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Letters to the Editor

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The Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics

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Letters to the Editor

Dear Dr. Leighninger,

I have had a subscription to *Social Work* since 1975 when I first joined NASW. Since that time, I have to admit that I have probably read less than 1% of the editorials published within that journal. When I unsystematically poll other subscribers, I discover that most people do not read the editorials. So, if Midgley's editorial appeared within *Social Work* with or without "naming the names," I doubt that most people would have read it. I would not have read it. Perhaps telling social workers that they are not permitted to read something is the best way to get them to read. The decision of Elizabeth Clark and the NASW staff to censor Midgley's editorial was the catalyst for an unprecedented number of people reading material that would normally go unread. Perhaps this was an unintentional benefit.

The editorial board of *Social Work* and the Executive Director of NASW has a fiduciary responsibility to protect NASW from law suits and other hazardous responses. This fiduciary responsibility includes self-censoring. Although it appears like micro management, Clark has every right and duty to censor material that could harm the organization. For example, I was invited to write a review of the CD version of *The Encyclopedia of Social Work* [see: *Social Work*, 1997. 42(2), 210-211]. Part of the review included experimenting with various social workers (3 or 4) and a librarian on this "new technology." I went to the trouble to get signed release/consent forms. Nevertheless, *Social Work* required me to remove all names from my manuscript. I thought it was a mistake to fail to give credit. Because of my own experience, I suspect that eliminating names is a common practice. Thus, removing the names from Midgley's editorial is, in fact, consistent with past editorial procedures.

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Yet – like many others, I don't like it.

My simple review was not a political statement, while Midgley's editorial was. The censorship of Midgley's editorial has generated considerable anger among a number of social work faculty. In fact, at least two of my most respected colleagues are planning to drop their membership to NASW as a direct result of the censoring of Midgley's editorial. This action is a mistake! Like it or not and whether you're a member or not, NASW represents all social workers in the U.S. In my mind's eye, the censorship of Midgley's editorial should become the catalyst for more people to join NASW. Thus, if you don't like censorship and you want NASW to take greater political risks, you need to be a member of NASW and work to change its policies, and if necessary, its leadership.

Sincerely,

Stephen M. Marson, Ph.D. ACSW

Senior Editor, *The Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*

Dear Dr. Leighninger:

As someone in the perhaps unique position of serving as an editor for both *The Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* and *Social Work*, I greatly appreciate that you and this journal have exposed the issue of censorship at NASW by airing the linen pertaining to the unilateral altering of Jim Midgley's guest editorial originally scheduled for publication in *Social Work* last year. The correspondence published about this occurrence, coupled with the thoughtful letters concerning censorship generally and the history of NASW's actions in this regard more specifically, have served an important purpose: providing an opportunity to examine whether the profession of social work when it comes to openly discussing ideas with political (even only tangentially political) content.

My situation is unique in yet another way: I am currently on the Editorial Board of *Social Work* and attended my

first meeting in that capacity last May when Jorge Delva, *Social Work's* Editor-in-Chief, brought the controversy to our attention. Several members of the Board and I were deeply concerned when we learned about the decision made by Betsy Clark and NASW's publisher to strike the names of a few prominent public figures either in or close to the Bush administration. Indeed, the Board spent most of our annual meeting on this matter, including having an unscheduled meeting with NASW's attorney. My position during this discussion (and I was joined by several others) was emphatically to oppose all censorship; there were one or two who voiced concern that the association includes members who are politically conservative, and that efforts must be made not to drive them away.

What clearly emerged—in addition to the publisher's stance of obdurate caution—was that there were no procedures in place to resolve disagreements or disputes between the Editor and the organization or its publisher. We resolved to have procedures developed and suggested that a "special resolution committee" include members of the Editorial Board, the Editor-in-Chief, the author of the "controversial" submission as well as various members of NASW's leadership and press. The resolution, which circulated through email, was made to NASW's Publications Committee whose Chair, Barbara White, was present at the *Social Work* Board meeting in May.

Despite the seeming urgency to create a policy and the embarrassment to NASW resulting from this controversy, it was not until the its annual meeting in December that the Publications Committee voted to recommend a process to resolve future disagreements. Essentially, as Dr. Delva has informed the Board, the recommendation is to have a process in place that includes the author(s), the Editor-in-Chief, NASW's Executive Director, and the publisher to discuss any concerns. Through this process, it is hoped that the parties will reach agreement or compromise. Dr. Delva has also informed Board members that peer reviewed articles will not be subject to reviews by NASW's executive or publisher and that it is only editorials that are of concern. He has also stated that the process is similar to those of the APHA and the APA. I have asked that this matter be placed on the agenda for the Board's next meeting, in May. I remain concerned that the door is still

open for censorship by NASW's Executive Director and/or publisher should an amicable resolution not be reached in situations of controversy.

I have been consistently aware of the hypocrisy inherent in NASW's censorship of Dr. Midgley's editorial: an organization whose Code of Ethics specifically calls on social workers to advocate for political and social change in order to enhance social justice silences a reputable scholar when he points to some who thwart it. I am reminded of John Ehrenreich's cogent analysis of the profession's history¹: when the political environment is open to social and economic change, social work follows and joins the chorus, but when the times are dominated by reactionary forces, social work retreats and focuses primarily on individuals' problems and methodologies to address them.

Needless to say, I have my own dilemma about whether to remain on *Social Work's* Board or to resign. Perhaps with the publication of this letter, others will make the decision for me.

Sincerely,
Marguerite G. Rosenthal, Ph.D
Professor, School of Social Work
Salem State College, MA

1. Ehrenreich, J. (1987). *The altruistic imagination: A history of social work and social policy in the United States*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.