

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The following letters were submitted in response to the Spring 2019 editorial titled “*Abortion and The Routledge Handbook of Social Work Ethics and Values.*”

Dr. Marson,

I was thankful to read your editorial piece. Although I have not read the 3 chapters related to abortion, I am so glad that different viewpoints were recognized and allowed to be shared. I think we need to do more of this within the social work profession so that those who hold a minority viewpoint on an issue can feel supported and free to voice their opinion!

Katy Harrell, MSW, LCSWA
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Steve,

I am writing to report back from a class assignment using our *Routledge Handbook on Social Work Ethics & Values*. I asked the bachelors-level students in my macro-Human Behavior in the Social Environment course to select a chapter of their choice from the Routledge Handbook, and to write a reflection making connections between the handbook chapter, our textbook’s chapter on social work ethics, and their future practice as a social worker.

With 23 students in the class, they chose 19 different chapters from the book. This was a great success, since it allowed students to explore a specific topic of interest, while also seeing the breadth of the profession and how ethics permeate all that we do. During class, I had students talk about their papers in small groups, so they could learn about additional chapter topics from their peers.

One student asked if we could use the whole book as part of a course, so our faculty is talking about that possibility, or alternately using it across several courses within the major.

How have others found ways of using the book in your teaching?

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The following letter was submitted in response to the Fall 2018 Forum article titled “*Aborting Abortions: How You Can Reduce Abortions in Your Community.*”

Dear Editors,

I am writing to express my dissent, disagreement, and distress over Dr. Bruce A. Thyer’s (2018) essay, “*Aborting Abortions: How You Can Reduce Abortions in Your Community.*” While I recognize that material in The Forum of JSWVE does reflect endorsement [*sic*] by its editors, I am concerned that, as a notable figure in social work, Dr. Thyer’s pen yields considerable influence over our profession. As a social worker, academic, and mother who made the heartbreaking decision to terminate a pregnancy due to fetal anomaly, I am compelled to respond to Dr. Thyer’s essay.

Readers should be aware that Dr. Thyer presents multiple uninformed assumptions about the reasons why women have abortions, avoiding our profession’s acknowledgement of social justice and access issues. His words further stigmatize women and minority/underserved populations.

In his essay, Dr. Thyer does not rely upon readily-available, peer-reviewed publications or widely-disseminated statistics on abortion in the United States. He states, “...the sad reality is that many women seeking an abortion do so purely for methods of birth control, for convenience, being unwilling to bear the burden of nine months of pregnancy.” (p. 95). It is a broad generalization to

suggest that the decision to have an abortion is one of convenience. Some women must travel great distances to obtain an abortion, and the majority have paid out of pocket for the procedure (Guttmacher Institute, 2019). According to the Guttmacher Institute (2016), 75% of US abortion patients are of low-income, and 59% already have a child. Thirty nine percent are women of color, who consistently are less able to access reproductive healthcare as compared with their white counterparts (Eltoukhi, Vance, Troutman, & Al-hendy, 2018). While 58% of all abortion patients wished they could have had an abortion earlier (Guttmacher Institute, 2019), certain populations are more likely to have them in the second trimester: women of color, low education, and those whose lives had been affected by disruptive life events.

The mission of social work is to meet the “basic human needs of all people, with a particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (National Association of Social Work, 2017, p. 1). Certainly, a discussion of abortion and reproductive rights should avoid stigmatizing women who have had abortions as “irresponsible” (Thyer, 2018, p.95), as he claims the “ready availability of low-cost and effective contraception to everyone”. While Dr. Thyer (2018) argues for “the love of human life, or babies, of women, love to prevent the needless deaths of tens of thousands of African-American babies” (p.95), he is apparently unaware of the systemic social, economic, and other forces beyond “love” that require the participation of social work to remedy lack of access to safe and reliable reproductive healthcare for African American women. If Dr. Thyer is truly concerned for life, women, and babies, he should invest his time not in proposing elaborate and manipulative methods to infiltrate women’s health clinics but actually proposing changes to systemically discriminatory legislation targeting oppressed populations across the country.

Additionally, Dr. Thyer’s essay presents hyperbolic language that places abortion clinic staff at risk. He writes in a dangerous tone, arguing, “The murder of an infant is not a price that should be paid for a parent’s carelessness” (p. 95) and suggests that abortion clinic staff meeting with ambivalent patients are likely to “persuade” such women to “abort her baby” (Thyer, 2018, p. 95). By suggesting that clinic staff and pressuring women to “murder” their “babies”, Thyer is placing the lives of countless individuals in danger. Now, more than a decade following the murder of George Tiller, the National Abortion Foundation (2018) has documented a continued number of death threats to providers, hate mail, internet harassment, and stalking. Divisive language characterizing abortion providers as callous and uncaring abandon’s our profession’s code of ethics to treat others with dignity and worth, as well as valuing human relationships (NASW, 2017). If Dr. Thyer truly cares about the well-being of women and children, he should turn his focus to building bridges across pro-life and pro-choice divides, instead of burning them.

I am deeply concerned about the information that Dr. Thyer continues to disseminate about abortion across our profession. In his chapter, “Social Work’s First Obligation: The Role of Social Workers in Protecting Unborn Children”, Thyer and co-author William C. Rainford (2019) argue that fetuses are “pain-capable” at fourteen weeks and beyond (p.112), and erroneously cites scholarly literature, when in fact, there is no scientific evidence indicating this (Lee, Ralston, Drey, Partridge, & Rosen, 2005). Further, Thyer and Rainford (2019) cite a 1984 anti-abortion “documentary”, *The Silent Scream*, to suggest that fetuses attempt to “escape the physician’s tools” (p. 112). This documentary has been largely discredited as misleading propaganda by medical experts, including neurobiologists (New York Times, 1985).

While Dr. Thyer is entitled to his opinion, he must be mindful that publishing misinformation across

our discipline can result in a lack of access and equitable treatment across the very populations we commit to assisting, in addition to placing lives at risk. I compel him to consider the damage essays such as his have as they perpetuate stereotypes and fuel the fire across the pro choice/pro-life divide. I request that the Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics consider publishing this letter to offer a different perspective on Dr. Thyer's work.

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