

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

IN SOCIAL WORK

**Gambrill
Pruger**

Editors

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CONTROVERSIAL
ISSUES

IN SOCIAL
WORK

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Preface

This book has four major purposes: (1) to present different perspectives on a number of current issues related to social work; (2) to demonstrate the value of presenting different positions concerning an issue in a debate format; (3) to demonstrate that controversy can be carried out in a constructive manner that highlights (rather than mutes) issues involved in each topic; and (4) to offer readers some guidelines and practice opportunities to enhance their skills in identifying and countering tendencies and fallacies that result in the evasion, distortion, or confusion of issues.

Controversial Issues in Social Work is for social work educators as well as social work practitioners and students of social work. It is for readers who wish to deepen their understanding of issues of concern to social work by considering opposing viewpoints on these issues. It is for use both within and outside of formal educational programs. It could be used as a text in courses on the field of social work or social work practice to highlight points that should be considered when discussing or thinking about important issues or it could be used to supplement a main text.

A representative set of issues was selected that concern a broad array of professional interests, levels of practice, client populations, and problems. Criteria for selection included a decision that any issue was a proper professional matter, had a genuinely controversial content, and that there were well informed, willing and fairly matched opponents. Twenty-four different issues are discussed in this book. We selected some issues that are often avoided, such as "Should social workers blow the whistle on incompetent colleagues?" Although the code of ethics of the National Association of

Social Workers says that social workers have an obligation to offer competent services to their clients, many (if not most) social workers do not blow the whistle on incompetent colleagues (although they complain often about them). Our selection of issues reveals that we are not persuaded that because something is, it ought to be. This can be seen by inclusion of questions "Should social workers work for for-profit firms?" and "Should social workers be licensed?" Each discussant prepared a position statement arguing for or against a position and, in addition, prepared a rebuttal to the opposite side. This format allows for an engaging exchange that offers readers an opportunity to consider the relevance of rejoinder points that are made. Questions can be raised such as: Does the reply address points raised in the opposing statements? Are the replies persuasive? Is any evidence presented to support claims made? Have relevant facts been cited?

The issues discussed are clustered into four parts. Debates about social work as a profession are included in Part I, such as: "Are union membership and professional social work incompatible?" Understanding issues that confront the profession as a whole will help social workers to be more informed about factors that influence their day-by-day practice with clients and will be helpful in identifying options for enhancing the quality of practice and job satisfaction. The issues in Part II all relate to the knowledge base of social work; what knowledge should be drawn on in offering services to clients? Examples include: "Should all social workers be well trained in behavioral principles?"; "Should social workers accept a disease model of substance abuse?" There is a notable lack of agreement about what criteria to use in selecting knowledge. That is, there is little agreement about what social workers who offer certain kinds of services should know (content knowledge) and what skills they should possess. What appears to be agreement when knowledge or skills are described in a vague manner often vanishes when concrete descriptions are given. Nor does agreement, even on a concrete level, mean that social workers use knowledge and skills agreed on as desirable. For example, most social workers (if not all) would agree that child welfare workers should know the grounds on which parental rights can be terminated in their state. However, agreement does not mean that child welfare workers indeed possess and make use of this information. Even when there is agreement on knowledge and skills of value, there may not be agreement on ensuring that these are used in practice as can be seen in the discussion of the question "Should part of social workers' salaries be contingent on outcomes achieved with clients?" in Part III. Debates about social work practice are included in this third part. Other examples include: "Should social workers use written service agreements with clients?" and "Should community organization be based on a grassroots strategy?" Debates about special client populations are contained in Part IV. Here readers will find five questions that relate to different fields

of practice such as “Should maternal preference govern child custody cases?” and “Should welfare clients be required to work?”

The very selection of issues reflects certain beliefs and biases. Take for example the question “Should social workers be licensed?” When we asked a person who has argued publicly for the licensing of social workers, he refused on the grounds that the question was no longer important, that everyone agreed that social workers should be licensed. This reflects a common tendency (unless we develop skills for avoiding it) to think that what we believe and what most people believe is the best position. We do not believe that a policy or position is necessarily the best one because most people happen to believe it or because it is “in place” as an accepted practice. That is, we are not persuaded that consensus is necessarily a sound basis for acceptance of a point of view. Too many widely accepted positions have been found to be inaccurate (Gardner, 1957). In fact, we hope that one effect of this book will be to encourage readers to question what is widely accepted as well as what is new and innovative. There is a special need to question widely accepted views that work against the best interests of clients rather than for them.

Ideas, not persons, are the central element of a debate. Thus, it is not surprising that many of our opposing debaters have ongoing personal and collegial relationships with each other, or at least they worked cooperatively to produce useful debates. For example, several contributors agreed to argue positions that went beyond their own beliefs in order to make their presentation more interesting and useful and because they thought there would be some fun in taking on such a challenge. Some discussants reviewed each other’s statements or outlines to suggest how opposing views might be strengthened and to ensure that the two statements addressed as many of the same points as possible. One debate takes place between a husband and wife; one between a former husband and wife. Several take place between friends or members of the same faculty. When one of the original debaters had to drop out of the international social work debate, the remaining one agreed to write both sides. (A pseudonym is used here to meet the formal debate requisite of two sides.) Nevertheless, the debate is a lively one precisely because the author, although he does have a personal conviction about the issue, has a good grasp of both sides of the argument. Are criticisms of positions accurate? (See introduction.)

Some people we approached said they would argue a controversial question only if they could argue both sides of the issue; they said they did not want to have their name associated with one side of a controversial issue although this reflected their true position. There is indeed evidence that people who argue a position are associated with believing it even when listeners are told that positions were assigned on a random basis (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). We had trouble finding anyone who would argue some

positions. For example, many people refused to argue that "Social workers are well trained" although the first author was prepared to argue the position that social workers are *not* well trained.

Preparing this book highlights the existence of a substantial realm of controversy in social work that should be clarified and communicated to students rather than glossed over. No single work could capture all significant issues. It is hoped that other works will continue the task of identifying, organizing, and discussing controversial topics in the field. Possible issues for future attention include the following:

- Should family responsibility laws be enforced?
- Are clinical social workers well trained?
- Are social workers well trained for administrative responsibilities?
- Should interracial adoptions (adoptions by gays) be permitted?
- Should social workers accept gifts offered by clients?
- Can social workers be generalists?
- Should a social worker terminate a case against a client's wish to do so?
- Can a social worker promise confidentiality?
- Should there be a voucher for social services?
- Do parents have a right to know about problems revealed by children in therapy?

We hope that social workers of many different persuasions will find the dialogues interesting and useful in sharpening their understanding of issues that influence their everyday practice. Simply reading the list of issues can reveal what "side you are on." Reading the debates in this book can help readers to sharpen their clear thinking skills. Tendencies that are likely to result in errors such as the tendency to search only for evidence that confirms favored positions as well as fallacies that evade, obscure, or distort positions are described in the introduction and in Appendix A. Familiarity with these tendencies and fallacies as well as with methods to avoid and counter them will enhance critical thinking skills that will be useful whether working with clients, reading the professional literature, or thinking by oneself. Readers can sharpen their skills in recognizing and countering fallacies that get in the way of arriving at informed positions by using material in the introduction and Appendix A as well as other sources such as *Straight and Crooked Thinking* (Thouless, 1974) when reviewing statements. For example, does an author "beg the question" (assume what he or she is trying to support)? Do authors distort a position? Are key data omitted? That is, is information suppressed? Is emotional language used that influences but does not inform?

There are two ways to read this book. One is to read only statements that support preferred positions. This approach will result in the least

benefit for readers; readers who do this will essentially have their biases confirmed. Another way to read this book (which we would recommend) is to read both statements and rebuttals on an issue, paying special attention to arguments against favored positions. Only in this way are readers likely to avoid the confirmation bias, the tendency to see and recall only points that favor preferred positions. We did not prepare this book to offer readers an opportunity to solidify biased positions on an issue. We prepared this book so that readers could become more informed about the many factors that should be considered in arriving at an informed position on each question.

We hope our readers will enjoy the discussions in the book and that reading arguments on both sides of issues will deepen understanding and appreciation of factors related to the questions addressed and provide an opportunity to enhance critical thinking skills. In the course of preparing this book we discovered many other books that are arranged in a debate format. Greenhaven Press has an opposing viewpoint series containing well over thirty topics including poverty, social justice, death and dying, teenage sexuality, and chemical dependency. The Dushkin Publishing Group has a *Taking Sides* Series in which "clashing views" on controversial issues are presented in areas such as legal issues (Katsch, 1986), crime and criminology (Monk, 1989), and social issues (Finsterbusch & McKenna, 1986). Stone-song Press has published *Pro and Con* (Isaacson, 1983) in which fifty-three topics are discussed including psychiatry, lying, capital punishment, the equal rights amendment, and religious cults.

We wish to thank our contributors for preparing statements and replies and for their enthusiastic reactions to the format of this book. We invite readers to share their reactions to both the format of this book and content of the discussions and to suggest topics for discussion. Readers will no doubt have their own views on the topics discussed in this book. Whether these are influenced by reading the debates will depend on many factors including the cogency of individual statements and rebuttals, the transparency of weak appeals that do not foster careful consideration of issues (such as use of emotional language), the reader's skill in detecting and countering fallacies in thinking, the reader's knowledge of content related to each topic, and attitudes that affect clear thinking, such as curiosity and openness to exploring opposing viewpoints.

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Introduction

Controversy is often downplayed and discouraged in social work. Rarely do we see a position statement followed by a number of invited responses to this position. Too rarely are panel discussions offered at conferences in which different perspectives on an issue or case are presented together with rebuttals to each view. Students at the School of Social Welfare at the University of California at Berkeley tried for years to interest faculty with different practice perspectives to discuss a case in a panel presentation. Most of the individuals approached refused on the grounds that this would be divisive. Proposal of a presentation of different views seemed to trigger words such as argumentative, rather than informative, provocative, useful. Thus, too rarely do students read or hear models of constructive controversy. Reasons include a confusion between arguments and debate, a reluctance to think more deeply and expose what one thinks, and an acceptance by many practitioners and authors of unsupported pronouncements rather than carefully reasoned arguments or empirical evidence.

Controversy in which different positions on a question are offered and considered in an open, inquiring manner should be a hallmark of quality professional education and practice. There are many positive functions of controversy. Discussion of questions within a framework that highlights the value of considering both sides encourages exploration of alternative positions. Errors are more likely to be spotted and valuable options are more likely to be identified if opposing views are considered. This will enhance the quality of services provided to clients. Research on human inferences shows that we selectively search for evidence that supports preferred beliefs

and tend to ignore evidence that contradicts favored assumptions (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Snyder & Thomsen, 1988). These tendencies encourage us to overlook limitations of favored positions; they often occur with little awareness on our part. This confirmation bias may result in selection of inferior options. For example, if a clinical social worker assumes that a client's depression is related to her abuse as a child and does not examine other possibilities such as environmental or physiological factors, inappropriate treatment methods may be recommended that may exacerbate client distress (Mays & Franks, 1985).

A reluctance to discuss differences of opinion because of fear of finding errors overlooks the advantages of discovering new ways to view events (Kottler & Blau, 1989). You cannot say you have a firm grip on your own position on an issue until you can competently state the opposite view. And you do not really understand the other side of an argument until you can state it so that those who hold that view agree you have stated it correctly. Debates that can be studied offer a route to this kind of mastery of an issue.

Styles of Controversy

The term *debate* often triggers negative reactions such as arguments, backstabbing, and so on. This image may be encouraged by media presentations in which discussants are permitted to insult, harass, and interrupt people with different ideas. The discussion of differences does not have to be conducted in such a crude manner, as illustrated by the examples in this book.

Debates are often thought of as a form of combat. For the observer there is some innocent fun in watching two sides engage each other. Some of the appeal of the form derives from this element of conflict—of winning and losing. This book uses a debate format because it is a good way to explore issues and ideas. What matters is how the clash of ideas (rather than of persons) leads to greater clarity and understanding of an issue. A reader might conclude that one side of a debate was better argued. Nevertheless, the reader might still find issues raised in the opposing side that are useful in constructing a new view.

Evaluating Arguments

The discussions in this book present arguments for or against a position. "Argumentation" refers to the process of making claims, challenging these, backing them with reasons, (assertions), criticizing these reasons, responding to the criticism offered (Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik, 1979, p. 13). An argument in this sense refers to the claims and reasons offered for these; that is, "a set of assertions that is used to support a belief" (Nickerson, 1986).

p. 2). This term has a different meaning in everyday use in which it refers to disagreements between two people as in "They had an argument about who will go to the store."

Arguments consist of parts and they can be taken apart as well as put together. They may be strong (convincing) or weak (unconvincing), simple or complex. Assertions may involve statements of fact ("a belief for which there is enough evidence to justify a high degree of confidence," Nickerson, 1986, p. 36), assumptions, or hypotheses. The term "assumption" refers to "an assertion that we either believe to be true in spite of being unable to produce compelling evidence of its truth, or are willing to accept as true for purposes of debate or discussion" (Nickerson, 1986, p. 37). An hypothesis is an assertion that we do not know to be true but that we think is testable. Assumptions, hypotheses, or statements of fact may be used as premises in an argument, or they may serve as conclusions.

A key part of an argument is the claim, conclusion, or position that is put forward. (Excessive wordiness makes a conclusion difficult to identify.) A second critical feature of an argument is the reasons or premises offered to support the claim made. "The credibility of a conclusion can be no greater than the least credible of the premises from which it is drawn, so a conclusion cannot be considered a statement of fact unless all of the premises are statements of fact . . ." (Nickerson, 1986, p. 37). Premises can be divided into two parts—grounds and warrants. The grounds (data or evidence) must be relevant to the claim as well as sufficient to support the claim and here is where "warrants" come in. Warrants concern the inference or justification of making the connection between the grounds and the claim (Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik, 1979). Do the grounds provide support for the claim made? Warrants may involve appeals to common knowledge, empirical evidence, practice theory, and so on. So warrants purport to offer evidence for making the step from the grounds to the claim and the strength of the support offered should be evaluated. Questions of concern include: How reliably does the warrant offer such evidence? Are the grounds necessary or sufficient? These questions are of concern both when considering the merits of a social worker's assessment concerning a particular client as well as when considering broader questions (Bromley, 1986).

An argument may be unsound for one of three reasons: (1) there may be something wrong with its logical structure; (2) it may contain false premises; (3) it may be irrelevant or circular. The latter two kinds are *informal* fallacies; they have a correct logical form but are still incorrect. So informal fallacies are related to the *content* of arguments rather than to their form. In deductive arguments, if the reasoning is logically valid, the conclusion necessarily follows (although it may not be true if one or more of the premises may be false.) Deductive arguments can produce false conclusions when one of the premises is false or when one of the rules of deductive inference is violated as in the logical fallacy of affirming the consequent.

The conclusion may be true but it may be invalid because it is arrived at by an illogical inference. Seldom are the major premises as well as the conclusion clearly stated in deductive arguments; more typically, at least one premise is missing. Questions of concern in evaluating a logical argument include: (1) Is it complete? (2) Is its meaning clear? (3) Is it valid (does the conclusion follow from the premises)? (4) Do I believe the premises? (Nickerson, 1986, p. 88). An argument may be worthy of consideration even though it has some defects. The following steps are helpful in analyzing incomplete logical arguments.

- Identify the conclusion or key assertion.
- List all the other explicit assertions that make up the argument as given.
- Add any unstated assertions that are necessary to make the argument complete. (Put them in parentheses to distinguish them from assertions that are explicit in the argument as given.)
- Order the premises (or supporting assertions) and conclusion (or key assertion) so as to show the structure of the argument.” (Nickerson, 1986, p. 87)

With plausible (inductive) arguments, there are no objective criteria; what is convincing may differ from person to person. Inductive reasoning involves generalizing from the particular to the general. It is assumed that what is true of the sample is true of all possible cases. Because plausible (inductive) arguments do not have to fit any particular form, objective evaluation is more difficult. As with logical arguments, the truth of the premises is important to assess. However, even if these are assumed to be true, people may disagree as to whether they provide evidence for a conclusion. Helpful questions when evaluating inductive arguments include the following:

- Are the facts accurate?
- Do the examples consist of isolated or universal instances?
- Do the examples used cover a significant time period?
- Are the examples given typical or atypical?
- Is the conclusion correctly stated?
- Is the argument really of concern—the “so what” and “what harm” questions. (Huber, 1962, p. 140)

There are many excellent descriptions of how to analyze arguments (Nickerson, 1986; Scriven, 1976; Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik, 1979).

Counterarguments should be considered. Are there arguments on the same issue that point to the opposite conclusion or to a somewhat different conclusion? For example, an analogy may be used to support the opposite conclusion. Key premises or conclusions may be missing, and a critical part

of examining an argument is filling in these parts. Arguments should not be dismissed simply because they are presented emotionally or because a conclusion is disliked; the emotion with which a position is presented is not necessarily related to the soundness of an argument (Scriven, 1976). Many statements, written or spoken, are opinions or points of view; “they frequently don’t pass the test of providing reasons for a conclusion, reasons that can be separated from a conclusion” (Scriven, 1967, p. 67). The question is, can the premises be established independently of the conclusion? Is the argument convincing?

Kinds of Arguments

Arguments occur in different contexts, including courts of law, case conferences, Joe’s Bar, and the American Psychiatric Association annual convention. These different contexts influence the manner in which a topic is discussed due to different norms, values, procedures, and requirements for types of evidence that are acceptable or unacceptable (Bromley, 1986). Courts of law favor an adversarial (competitive) format in which each party tries to settle a dispute in its favor. In arbitrational arguments, there is a focus on arriving at a compromise resolution that is satisfactory to both parties. In both professional and scientific contexts, value is (or should be) placed on a “willingness and ability to be self-critical, to deal sensibly with justifiable objections and queries from others” (Bromley, 1986, p. 233).

Misunderstandings and bad feelings may result when participants in a discussion do not recognize that different kinds of arguments are being used. Lawyers and social workers often have negative views of each other due to different frameworks for argument analysis. Lawyers may view clinicians as fuzzy thinkers and clinicians may view lawyers as inhumane and legalistic in their questioning concerning the credibility of evidence.

Common Sources of Error in Thinking about Issues

Social workers are rarely trained to identify and counter formal and informal fallacies that may get in the way of viewing issues clearly. Reading the debates in this book provides an opportunity to increase skill in recognizing fallacies. We are all guilty of using these fallacies at times, and the more skilled we are in identifying them, the easier it will be to avoid them.

Some arguments are false although they are valid. A valid argument is one whose premises, if true, offer good or sufficient grounds for accepting a conclusion. The incorrectness of premises is often overlooked resulting in poor choices. Most fallacies are *informal* ones; that is, they do not involve a formal mistake. There are many different kinds of informal fallacies (see for example, Thouless, 1974). Ad hominem arguments may be used in