorial appointment, then what is? "It is reasonable to assume that an old boy and old girl professional acquaintance influence might be involved in the selection process,"⁵ suspected Pardeck and Meinert.

Thus, it is not so surprising that Jim Midgley, a scholar of international repute, would have an invited article subject to the vagaries of what passes as editorial practice at *Social Work*. Years ago I decided to boycott *Social Work* because of experiences with such editorial mismanagement; Midgley's shabby treatment indicates that little has changed. Instead of ingratiating the Right, would that NASW's editors and board elected to clean-house and upgrade *Social Work* so that it actually delivers to social workers what they deserve: the best knowledge, evaluated by the best scholars, in the most expedient manner possible.

Sincerely,

David Stoesz, Ph.D.

Professor, Virginia Commonwealth University

Executive Director, policyAmerica

(Endnotes)

1 Bob Sontag, "Article Backlog," *Social Work*, 49, 1 (January 2004): 141.

2 Jeanne Marsh, response to Sontag, *Social Work*, 49, 1 (January 2004): 141.

3 David Stoesz, "Time Capsule," *Social Work*, 31, 6 (November-December 1986): 480-81.

4 John Pardeck and Roland Meinert, "Scholarly Achievements of the *Social Work* Editorial Board and Consulting Editors," *Research on Social Work Practice*, 19, 1 (January 1999): 88.

5 Pardeck and Meinert, p. 90.

