

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

*Standing Up for the Lives of Babies: An Ethical Imperative*

Thank you for this opportunity to reply to the letter published in your journal authored by [Dr. Erica Goldblatt Hyatt](#), which she submitted in reaction to my article titled *Aborting abortions: How you can reduce abortions in your community* (Thyer, 2019). She says I made multiple uninformed assumptions about the reasons why woman have abortions, and that my article stigmatized women and minority/underserved populations. In particular she took exception to my contention that for many women the decision to have an abortion is one of convenience. She says I did not rely on readily available peer-reviewed publications of widely disseminated statistics on abortion in the United States (citing none herself). I made it crystal clear that I accepted the need for abortions in many cases: "...women seeking an abortion do so because of pregnancy caused by rape or incest, or a have a legitimate medical condition that poses serious health risks" (Thyer, 2019, p. 95) and I stated many pro-life advocates agree that in such circumstances abortion is necessary and justified. I am among them. What I took issue with are the large proportion of abortions occurring because of the failure of men and women to engage in responsible birth control, stating that the taking of a human life via abortion is not justified in such circumstance.

Abortions for non-medical reasons do account the majority of these procedures. According to Biggs, Gould and Foster (2013), of 954 woman who obtained an abortion, 40% reported financial reasons, 36% reported timing issues, 31% reported partner-related reasons, and 20% the need to focus on other children. 81% of these women rated their health as good or very good. Only 6% of the women gave as a reason for having an abortion a concern for their own health, and only 5% said it was because of concern for the health of their fetus. Only 0.7% said they did not want adoption. An earlier study

conducted by researchers from the pro-choice Alan Guttmacher Institute surveyed 1900 woman about their reasons for abortion (Torres & Forrest, 1988). Of these women, 1% said they were victims of rape or incest, 7% said they had a health problem, and 13% said the fetus has possible health problem. "Three quarters said they decided to have an abortion because they were concerned about how a baby would change their life. About two-thirds said they could not afford to have a child now; half said they did not want to be a single parent or had relationship problems" (Torres & Forrest, 1988, p. 171). Clearly, as I said in my earlier paper, for most women their choice to have an abortion is because abortion is less inconvenient than carrying the baby to term. Facts are stubborn things.

Almost every reasonably sized community in the United States has one or more Crisis Pregnancy Centers which can provide pregnant woman financial help, assistance with obtaining medical care, child-rearing training, and adoption referrals. Some social work programs place student interns in these centers! Many adoption agencies are seeking newborns to be placed with adoptive families. There are viable alternatives for the woman with an unwanted pregnancy besides being having an abortion because they do not want to carry a baby to term or to parent a child. (Delahoyde & Hansen, 2006).

I note that the federal regulations pertaining to conducting research on human being includes separate guidelines for research involving fetuses and non-viable neonates ([https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/retrieveECFR?gp=&SID=83cd09e1c0f5c6937cd9d7513160fc3f&pitd=20180719&n=pt45.1.46&r=PART&ty=HTML#se45.1.46\\_1204](https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/retrieveECFR?gp=&SID=83cd09e1c0f5c6937cd9d7513160fc3f&pitd=20180719&n=pt45.1.46&r=PART&ty=HTML#se45.1.46_1204))

Given that this governmental document is titled *Basic HHS Policy for Protection of Human Research Subjects*, legally there is little doubt that fetuses are human beings. And as human beings fetuses are fully deserving of the protections social work has particularly paid to the least powerful members of our society. The victims of abortion, babies, are

disproportionately found among minorities of color, and of the poor. I admit to using harsh language. I referred to abortions of convenience as murder. A good many social workers agree with me. One study of social work students (Ely, Flaherty, Akers, & Noland, 2012) surveyed BSW, MSW and Ph.D. students at one large university regarding abortion attitudes. Of the small sample of 116 students, “nearly half of respondents said they would not refer a client for abortion services if this was requested by a client” (p. 39) and 26% said abortion is the equivalent of murder. Thirty-five percent agreed that a fetus should have the same rights as a person. Such pro-life individuals are a silenced voice in social work discourse. Woe betide the brave social worker who challenges the profession’s explicit pro-choice agenda. They deserve to be heard, as I should be, respectfully and without accusation of heinous acts such as encouraging the murder of abortion providers. This does nothing to advance discussion. As a pro-life social worker, I am equally against the death penalty and abhor the initiation of violence.

I invite inspection of the following quotations and see if the reader can guess who made these “outrageous” statements:

“While there are cases where even the law recognizes an abortion as justifiable if recommended by a physician, I assert that the hundreds of thousands of abortions performed in America each year are a disgrace to civilization.”

“Human society must protect its children—yes, but prenatal care is most essential! The child-to-be, as yet not called into being, has rights no less imperative.”

“Although abortion may be resorted to in order to save the life of the mother, the practice of it merely for limitation of offspring is dangerous and vicious.”

“we explained simply what contraception was; that abortion was the wrong way—no matter how early it was performed it was taking life; that contraception was the better way, the safer way—it took a little

time, a little trouble, but was well worth while in the long run, because life had not begun.”

These are harsh words indeed. Who dared utter them? Margaret Sanger, the racist and feminist icon of women’s reproductive rights early in the 20th century. These quotes can be found here: <https://www.redstate.com/ironchapman/2013/01/23/what-did-margaret-sanger-think-about-abortion/>. According to David Tell, who reviewed several of Sanger’s books:

She turned women seeking abortions away from her clinics: “I do not approve of abortion.” She called it “sordid,” “abhorrent,” “terrible,” “barbaric,” a “horror.” She called abortionists “blood-sucking men with MD after their names who perform operations for the price of so-and-so.” She called the results of abortion “an outrageous slaughter,” “infanticide,” “foeticide,” and “the killing of babies.” (also found in the above URL)

Ugly words indeed, making my modest article appear very mild. These issues are not simple but one-point Dr. Goldblatt Hyatt and I agree upon is the appropriateness of abortion is cases of rape, incest, threat to the physical health of the mother, or in the case of fetal anomaly. Dr. Goldblatt Hyatt as written compellingly, indeed movingly, about her personal experience with this and her counseling work with such woman (Goldblatt Hyatt, 2019a, 2019b). I know of no one, certainly not me, who advocates restrictions on abortion access in such instances.

Dr. Goldblatt Hyatt also criticized something I wrote in another paper (Rainford & Thyer, 2019) dealing with the issue of fetal pain. She claimed that fetuses do not feel pain. Another difficult fact for the pro-abortion camp is that neonatologists regularly treat fetuses for pain (Pierucci, 2020), including when fetuses are being operated on while in the womb. This is not being done for imaginary reasons. Older fetuses do indeed feel pain. And if the issue is uncertain in the eyes of some, is it not better to conservatively err on the side of assuming fetal pain is present?

I was heartened to see, prior to Dr. Goldblatt Hyatt's commentary, a letter from Harrell stating, in reference to my article: "I am so glad that different viewpoints were recognized. I think we need to do more of this within the social work profession so that those who hold a minority viewpoint can feel supported and free to voice their opinion." (Harrell, 2019, p. 4). Thank you, Katy Harrell.

Bruce A. Thyer

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**Subject:** Re: [EXT] ["BPD-L"] Impact Factor

Steve:

I agree with you and believe that the impact factor is being used as a false metric. Social work journals are particularly vulnerable here. I have great difficulty in getting an impact factor for the *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, which I edit. Indeed, I have had several knowledgeable people look for this and have been told that the impact factor is better suited to the sciences (and the factors are generally higher). Except for a few social work journals this factor is hard to find. I am afraid that the use of this metric encourages social work faculty to publish outside of social work - a very disturbing idea. Impact factors are likely used by P & T committees to compare people across disciplines, which is an unfair type of comparison because they tend to differ significantly. For example, in the sciences it is not uncommon to pay a significant fee if an article is published in a high impact factor journal. We don't do that in social work. There are other ways to determine the significance of a publication that are likely more valid. I am not sure that any method we have now would have a high reliability coefficient given the variation in the universities across the country. but I do think that external peer reviews are much superior to a single metric that gives a false sense of precision.

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**Subject:** RE: ["BPD-L"] Impact Factor

Steve, nice editorial, the last refuge of free speech these days is the journal editor's introduction to an issue! I enjoyed it immensely at Reflections.

Open Access journals are at a disadvantage in IF, as the reality of the wider distribution of their articles

isn't always apparent. Open Journal Systems has a measure of downloads. That is not clicks on the citation information (there is a message of that as well) but of opening a PDF of an actual article. That is an important measure. Sometimes they can be very high.

If I were making tenure decisions, I'd want to understand more about how people have cited your work. In the longer version of my resume, my vita, I actually discuss and except from the citations of my work in the Encyclopedia of Social Work (which by the way should count if substantive, and which makes available statistics upon request and of the most cited articles routinely) and in various journals. **How** people cite and use your work, not **how many** seems important, and not just citation in journals but as you say other measures of impact. I doubt the attached is an effective resume for a faculty position, you never know. It's not the number of publications but their quality and contribution, including theoretically, if you ask me! (:)

For instance, your posting may make your article go viral! (:) If you can show that the data you reported or the conceptual problems you solved have been read and used by others, that is a valuable claim by the candidate and metric for the evaluators. However, it could work against people doing important work in neglected and emerging areas, and that could work against those doing international work, work related to oppressed and vulnerable populations, etc.

But there may be other and better measures of how many than the IF. For instance, my recent article on a needs-based theorization of human injustice, fully published in paginated form last fall: <https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/hasa/43/4>

You can click on it and choose article metrics: Article Metrics; Article Usage; Total views and downloads: 361. That is more than some articles in the same issue and less than others. Comparative data of that kind, within and between journals in your field of specialization, may be valuable.

Ditto on my 2016 article in the *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* on the Moment of Microaggressions:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10911359.2016.1237920?journalCode=whum20>

721 views, 8 Crossref citations, 2 Web of Science, 4 scopus, and Altmetric score of 45: News Outlet mention (5), Twitter (2), Mendeley (48). Altmetrics says "in the top 5% of research outputs scored by Altmetric," the meaning of which wasn't clear to me. If you click more it says, "One of the highest scoring outputs from this source, #6 of 208," with source meaning I think means from this journal in the given time frame. And it says "high attention score compared to outputs of the same age (94<sup>th</sup> percentile), which relates to time frame, but there I may benefit if it is say a 5-year time frame and I'm already in my fifth year. And it says, "high attention score compared to output of the same age and source," which may "control" for age better, 80<sup>th</sup> percentile. I wasn't aware of Altmetric: <https://www.altmetric.com/>

Its citations says 7 dimensions and what that means is not clear, it only lists 2 citations, but I know of many more including dissertations.

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Steve,

Here is a bit of fan mail. We use your journal articles in our required Social Work Ethics course at Boston University. It's been a great help and resource. Our course is a delight to teach and I've been chairing and/or collaborating on it for almost thirty years. I used to serve on our state licensing board, and I swear people who came through BU were underrepresented among the complaints. (I never did get to conduct a formal study of that, which I'd have liked to have to done). I believe Boston University's Ethics education has gone largely

unrecognized and yet I think it is quite unique. We created and update our course, which begins with and includes a whole section on the sociology of the profession, and then we break into teaching seven discrete skills of ethical decision making. We end with a strong section on licensing, impairment, etc. It is quite “contextual” in its approach, which is my orientation, and much less prescriptive than much of what passes for ethics education in social work. We really have tried to encourage a strenuous critique of social work professionalism and its discontents, and to critically examine the way the profession has grown and persisted. I always tell students it’s not a “rah rah social work” course--that it’s a place to lay down your worries and concerns about the rhetoric and the reality of this endeavor and to become better critical thinkers. Thanks for continuing to provide an important set of resources for those of us who attempt to teach in-depth about moral imagination, ethics, and doing the right thing in social work.

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### **Journal Impact Factors: The Good, The Bad and the Ugly**

Dr. Marson’s 2020 editorial in this journal titled *Is the Impact Factor (IF) Ethical to Use for Promotion and Tenure Decision* is a welcome excursion into the critical analysis of this increasingly influential academic metric. There is large literature describing problems with the use of the IF as a measure of a journal’s influence, and it is good to see this being brought to the awareness of social work scholars.

Impact factors for journals are published in an online outlet called the *Journal Citation Reports (JCR)*, found in the Web-of-Science database available through most university library online systems. JCR is now owned by a company called Clarivate. The JCR staff selects some journals from a given discipline and decides to calculate an IF for each of

those journals. In the field of social work the JCR lists about 43 journals (out of several hundred social work journals around the world), and the criteria on selecting these journals and publishing an IF for them is fairly opaque. Not one, apart from the minions behind the curtain at Clarivate, knows how these journals are selected. This is unfortunate and goes against the principle of transparency which should govern academics. However unlike Dr. Marson’s claim, one cannot buy an impact factor for \$500, or any other amount. Otherwise all journals would pay the fee and obtain an impact factor. The IF is a problematic metric, but being available for purchase is not one of its problems.

Marson’s ire was exercised by his colleague having told him that her P & T committee wanted to know the IF for each of the journals she had published in, and she was discouraged from publishing in journals lacking an IF. It is a very common practice to list this information in the vitae and P & T dossiers of faculty active in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, medical) disciplines, and I increasingly see it being used in the behavioral sciences, including social work. In China, Hong Kong and Korean social work programs where I have frequently consulted, faculty are indeed actively discouraged from publishing in journal’s lacking an IF. And reciprocally, it is a common practice to provide a bonus (sometimes several \$1000 dollars) to faculty who get their work accepted in a journal with a high IF. Some social work programs in Asia hire outside consultants to work closely with junior faculty with the explicit goal of getting the junior person’s work accepted in a high IF journal (Shu, 2017). Like it or not, these practices are increasing, spreading around the world, and are unlikely to recede in significance.

Marson concludes that the “IF coefficient is such a weak measure of an individual’s scholarly impact that it is unethical to employ as a method of making rank and tenure decisions” (2020, p. 4). He raises the specter of faculty who were denied being hired, promoted or tenured suing their university because of the IF’s lack of reliability and validity. Perhaps

this could happen, but then virtually all of the other forms of evidence of one's academic impact and reputation used in hiring and P & T decisions are similarly deficient. One could similarly appraise other commonly used factors such as student course evaluations, letters of recommendation, receipt of 'teaching' or service awards, the merits of certain forms of grant funding, etc. None of these factors have established reliability and validity, except perhaps of the weakest form, face validity. Could negative P & T decisions be challenged on the basis Marson suggests are pertinent to the IF? Perhaps. But virtually all such measures used to arrive at career-changing decisions are equally vulnerable. In my own program our P & T committee is explicitly prohibited from providing failed candidates with specific reasons for not being promoted or tenured, beyond saying something like "Insufficient scholarship" or "Inadequate evidence of quality teaching" (or service). It is unimaginable in my program for a candidate to be told "Sorry, but you were not tenured because you published in journals with no (or low) IFs." We hide behind non-specifics to avoid the types of legal troubles Marson envisions.

Marson complains that the IF metric does not take into account other forms of potentially valuable scholarship, such as book chapters, books, works only available on line, etc. He is correct in this but recall that the IF is a measure of a *journal's* impact. Journals publish articles, hence the IF for journals is limited by its very purpose which is to evaluate citations to articles published in that journal. It is not legitimate to criticize something for not doing what it was not intended to do. Curiously, the IF was originally developed to help libraries decide what periodicals to subscribe to, not to evaluate the quality of someone's scholarship. Marson segues into the use of Google Scholar, which does include books and chapters but not, to my knowledge, works that are solely available online, or are otherwise unpublished. He displays a graph depicting citations to his own works from 1984-2019, and lauds this bar chart as a better assessment of an individual's scholarly impact (being cited)

than the IF of the journals published in. But this conflates apples and oranges. Google Scholar is indeed a great way to assess an individual's impact, and the well-known h-index found on one's Google Scholar account is seen as a surrogate for this (see Thyer, Smith, Osteen & Carter, 2019), But the h-index is intended for a different purpose than the journal IF. The former is to estimate the influence (as determined by citations) of a single *author*, the latter to estimate the influence of a *particular journal* that author published in. P & T dossiers at prestigious universities laudably include both metrics, the individual faculty member's h-index and the IF of the journals they published in. Two different things for two different purposes.

It is ironic that Dr. Marson's publication of his editorial, and gracious invitation to readers to prepare a response, which he will publish in this journal, would elevate the impact of this journal had it possessed an IF! This tactic is often used by journal editors, along somewhat different lines, when, in their editorial presented at the beginning of each issue, they mention and cite each article appearing in that issue. This immediately generates one citation for these newly published articles and thus elevates the impact factor of that journal. Now, self-citations such as this are not excluded in IF calculations, but they should be if the intent is to assess the extent to which articles are cited and influence the work of others, after publication. This is another flaw of the IF, one not mentioned by Dr. Marson, and one which disadvantages journals which forego self-serving editorials. Some journals purposively publish provocative or controversial articles, hoping to generate a number of submissions in response to the original work. Or a crafty journal editor may deliberately publish a 'target' article which is accompanied by a number of responses from different authors, and these in turn being subject to a reply from the target article author. Everyone ends up citing everyone else in the same issue, and voila, the impact factor is raised, via this manipulative ploy. A variation of this is for the Editor to publish editorials that cite a large number of papers published in their

journal during the past two years. Martin (2016) describes various ways an unscrupulous Editor can artificially raise their journal's IF, which in effect devalues this metric. The Leiden Manifesto is one resource which outlines practical protections regarding using research metric such as the IF from being improperly used (Hicks, Wouters, Waltman, DeRijcke & Rafols, 2015)

Dr. Marson is indeed correct to raise concerns about the use and misuse of the journal IF. But the solution is readily at hand if we wish to avail ourselves of it. It was stated by Garfield, the very originator of the journal IF: "The use of journal impacts in evaluating individuals has its inherent dangers. In an ideal world, evaluators would read each article and make personal judgments" (Garfield, 2006, p. 92). Unfortunately, many faculty are lazy louts, and it is much easier to rely on condensed metrics, such as journal IFs, the h-index, citations per year over time, number of articles published, aggregated student course evaluations, etc. Like the ancient Romans, we might do as well by hiring Augurs to sacrifice animals and read their entrails to ascertain the future success of a candidate for promotion or tenure. Tea leaf readers would be less messy. Using the Magic Eight Ball easier still. Or just leave it to me to make purely qualitative judgements. These cannot be effectively challenged.

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There are no social workers that have the mastery over the written word to the degree possessed by Dr. Thyer. However, we can reduce my IF editorial to two points:

1. As a measurement tool for individual productivity, using the IF coefficient defies all the rules I have learned for the ethical use of a complex instrument.
2. I offered an alternative that is not perfect, but light years ahead of employing the IF.

Stephen Marson, Editor

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Assessing the quality of faculty scholarly work has important ethical dimension and significant ramifications for knowledge building. Scholars have the right to have their work judges fairly and the growth of knowledge requires that we have rational ways to judge the quality of scholarship.

The introduction of scholarly metrics is an important contributor to this effort. This is a judgement issue and judgements can reflect bias and can be unfair. Metrics can be important counterpoints to other forms of assessment. It's also important to note that they have limitations.

At one point in my career, good journals were what senior faculty said they were. There were a smaller number of journals and often general agreement

on which ones were “good” journals. On balance, this was often tilted toward the journals that had been around for a while and that tended to publish “safe” scholarship. As Everett Roger’s (2003) work teaches us, innovation tends to come from outside the majority.

This was replaced by looking at circulation numbers (better journals had larger readership). This was progress. It was more rational but circulation was often tied to association memberships. We also began to look at rejection rates and submission rates.

When scholarly metrics were introduced, they represented a move forward. This was not only a way to judge journal quality, it was a way to systematize scholarship. Because early technology was limited, this was still a time-intensive task.

The first set of metrics are journal-level measures. These assess an entire publication in terms of quality and impact. The growth of Impact Ranking was a dramatic improvement. These are based on the number of citations that the articles in a journal receives. Web of Science was probably the first major system in the social sciences, followed by Scopus and Google Scholar (there are others). While this can suggest which journals have higher levels of impact, there are several issues that need to be considered. All of this is based on the number of citations that can be identified, something that varies from system to system. The three systems vary in coverage and not every publication is included. Inclusion is often dependent on the resources that the journal has available for the application and the technology needed to make data available to the ranking system. This means that less well-funded journals aren’t always included. Many of these journals exist in nations in the Global South. It also often means that older issues are not included. This is a significant social justice issue

From a faculty evaluation standpoint, Journal Impact Factors don’t say much about the individual articles. So do good journals publish low-quality articles? Probably. It seems far less likely than in

lower quality journals but data on retractions suggest that they do. Impact factors do a real service to the profession by encouraging journal quality.

The second set of measures are article-level metrics. These look at the number of citations to a specific article. There are different ways to slice and dice the measures, but they relate the number of citation to the impact of the article. These can be aggregated for an individual author or a department or a school. The H Index and H10 index are often used in addition to raw citation rates. Article level citations represent a substantial move forward. Of course, they can only speak to materials in the dataset and they do not tell us much about how the article was cited.

In the past few years, there have been several refinements. Alt Metrics looks at the impact that articles have on public decision making. We can look at which papers are cited in syllabi and how many times papers are downloaded or read online.

These measures provide a better view of the quality of an article than any of the previous systems. There are still limits, but this is a move forward.

We can now do an analysis that exceeds simple article and citation counts. The growth of data science and high-performance computing makes it possible many things that would have been unthinkable in the past.

Article level measures have emerged as central. As open science becomes more of the norm, we can expect to see a wider range of materials incorporated and there will be a metrics that look at larger issues such as connections between scholarly products and the progression of research thinking.

On balance, we know that these measures do not replace professional judgement. They can greatly assist decision making and possibly make the process less biased, but judging the quality of research programs and scholarly quality are still judgements we should make.

*LETTERS TO THE EDITOR*

Many academics object to the metrics revolution saying that it is incomplete and unfair. Those things can be true, but not as often as some charge. I think the real issue is that someone else (not the faculty) is controlling the narrative and defining which data is important. These metrics are often incorporated into systems that judge faculty and departments without context. Some of the systems are simplistic and some measure factors that are arguably irrelevant. Taking control of your data is important and we certainly need to make the effort to participate in the discussion of scholarly metrics and faculty data.

Academics need to take control of how research is assessed, how the data is collected and how it is used in decision making. If we don't offer an alternative, someone else will.

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