

# Editorial: Sex, sex, sex, that's all you think about!

Stephen M. Marson, Ph.D. Editor

After teaching undergraduate social work for 33 years, this will be my last semester. Although I don't have the space to reflect on trends found among social work students, I can reflect on a phenomenon that appears to be a recent trend. Within the last five years, social work students have been demanding concrete answers for ethical dilemmas. They want to be told that in all circumstances it is unethical to accept a gift from a client. For example, a student social worker who accepted a drawing from a child was guilt ridden. She accepted the drawing for fear of hurting the child's feelings but was distressed because she interpreted her action as a violation of the ethical code. To immediately relieve her anxiety, I told her I probably would have done the same thing. Among undergraduates, these kinds of conversations are becoming more and more common.

If I have time, I usually include a statement like: *There is only one unambiguous statement within the NASW Code of Ethics – no sex with clients and no justification.* (That's how I came up with the title of this editorial.) Every other standard within the *NASW Code* includes the word "should" and/or indicates that the ethical outcome rests solely on the shoulders of the practitioner. If ethical standards were clear cut, you would NOT need a college degree to be a social worker. Critical thinking skills are at the heart of ethical decision making. In the end, I'll usually refer the student to a particular article or book. If there is time, we will talk about it further. However, most of these conversations take place in the hallway!

For me, outdated concepts like "countertransference" proved to be helpful. Recently, I saw the term countertransference used in an adjudication document. A clinical social worker lost his license to practice because he had sex with a client. The adjudication board described the cause as "countertransference." At any rate, antiquated or not, the concept of countertransference seems to help BSW students deal with ethical dilemmas. In social work research courses, we have stopped offering systematic tools for assessing and identifying countertransference. A 1991 out-of-print book by Alter and Evens entitled *Evaluating Your Practice* offered a model and an example for assessing countertransference. BSW students who have used Alter and Evens' book seem to have a better handle on this type of decision-making.

In the end, tell me what you think. Send e-mail to [smarson@nc.rr.com](mailto:smarson@nc.rr.com) and let me know if you are seeing the same pattern among student social workers. It would be interesting to hear how field work supervisors handle the situation. Frankly and most curious for me, do people other than myself still use the concept of countertransference?