

Editorial: Censorship at NASW?

by Diane S. Falk, Ph.D. Member, JSWVE Editorial Board

Twenty pages of the December 2006 issue of the *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* are devoted to the discussion of a controversy that arose after James Midgley, formerly Dean of the University of California at Berkeley School of Social Work and well-known authority on social development and international social work, was invited by Jorge Delva, the Editor of *Social Work*, to write a guest editorial. That editorial, "International Social Work, Globalization and the Challenge of a Unipolar World," was reviewed by NASW administrative staff who, in consultation with the NASW attorney, concluded that the names of governmental officials needed to be removed prior to publication. Dr. Midgley refused to do so and withdrew the editorial. Dr. Delva had not been consulted on this decision and protested, to no avail. Dr. Midgley then approached several members of the NASW National Board, asking them to intervene. The Board upheld the staff decision.

The *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* published Dr. Midgley's editorial in its entirety (2006). It also published an editorial by its editor, Robert D. Leighninger, Jr., and several letters to the editor from current and former editors of social work journals, including the former editor-in-chief of *Social Work*, Stanley L. Witkin. The final letter was from Elizabeth J. Clark (2006), NASW Executive Director. All of the current and former journal editors concurred that NASW erred in allowing administrative censorship of scholarly writing. Dr. Clark argued that, as a 501 (c) (6) tax-exempt organization, NASW is constrained to act "in appropriate ways and within legal and regulatory requirements" and therefore could not publish Dr. Midgley's editorial without removing certain names (2006).

The issue could be framed, as suggested by Dr. Clark, as one of protecting NASW from any difficulties that might arise as the result of lapses in meeting legal and regulatory guidelines. As a former member of the NASW Board of Directors, I have some understanding of the concerns of the Board. During my term on the NASW Board, I had an opportunity to gain some perspective on the challenges facing that organization. NASW has been sued a number of times, and each lawsuit has drained the resources of the organization. Avoiding future lawsuits is an important consideration. In addition, NASW has been attacked from both sides of the political spectrum for the positions it has taken on issues. When NASW advocates on behalf of oppressed groups, its

credibility with other groups suffers. In addition, NASW is continually in an uphill battle to gain recognition for the profession from a society that assigns low status to a human services field whose ranks are populated mainly by women. In order to advance the profession, NASW has undertaken a major public education campaign, the aim of which is to gain greater public acceptance and appreciation for the profession. From this vantage point, the decision is clear: assure that nothing is published that might lead to legal or regulatory problems.

There are other considerations, however. As a founding board member of the *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, I suggest that the issue be framed as an ethical dilemma. On the one hand, the *Code of Ethics* appears to lend support to the position taken by Dr. Clark and the NASW Board. "Social workers should be diligent stewards of the resources of their employing organizations, wisely conserving funds where appropriate..." [Standard 3.09 (g)]. Keeping NASW out of legal and regulatory trouble -- and thereby conserving funds and protecting the association from threats to its effectiveness in advancing the profession and advocating on behalf of clients -- is certainly one of the responsibilities of its executive director and board of directors. On the other hand, however, the *Code of Ethics* also states:

Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments. Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice (Standard 6.01).

...Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice. [Standard 6.04 (a)]

This is exactly what Dr. Midgley was doing in his editorial. This issue was also a predominant theme of social work's two international conferences last summer, where social workers from around the world gathered to consider, among other things, how our profession could address some of the negative aspects of global political and economic shifts.

It appears then that, in addition to freedom of speech issues, there is a compelling ethical reason to encourage social work scholars who have engaged in depth with complex political and economic issues to speak out freely to expose the ways that they believe social and economic

policies are eroding human rights and creating oppressive and destructive social conditions for a significant proportion of the world's population. To say that scholars can name policies but not name names is simply silly. Every informed social worker who would read a censored version of Dr. Midgley's editorial would know who was behind the policies being critiqued.

The vigorous critique of a society that has lost its moral compass is the most compelling choice for a social worker faced with the ethical dilemma described above. If we strive too hard to avoid vague possible problems with government regulators, we run the risk of becoming part of the problem instead of part of the solution. In a democracy such as ours, we need to allow for the full expression of diverse opinion. As John Stuart Mill (1859) said,

...the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.

Our profession, as well as our democracy, will be best served by vigorous public debates on issues of such importance.

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References

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