

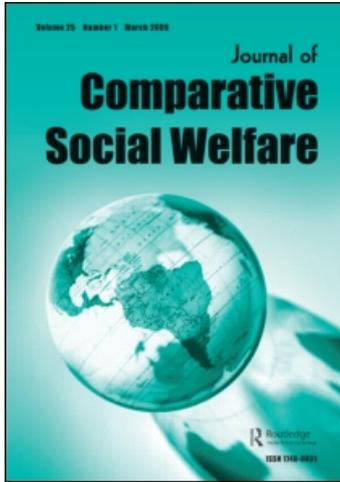
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social justice: a conservative perspective

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Although political conservatives outnumber moderates and liberals in the American populace, the conservative political ideology is largely absent from academic, practice and policy discourse within the social work and social welfare communities. This article describes a conservative perspective on the topic of social justice and illustrates how this view actually promotes a more socially just practice than a liberal orientation to practice and policy. Specific attention is given to the conservative perspective on the provision of social welfare programs, the use of the income tax as a means to redistribute wealth, on affirmative action, on the death penalty, and on abortion rights.

Keywords: conservatism; social justice; social work; social welfare

Introduction

The concept of social justice has long been a central value for social workers, central to such an extent that anyone not endorsing this perspective would be questioned as regards their suitability for the profession. This article will attempt to clarify the views that politically conservative social workers take with respect to the concept of social justice. Recognizing that the majority of social workers endorse a relatively liberal political orientation, conservative social workers sometimes need to justify their own beliefs, particularly in the light of sentiments published in the *NASW News*, such as: “If you accept that social workers have an obligation to advance social justice and that political engagement is a means to accomplish that end, then you have to accept that we *reject conservative political thought and conservative politicians*” (Newdom, 2003, p. 3; emphasis added). Given that a respect for diversity is also central value of social work, this repudiation of a political orientation held by a substantial proportion of the electorate in the United States and in other countries seems inappropriate. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics addresses this issue in the standards appearing in Box 1, each indicating that political belief should not be the basis for discrimination (NASW, 1999). Similarly, the Council on Social Work Education includes political ideology as among the factors (comparable with race, sexual orientation and gender) deserving of

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Box 1. Selected statements from the NASW Code of Ethics addressing political beliefs.

2.01 Respect (b)

Social workers should avoid unwarranted negative criticism of colleagues... Unwarranted negative criticism may include demeaning comments that refer to... individuals' attributes such as race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, *political belief*, religion, or mental or physical disability.

4.02 Discrimination

Social workers should not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, *political belief*, religion of mental or physical disability.

6.04 Social and political action

Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, group, age, marital status, *political belief*, religion, or mental or physical disability.

Note: Emphasis added.

Box 2. Selected statements from the educational policy and accreditation standards of the Council on Social Work Education (2008) addressing political ideology.

Educational Policy 2.1.4 – Engage diversity and difference in practice

The dimensions of diversity are understand as the intersectionality of multiple factors including age, class, color, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, *political ideology*, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation... Social workers... gain sufficient self-awareness to eliminate the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse groups.

Educational Policy 3.1 – Diversity

The program's commitment to diversity – including age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, *political ideology*, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation – is reflected in its learning environment... and the demographic make-up of its faculty, staff, and student body

Accreditation Standard 3.1 – Diversity

The program describes the specific and continuous efforts it makes to provide a learning environment in which respect for all persons and understanding of diversity and difference are practiced.

protection and respect in its educational policy and accreditation standards (see Box 2).

Such protections are apparently needed, given the discrimination experienced by some conservative social work students at the hands of liberal faculty members, as documented by Ressler and Hodge (2003), Powers (2006), and in the report issued by the National Association of Scholars (2007) entitled *The scandal of social work education*. This latter report had its findings syndicated nationally (McAdams, 2008; Monjonner, 2007; Will, 2007), and reflected discredit upon academic social work. For example, it was dismaying to read in the prestigious *Chronicle of Higher Education* that:

Social-work students at Rhode Island College and Missouri State University report that they were required to lobby for political causes they did not support and were threatened with punishment for dissenting views. The Missouri student filed suit in late October, and the University promptly settled in the student's favor... she was subjected

to a closed hearing ... and then forced to agree to “lessen the gap” between her own beliefs and those of the department. (Lukianoff, 2007, p. B8)

Of course the students involved were conservative and the causes they were required to lobby for were liberal ones. At times it seems that conservatives are the last politically acceptable minority group that remains fair game for discrimination. This is odd since the political philosophy of conservatism is more popular than liberalism in contemporary America. Specifically: “Conservatives continue to outnumber moderates and liberates in the American populace in 2009, confirming a finding that Gallup first noted in June. Forty percent of Americans describe their political views as conservative, 36% as moderate, and 20% as liberal” (Saad, 2009, p. 1). Across 16 separate Gallup surveys conducted in January–September 2009, between 39% and 41% of Americans identified themselves as either “very conservative” or “conservative”, compared with between 20% and 21% identifying themselves as very liberal or liberal. Thus, conservatism is more mainstream than liberalism as an American political philosophy, although this is not reflected within the social work profession.

It can help discussion to clarify from the onset what is meant by certain terms, and I will begin with the definition of social justice as described in *The social work dictionary* and published by the NASW:

Social justice An ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits. Implicit in this concept is the notion that historical inequities should be acknowledged and remedied, through specific measures. A key social work value, social justice entails advocacy to confront discrimination, oppression, and institutional inequities. (Barker, 2003, p. 205)

This strikes me as a very reasonable perspective, and providing such a definition helps avoid ambiguities of meaning. For example, in the 1930s Father Joseph Coughlin provided a weekly radio address and a newspaper received by over 30 million Americans. Through these outlets, Father Coughlin advocated anti-Semitic and pro-facist themes. The name of his organization was the National Union for Social Justice and his newspaper was called *Social Justice*, although by most standards these views were anything but just (Thyer, 2006). Not all practices enacted in the name of social justice are truly reflective of the noble ideals behind this value.

Conservatism too can be construed in many different ways, but for the purposes of this article I am providing the following general definition:

A political philosophy based on tradition and social stability, stressing established institutions, and preferring gradual development to abrupt change; *specifically*: such a philosophy calling for lower taxes, limited government regulation of business and investing, a strong national defense, and individual responsibility for personal needs (as retirement income or health-care coverage).¹

Note the focus of this article is on political conservatism, not other aspects such as fiscal, social, economic, cultural, green and other more specific variations. Note also that there is nothing within this definition that could be construed as antithetical to social justice. Within conservatism there is no room for racism, homophobia, a blind clinging to tradition, or an authoritarian state, positions sometimes associated (erroneously in my opinion) with conservatism. What conservatives do promote includes principles such as:

- The rule of law, with everyone treated equally under the law.
- The sanctity of contracts.

- The right of property – to be able to keep what one owns.
- A fairly strict interpretation of the US Constitution.
- Human liberty and freedom from coercion, especially coercion from the government.
- The minimal necessary levels of taxation for essential governmental services. Conservatives do not advocate the abolition of taxes, just lower taxes and a cautious approach to governmental spending.

Conservatives strongly promote human rights, especially those enumerated in the US Constitution, rights such as the freedom of the press, of religion, assembly, and to petition the government, the right to bear arms, freedom from cruel and unusual punishment, and the right of people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures; and the right to a trial by jury, to a speedy trial, to confront witness, and to legal counsel. Note that all of these rights are essentially negative rights, *limits* on what the federal government can do for its citizens. There are no positive rights, goods or services to be proactively provided by the national government, enumerated in the Constitution, except one – the right to have legal counsel appointed if a defendant cannot afford a lawyer. Our constitutional right to freedom of the press does not mean that the government provides newspapers or printing presses to the citizens. This right means that the government cannot (generally) prohibit someone from publishing books, newspapers or pamphlets, even materials antagonistic to the government. Freedom of religion does not mean the government has an obligation to provide places to worship or an official priesthood, only that it cannot interfere (generally) from people practicing their religious beliefs. The right to bear arms does not mean the government must provide citizens with weapons, only that it cannot (generally) interfere with citizens owning guns.

Constitutionally, and hence from a conservative perspective, there are no constitutionally-mandated federal rights to goods and services such as food, housing, healthcare, or retirement income. These positive “rights” are seen as best secured by the individual citizens for themselves and their families, not by the federal government. Constitutionally the individual states may pass laws providing for positive rights (e.g. some states have passed laws providing for near-universal healthcare), but the conservative is more concerned with limiting the role of the federal government in this regard, than with the individual states, or lesser levels of government (e.g. cities that provide homeless shelters).

Remembering “The Forgotten Man”

Many conservatives draw inspiration from the writings of Yale Professor William Graham Sumner (1883), whose essay entitled “What social classes owe each other” is a succinct statement of a conservative view. Sumner described the situation wherein Persons A and B (federal politicians) decide what Person C (the taxpayer) shall be required to do for Person D (the person in need). In their zeal to provide for Person D, at no expense to themselves, Persons A and B often forget the effects of their legislation on Person C, hence the term “The Forgotten Man”. In Sumner’s view, “. . . a man whose labor and self-denial may be diverted from his maintenance to that of some other man is not a free man, and approaches more or less toward the position of a slave” (1883, p. 15). Someone who is forced to labor not for himself/

herself but 100% for someone else is a slave. Providing 50% of the results of one's labor means that one is half a slave. Providing 10%, one-tenth a slave, and so forth. According to Sumner, when the politicians get together: "In their eagerness to recommend the less fortunate classes to pity and consideration they forget all about the rights of the other classes...they invent new theories of property, distorting rights and perpetuating injustices" (Sumner, 1883, p. 22). He goes on:

If any student of social science comes to appreciate the case of the Forgotten Man, he will become an unflinching advocate of strict scientific thinking in sociology, and a hard-hearted skeptic regards to any scheme of social amelioration. He will always want to know... *who will have to pay for it all?* When, therefore, the statesmen and social philosophers sit down to think what the state can do or ought to do, they really mean to decide what the Forgotten Man shall do. (Sumner, 1883, p. 149–150)

The role of the federal government in regards to social welfare was seen by the founders of our nation as rather limited. Box 3 presents some representative quotations from several significant figures who addressed this issue. A perusal of these views will demonstrate the high value placed on the right of property, the protection of the citizen from the arbitrary seizure of his assets, property, goods, or money, by the Federal government. This is in stark contrast to the values of the liberal political theorist. For example, Saul Alinsky bluntly stated:

... The radical believes that all people should have a high standard of food, housing and health... The radical places human rights far above property rights. (Alinsky, 1946, p. 16)

and:

The more developed a welfare state is, the more it removes the satisfaction of individual needs (food, clothing, shelter, education, health, the right to employment) from the caprice of the marketplace. (Karger & Stoesz, 1994, p. 106)

Box 3. Selected quotes from early American statesmen on the role of the federal government in relation to social welfare.

James Madison

"I cannot undertake to lay my finger on that article of the Constitution which granted a right to Congress of expending, on objects of benevolence, the money of their constituents".

"The government of the United States is a definite government, confined to specific objects. It is not like the state governments, whose powers are more general. Charity is no part of the legislative duty of the government".

Thomas Jefferson

"... what more is necessary to make us a happy and a prosperous people? ... A wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labour the bread it has earned. That is the sum of good government".

"To take from one, because it is thought his own industry and that of his fathers has acquired too much, in order to spare others, who, or whose fathers, have not exercised equal industry and skills, is to violate arbitrarily the first principle of association, the guarantee to everyone the free exercise of his industry and the fruits acquired by it".

Abraham Lincoln

I don't believe in a law to prevent a man from getting rich; it would do more harm than good... [But] we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everyone else".

The problem with this liberal agenda is that the provision of food, housing and health is not a free good. The federal government can only provide such goods and services through funding largely obtained by taxation, thus burdening the Forgotten Man. It is *not* social justice, contends the conservative, to impose unneeded burdens on the taxpayer. There are certain things the federal government should do as enumerated in the US Constitution (e.g. maintain the national defense, provide for public safety, regulate interstate commerce, contract international treaties, promote public health, etc.) and the conservative supports low levels of taxation to provide these services. But as Winston Churchill said: “Taxes are an evil – a necessary evil, but still an evil, and the fewer we have of them the better” (1906, p. 136).

The social injustice of social welfare programs

The conservative would like to limit the growth of, if not roll back, the federal government providing goods and services to people. To some extent this is due to political philosophy, but this perspective also takes into account the fact that many such federal welfare programs inadvertently (the more charitable interpretation) or deliberately (the more paranoid interpretation) perpetuate the dependence of their recipients upon the role of the government. In other words, they often do not work well. A third source of reservation is that many social welfare programs are fundamentally socially *unjust!* Take for example, the social security retirement system. Among males of my generation, the average Black man’s life expectancy is at or slightly below the age needed to receive full social security benefits! However, the White man or woman lives, on average, far beyond the age of eligibility. This is not socially just, to have White and Black people in America pay similar taxes into the social security program, and then to have differential levels of benefits based on race! Admittedly, Whites and Blacks get similar levels of benefits, *if they live long enough*, but they do not. For the average single Black man, the social security is basically theft. He receives nothing, except a death benefit of a few hundred dollars. Fraud is common within the social security program, with retirement checks being sent to individuals long since dead (Schuberg, 2009). The conservative advocates for a personal savings programs intended for retirement, aided perhaps by tax shelters, whose assets are owned 100% by the individual, and represent an asset that can be passed on to one’s heirs and not controlled by the government.

Fraud and abuse are rampant in social welfare programs. A significant proportion of food stamp benefits are fraudulently exchanged for smaller amounts of cash (and no food). The recipient brings in their food stamp electronic benefit card to a grocery store, and money is deducted by the criminal cashier from the card as if the person bought food. They are given a portion of the money, the store keeps the remainder, and no food is purchased. Recently, my MSW students acquainted with the food stamp program regaled my class with how individuals regularly defraud this program, either by schemes like that above or by inflating the numbers of dependents said to be residing in the household. It is estimated that about \$400 million or 2% of some \$20 billion in federal stimulus money allocated to the federal food stamp program in Pennsylvania alone will be lost to fraud (Wereschagin, 2009), a percentage comparable with that estimated by the US Department of Agriculture representing all national spending on food stamps. A Google search for “food stamp fraud” will reveal a very large number of similar stories. Each dollar stolen via fraud

represents fewer benefits available to legitimately qualified and honest recipients. And then there are the Forgotten Men (and women) whose taxes pay for this fraud.

Under the administration of President George W. Bush, several significant expansions of federal healthcare were enacted: one providing for enhanced coverage of drug benefits under Medicare, and the second elevating coverage of mental healthcare to levels comparable with that provided for physical healthcare. Conservatives ask why is it the responsibility of the federal government (i.e. The Forgotten Men and Women) to pay for the mental healthcare (and substance abuse treatment) of those unable to obtain such care through their own or more local resources? There are several objections to the government providing such care. First, there is virtually no evidence that the routine mental health and substance abuse treatment services received by most individuals via federal or state/federally paid-for programs actually improves their mental health or results in long-term sobriety. In other words, we do not know that these programs even help people. Secondly, a very wide array of pseudoscientific, indeed bogus, therapies are paid for with this largesse from the taxpayer, with little incentive to only pay for empirically-supported treatments. Third, most individuals, if asked, would have voted to expand federal coverage for *dental* care over mental care. But the citizens were not asked. Instead, the lobbying arms of the major mental health professions and advocacy groups exerted a long and strong campaign to provide for this expanded coverage – groups, coincidentally, who stood the most to gain financially from this expanded coverage (including the NASW). And fourth, according to a recent survey by a Gallup poll, more Americans say that it is *not* the government's responsibility to make sure all Americans have healthcare coverage (50%) than say it is (47%) (Newport, 2009). Thus conservative position of “Do not tax people in order to provide for federal health care programs” is more mainstream in the United States than the liberal position asserting that healthcare is somehow a right.

Medicare and Medicaid fraud is rampant, with between 3% and 10% of the \$800 billion spent on these programs each year being lost to waste, fraud and abuse. Millions are spent each year on services fraudulently billed after patients are dead, and “between \$60 million to \$92 million was paid for by medical services or equipment that had been ordered or prescribed by dead doctors” (Seper & Neubauer, 2009, p. 1). “To put the \$60 billion in fraud in perspective, Medicare loses seven times as much money in fraud every year than the combined profits of the 14 insurance companies on the Fortune 500” (Examiner Editorial, 2009). It gets worse. Between 2005 and 2007, over 200,000 (about 12%) of Medicare patients' deaths could have been prevented (Magor, 2008, p. 1). Conservatives also object to federal proposals that individuals who fail to pay for their own health insurance are liable to be subject to fines (up to \$250,000) or to be sent to prison (up to five years)! (see Miller, 2009; Morris & McGann, 2009). At the time this article is being written, federal legislation is on the verge of being passed to require individuals to purchase private health insurance. There is no so-called public option, and no expansion of Medicare in this plan about to be voted on by the US Senate. One result is that the stock prices of the major health insurance providers are soaring in value, benefiting the stockholders! Thus an unintended consequence of the federal government meddling in mandating health insurance is more profits to private insurance companies, companies already vilified because of their supposedly excessive profits.

What about the social contract?

Liberal reformers often justify their imposition of taxation on the Forgotten Man and Woman to provide supposed social benefits by invoking the so-called social contract, the concept that we all implicitly must support (via taxation) the larger society (e.g. social care programs like Temporary Assistance to Needy Families [TANF] and Women, Infants and Children [WIC]) as the price for enjoying the benefits of living in that society. Conservatives of course support the notion of a social contract, but typically see it as a much more limited arrangement than do their liberally-minded counterparts. For example, our elected representatives enact certain laws essential for the peace and smooth functioning of society. I give up my right to exact personal retribution against someone who commits a crime against me, in return for society enacting a strong criminal justice system. But the general agreement that some level of a social contract exists cannot be used to justify the imposition of an ever-expanding set of obligations upon the Forgotten Man or Woman in the name of social justice. Conservatives resist their tax money being spent on hugely expensive pork-barrel projects, which are allocated more on the basis of ensuring the re-election of federal members of congress than on legitimate need.²

A social contract is only legitimate to the extent that it is freely entered into by both parties. To the extent that coercion is a part of the program, as in fines or jail time for individuals who do not purchase a government-mandated health insurance policy, the social contract is broken. It is also broken from an intergenerational perspective. As a father of four children aged 16 years and younger, I resent the notion that contemporary federal officials can impose immense huge debts on the future generation of citizens. It is not myself or current federal officials who will have to pay of the expenses of these huge, fraudulent and often ineffective social care programs, but rather it is my children and my children's children. So long as we run a national deficit, and have a national debt, the idea of any kind of social contract is broken, because we are obligating others, not just ourselves, with the burden of paying off this debt. This is not social justice.

Redistribution = theft

Federal taxation is seen as legitimate, providing that it is used to enable the government to fund essential services. To the extent it funds social care programs outside the legitimate constitutionally restricted scope of the national government, to the extent these programs are rife with fraud, to the extent they are not effective, and to the extent they obligate future (not just current) citizens with ever higher levels of taxation, taxation levels have exceeded their legitimate role. However, there is another problem with the current system of taxation to which conservatives object, and that is the use of the federal tax system to attempt to redistribute wealth via the Robin-Hood-inspired philosophy of taking from the rich and giving to the poor. Conservatives see the right to retain one's property, not just land but all goods, resources, money, and labor, of the individual, as a crucial right for a free society, that is restricted at the peril of all other liberties. Conservative writer Russell Kirk listed this right as among the *Ten conservative principles*:

Seventh, conservatives are persuaded that freedom and property are closely linked. Separate property from private possession and Leviathan becomes master of

all... Economic leveling, conservatives maintain, is not economic progress... (Kirk, 1993)

Contrast this view from that of leading liberal leaders, such as President Obama:

“If you talk to Warren (Buffett), he’ll tell you his preference is not to meddle in the economy at all – let the market work, however it’s going to work, and then *just tax the heck out of people at the end and just redistribute it*,” Obama said. “That way you’re not impeding efficiency, and you’re achieving equality on the back end.” He continued by saying that he thought there was some merit to Buffett’s argument. (cited in Leonhardt, 2008, p. M30)

One of the major planks of Marx’s Communist Manifesto was to abolish the right of inheritance, again for the purpose of redistributing wealth. As this article is being written, the President’s proposed federal budget establishes an inheritance tax (known by conservatives as the death tax) at rates of up to 45% on estates valued at more than \$3.5 million (Staff, 2009). Keep in mind that the money in one’s estate has already been taxed and thus the estate tax represents double taxation. The taxation of estates leads to a decline in savings, spending on luxuries, and a reduction in accumulated capital that can be used to fund small business. My widow will be more likely to recklessly spend our estate on frivolities, knowing that what she leaves will be confiscated by the federal government. The amount of federal revenues thus raised via the estate tax is relatively low, but this is not its rationale, which is primarily redistributionist in nature. Again, Persons A and B (with lavish tax shelters) decide that Person C shall be required to pay an estate tax upon his or her death, in part to fund programs for Person D. The dead are even more forgotten than the living, since they do not vote. Conservatives remember Persons A and B, and would like to see that Persons A and B not only get to keep as much as possible of what they have legally acquired, but that they are free to determine the disposition of their estates upon their death, free from confiscatory government taxation. This is social justice.

Another major plank found in the Communist Manifesto is for a heavy progressive or graduated income tax. This too is for the purposes of distributing wealth and preventing the accumulation of capital. We already have this in the United States. In 2005 the richest 1% of income tax filers paid about 39% of all income taxes that year, and the richest 10% paid about 70% (Staff, 2007). In 2006 the top quintile of households filing income taxes paid over 69% of all revenues collected by the federal government, while the bottom quintile paid *no* income taxes at all, and 23 million received payments (over \$4 billion) via the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) program. Thus not only are the Persons A and B of America paying far more than their fair share of federal income tax, they are also directly making payments to Person D via the EITC. This is not social justice.

When the poor pay nothing at all, their involvement in responsible government declines precipitously, except to vote in favor of the politicians who will continue to provide them with social benefits, such as the EITC. This situation seems remarkably similar to that described over 2000 years ago by commentators during the Social Wars of ancient Rome:

If the middle class has any function at all it is to provide us with taxes, with which we can bribe the mobs of Rome and keep them contented and docile. It is true that the plebs of Rome are mere animals, but there are so many of them and we need their votes for our power! Let the middle-class be our servant to that end... (Gaius Julius Caesar, the Elder, cited in Caldwell, 1965, p. 101)

and

It is hard to say which is the more evil, those who bribe the masses, or the masses who receive the bribe. . . He who receives a bribe, so he must not work to cover and feed and house himself, is less than the amiable dog. . . The mob protects nothing but its belly, and he who caters to that belly for its grunted approval must stand before history as lower even than the basest slave. . . (Marcus Livius Drusus, cited in Caldwell, 1965, pp. 101–102)

Conservatives believe in supporting essential governmental programs via modest levels of taxation. Most social welfare programs are not usually seen as an essential federal governmental service. Taking money from taxpayers to support non-essential government-provided services is therefore socially unjust.

Affirmative action

Conservatives support affirmative action to redress past inequities or discriminatory treatment. But they do not support so-called affirmative action programs wherein such a history of discriminatory treatment does not exist. For example, many universities provide admissions preferences to men, admitting males who are under-qualified relative to women applicants. This is difficult to justify on the grounds that males have historically been discriminated against in terms of college admissions by virtue of their gender. In fact, the historical evidence suggests the opposite dynamic was common – men were afforded more opportunities to be admitted to college than similarly qualified women. The US Commission on Civil Rights is investigating the issue of affirmative action in colleges admissions, favoring men, and it is likely they will condemn the practice (Jaschik, 2009), even though it is widespread. Similarly, conservatives, adhering to the principle of equal treatment for all, object to the practice of colleges providing “legacy admissions”, of giving a preference in admissions to the children of alumni. The offspring of college-educated men and women can hardly be considered an oppressed group, and when a less academically-qualified “legacy” child is admitted *in lieu* of the more qualified non-legacy applicant, this is socially unjust and of course repugnant to conservatives. Legacy admissions may also be illegal, although this has not yet been tested in court (Shadowen, Tulante, & Alpern, 2009).

The NASW has a strong affirmative action policy in all of its operations, including the composition of ballots for national and state elective offices. Once I put myself forward to run for state NASW office, and I received the following email from the chapter NASW officer in charge of elections:

Bruce, the NASW national office dictates that our board composition parallels our membership. Unfortunately we cannot run a male for Board-Member-at-Large. The maximum number of males is on the board already. . . we are a largely female organization.

I found it astonishing that as a dues-paying member of the NASW I was disenfranchised because of my gender. This is all the more socially unjust in that my male African American colleagues would similarly not be allowed to appear on the ballot. Surely the distinguished NASW does not have a history of discriminating against women, and thus a so-called affirmative action policy favoring women over men is socially unjust, and hence repugnant to conservatives (for a more complete description on this episode, see Thyer, 2010).

Abortion and the death penalty

To conservatives, human life is a person's most precious possession and they should not be deprived of it. Conservatives distrust granting government the right to kill persons, in as much as we are constitutionally seen to have a right to life. Many conservatives, including the writer, advocate for the abolishment of the death penalty because of the historically unjust manner in which it has been carried out (e.g. the poor, and minorities of color are more likely to be executed, compared with white persons, having committed similar crimes; mistakes can be made and innocent individuals convicted and executed). We also do not favor granting the power of life and death to the government. It is conceded that the government should take steps to protect the public from dangerous persons, but this can be done less expensively and with greater justice via imprisonment, not execution.

Similarly the conservative perspective on the sanctity of human life makes most conservatives advocate for more restrictive abortion laws. Once intended to avoid forcing a woman to carry a baby conceived via rape or incest, or to avoid a life-threatening medical condition exacerbated by pregnancy, abortion now is simply a matter of convenient birth control for many women. Conservatives shun the idea that a human life could be terminated so that a woman could avoid the experience of carrying that child to term. In this instance, the developing fetus is seen as a human life, worthy of protection. The act of abortion commits a serious social injustice against this developing person, and the right to life supersedes the woman's right to avoid the inconveniences of an unwanted pregnancy.

Conservatives, ever concerned with equal treatment for all individuals, and wanting to promote a more socially just society, view with dismay the disproportionate impact that liberal abortion laws have had on the Black community in America. For example, although about 13% of the female population ages 15–44 years are minority women, this group experiences about 36% of the abortions. It has been estimated that over 1800 African American babies are aborted in the United States every day, totaling about 16 million abortions to Black women since 1973. More Black babies die from abortion than African Americans die from AIDS, accident, heart disease and cancer combined! Abortion has had a huge demographic impact on the United States, to the extent that the Black population would be about 36% larger than it is at present, were it not for abortion. Some conservatives have labeled this "Black Genocide".³

Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, one of the leading pro-abortion advocacy groups, advocated for the liberalizing abortion and sterilization laws, specifically for the purpose of reducing the numbers of Black people (Sanger, 1922). According to Evans and Makow (2009, p. 1):

In a 1934 letter, Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood, wrote to her financial sponsor, Clarence Gamble (the Proctor & Gamble heir):

"We should hire three or four colored ministers, preferably with social-service backgrounds, and with engaging personalities. The most successful educational approach to the Negro is through a religious appeal. We don't want the word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population and the minister is the man who can straighten out that idea if it ever occurs to any of their more rebellious members".

Most conservatives do not wish to abolish abortion, recognizing that there are many circumstances where such a decision is unhappily needed. But in the words of Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Every abortion is a tragedy" and thus some additional modest

restrictions may be appropriate. Examples include reducing the practice of aborting late-term viable babies (admittedly rare, but still available), and of providing support and incentives for women to choose to carry their baby to term, and perhaps give the baby up for adoption if the mother is unable to care for her infant. Or requiring that physicians be required to notify and obtain consent from the parents of minor non-emancipated teenagers prior to providing an abortion to these minors.

Summary

Conservative principles are completely congruent with the value of social justice, as maintained by the profession of social work, as well as by society at large. By adhering to certain core principles – the value of human life and liberty, the right to own and retain one’s property, the equal treatment of all persons under the law, conservatives can present a nuanced and justifiable argument relating to selected social justice issues of keen interest to social workers. Among these issues are the morality of social welfare programs, the use of the income tax system to promote the redistribution of wealth, affirmative action, the death penalty, and abortion. Conservative social workers believe that adhering to their principles results in a *more* socially just world via the creation of more socially just programs and policies, than the practices espoused by their more liberal colleagues. It is both ironic and socially unjust that conservative political ideology is both largely ignored and demonized by mainstream social work. The profession needs both a greater appreciation and acceptance of the legitimacy of the conservative political ideology held by so many of its members. It would do the profession good to recall the advice of early social work pioneer Edward T. Devine: “It was the first duty of social workers to be persistently and aggressively nonpartisan, to maintain such relations with men of goodwill in all parties as well as ensure their cooperation in specific measures of the common good” (cf. Margolin, 1997, p. 5).

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Notes

1. Retrieved October 30, 2009, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservatism>
2. Retrieved November 10, 2009, from http://councilfor.cagw.org/site/PageServer?pagename=reports_pigbook2009
3. Retrieved November 14, 2009, from <http://www.blackgenocide.org/>

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