



Putting the Social Back into Social Work: Principles and Models for Courageous Citizenship

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This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

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Abstract

Social work's classically liberal foundations can be restored and protected by promoting viewpoint diversity, peaceful pluralism, and courageous citizenship. Examining ideological homogeneity and reported discrimination within the profession, practical models are presented that foster dialogue, human dignity, self-determination, and collaborative problem-solving across political, cultural, and social differences.

Introduction

The National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics has roots in classically liberal principles: respect for rule of law, human dignity and individual rights; mutual cooperation; self-determination; and peaceful pluralism. However, a pervasive idea in the social work field that “the personal is political” means there is often a conflation of personal ideology and politics with professional practices. This can interfere with the ability of social workers to teach, serve, and work with those who have more moderate or conservative points of view. Research shows that ideological orthodoxy creates an environment where some social work [students](#) and professionals experience harmful discrimination and are limited in their ability to engage in intellectual curiosity with classmates and colleagues.

ProSocial Workers seeks to bring some balance to the field by inviting educators, practitioners, policy influencers, and researchers to uphold social work's classically liberal foundation. This approach aligns with a variety of mental health, systems change, and peacebuilding concepts that can inform and support professionals as contributors to a healthier civic society. The intention here is not to swing in reactive ways in an anti-progressive direction as some are wont to do; rather, this paper seeks to ground in universally-applicable principles and models that can apply to micro clinical work, mezzo/small-group and organizational settings, and macro efforts around policy and systems change.

The paper begins by exploring the landscape of the social work realm – including research about the political and ideological makeup of the profession, as well as studies and stories around alleged discrimination that students and professionals have experienced. Various concepts, tools, and models that align with NASW values and ethics will then be briefly summarized with the intent to help support the pursuit of peaceful personal living and fostering a more humane, respectful civic culture.

The social work landscape

Professorial Perspectives

A good place to start when creating a birds-eye view of the field of social work is within the academy. As students pursue undergraduate and graduate degrees, they are trained on the NASW Code of Ethics, as well as a more general lens and language for their future work. In [a study done in 2023](#), Stoeffler, Young, and Hassler set out to get a clearer picture of the political persuasions of social work faculty in the United States. Their position was that – contrary to some opinions – “theoretical perspectives and [andra]gogy utilized in social work education

tend to arise from a conservative paradigm ([Robbins et al., 2019](#)).” In practice, however, the makeup of the social work sector tells a different story.

Their findings can be found in Figure 1. Respondents (n=1037) from accredited social work programs reported on both their ideological and political leanings.

The researchers concluded that “knowing that social work educators identify as liberal-progressive... social work academia should...embrace progressivism and...prepare for any existential threats posed by policy stances that aim at suppressing liberal-progressive ideals.”

This perspective is consistent with a *critical theory* approach to social work that concerns itself with “[relations of culture, power, and identity](#)” in particular social and historical contexts. Citing the NASW Code of Ethics, [Stoeffler, Young, and Hassler](#) note NASW’s expectation that social workers “focus on knowledge of systems of oppression, opposing discrimination, and respect for culture and ethnic diversity.” These authors also used the [2022 statement of Council on Social Work Education \(CSWE\)](#) to support their position. More specifically, social work tends to concern itself with anti-racism and anti-oppression, with particular concern for specific oppressed groups like ethnic minorities and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Although the Stoeffler, et al. study was conducted in 2023, the perspective put forward by these researchers is decades old. Consider this from close to the turn of the century: “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 will reject conservative thought and conservative politicians” (Newdom, 2003, p. 3).

This form of binary, either/or way of thinking (*progressivism = good, conservatism = bad*) is prevalent in the realm of social work. Allegations that conservatives can’t be social workers have been made in many settings, [including in NASW’s community forum spaces](#). Conservative social workers have been “cancelled” or have even lost jobs when only seeking to model intellectually curious questions. [Students](#) in social work [programs](#) who hold more [conservative](#) and/or [religious views](#) have also had negative experiences.

In the mini-documentary, [Seeds of Doubt](#), Alli, a graduate-level social work student, shares the following:

When I first went into social work school, I was very bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, and I really thought that everyone was open to listening and learning from each other. [But] I noticed that there was an expectation of the way that you were supposed to answer questions for assignments.... No one was allowed to have any kind of individuality.

I remember one of my classmates had said that whenever they write a paper, they basically just add buzzwords in, because they know that’s the only way they can get a good grade...and it worked every time.

This sort of “walking on eggshells” experience is not limited to the realm of social work. For example, it is affecting [teachers at the K-12 level](#). People in many settings are feeling like [they have to self-censor](#). Of course, self-censorship and Courageous Citizenship cannot co-exist; our

sociopolitical climate is in need for change and improvement – and social workers have an important role to play.

“There is no such thing as a non-political social worker”

In 2020, after the deaths of George Floyd and others, the Michigan chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) posted this statement on [its Facebook page](#). This notion that “[the personal is political](#)” has been taught in 21st-century social work programs around the country, but it has its roots in earlier philosophical and sociological perspectives.

More specifically, C. Wright Mills, an American sociologist, published *The Sociological Imagination* in the late 1950s. In the book Mills “argued that individual experiences are inextricably connected with the greater social and historical context” ([Kelly, 2022](#)). This lens toward systems thinking is valuable – even critical – to healthy living at all levels (personal, familial, communities, societies, nations). But a *critical theory* approach can, unfortunately, produce a sort of tunnel vision that blinds social workers to the wide range of contextually-defined situations where “the minority” may differ. As one former ASU student noted to one of the authors of this paper, “As the only conservative, religious student in my program, I told my classmates that *I* was their diversity.”

From content to process – and people

We at ProSocial Workers take the position that “The personal is *social*.” We want to “[put the social back into social work](#).” We recognize that, along with clinical work, social workers are expected to be politically active, but aren’t always given tools and models that elevate beyond the *content* of an issue to productive, useful, and time-tested *process* ideals.

We all contribute to our shared sociopolitical space. We are *all* responsible to each other. Because of how human networks work, [our choices can influence people three degrees out](#) (which is about 1000 people!). None of us can choose to violate the [dignity](#) of another human without impacting the water we *all* swim in. And we can’t talk about systems change without looking at the intersectional systems that include us all. If we are not careful, we inadvertently create new systems of oppression (see the Karpman Triangle below).

Fortunately, social workers have some recent guidance that can elevate the field. In response to changing federal perspectives and policies around progressive definitions of and approaches around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), in 2025, [CWSE issued an updated statement](#) to ensure that social workers were not put in positions that violated changing federal and state laws. Some social workers celebrated this shift, noting that under the updated CSWE statement, “Programs must demonstrate that graduates possess the knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive processes necessary for professional practice with clients from *all* backgrounds” (emphasis added; from a yet-unpublished paper by Nafees Alam and Naomi Farber).

Put succinctly, *viewpoint* diversity may be the most important form of diversity that social workers and others can practice and protect. Pluralism of perspectives is a cornerstone of “Courageous Citizenship.”

What follows are concepts and models that can help assist social workers and others in this challenge and opportunity to contribute to “a more perfect union” by intentionally fostering dignity and respect for varied points of view.

Principles and models for prosocial pluralism

Point-Counterpoint

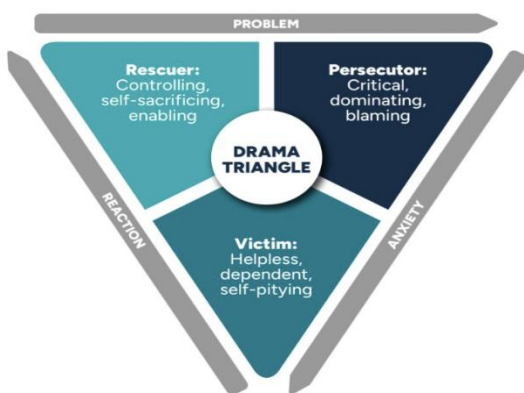
The [NASW Code of Ethics](#) states that social workers should practice “awareness and cultural humility,” “self-reflection [and] self-correction” and a commit[ment] to lifelong learning.” However, as has already been explored, the field of social work doesn’t always model and practice intellectual humility and curiosity toward intradisciplinary sociopolitical biases. The Point-Counterpoint model of teaching and engaging can help expand thinking and foster more open dialogue through elements like the Socratic Method, facilitating conversations that provide opportunities to intentionally explore different points of view in an environment of dignity and mutual respect.

[A colleague](#) recently summed up a practice that channels Point-Counterpoint by saying, “Whenever someone expresses a point of view, I ask them to provide five resources supporting their point of view, and five challenging it.”

Dr. Nafees Alam is a champion of Point-Counterpoint, and [teaches continuing education classes](#) on the topic and recently had an article published in [the Journal of Social Work Education](#).

Karpman’s Drama Triangle

A model used in many mental health and emotional resilience spaces is called the Karpman Drama Triangle (see [image below](#)).



Unfortunately, when social workers talk about “systems of oppression” they are inadvertently perpetuating the inherent harms of the Drama Triangle. Note: This is not to suggest that oppression doesn’t happen or doesn’t need to be addressed. But *how* we address it matters!

This model explains how human beings get stuck in roles in the Triangle: the *victim*, the *persecutor*, the *rescuer*.

We can consider anti-racism as an example of how this works. The very concept of being *anti* or against something sets up this Triangle trap. The victim in anti-racism is obviously the person who is a racial minority (which can be true – racial minorities *have* been victimized). But the key is to consider what the desired solution is to anti-racism. It’s that Whites need to do something differently because they are the *persecutors* in the model – all while *also* being expected to be rescuers.

What happens, however, is that when people feel attacked, labeled, criticized, and so on, it's very human to then slide into the victim role. Consider the visceral responses, for example, to DEI by conservatives. Instead of seeking to build actual relationships across racial divides, people on both "sides" of the issue stay stuck in the Triangle. This doesn't only foment division and even disdain – it hinders the very solutions that anti-racists purport to be championing!

Again, Whites *do* have improvements to make in our sociocultural environment. But the improvements can't just be issue-driven. The true solutions lie in care-filled relationships. As a [professor](#) shared thirty years ago in a business strategy class, "The more my feet have to move, the more my mind needs to be inspired and the more my heart needs to be touched." Humans need human touch to want to change.

The Space Between

Philosopher Martin Buber is known for his perspective on how we engage with people. Do we treat them as an *it* (an object) or as a person? But Jim Ferrell helped clarify what Buber really meant. If we really want to bring about positive change in our lives and in the world, we need to engage in *the space between*. The "hyphen" in Buber's model is the key. As long as we are making judgments about others without engaging with them and intentionally showing up in that space between, we are treating people like objects. "[\[T\]he space between us...is where everything happens.](#)"

Ferrell has even created a way to mathematically assess the space between – a space that no one owns.

This concept and model is revolutionizing how people talk about culture and relationships and is something that could greatly improve how social workers think about and engage in macro social change initiatives.

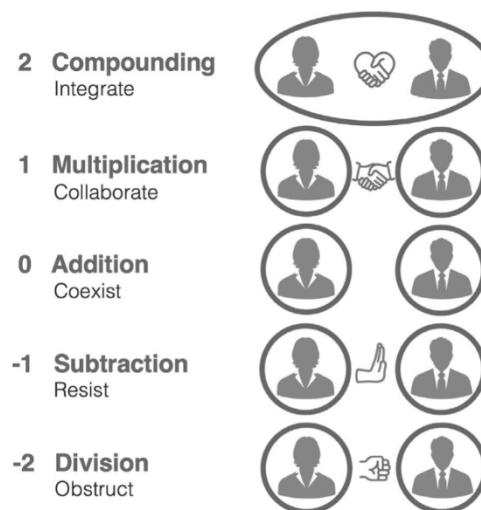
The And Way

The *And Way* is a model created by Kelsey Blahnik, LCSW and is explored in a 2026 book by the same name. Blahnik [describes her model](#) as one that can help people "embrace complexity [by] mov[ing] beyond 'either-or' thinking [into] nuance, connection, and growth in personal and professional life." As a therapist, Blahnik has also mapped therapeutic practices onto her model.

Blahnik will be providing a CE-eligible training on The *And Way* later this year. She also gave a presentation through the Braver Angels Mental Health Professionals Network last fall.

Developing a Democratic Disposition

[Dr. Leonard McMahon](#), a self-proclaimed liberal professor at Pacific Religious University, has a deep "interest in improving the common good through political theology,



spirituality, and pastoral care...work[ing] through his consultancy, Common Ground Dialogue, to bring divergent citizens into deeper conversation for the sake of our democracy.” He teaches around a concept, [Developing a Democratic Disposition](#) that empowers individuals to step into the aforementioned “space between” regardless of what other people choose to do or not do. His model is also a direct antidote to the Drama Triangle mentioned earlier.

Non-violent Communication

Space does not allow more than just mentioning [Dr. Marshall Rosenberg](#)’s work on Non-violent Communication (NVC) – a concept and practice that literally could change the world.

Standing for “our values”

The title of Stoeffler, et al.’s article was “Embracing Our Values: Social Work Faculty Progressivism in a Conservative World.” This title misses that there is no one ubiquitous box into which all social workers can be placed. In truth, using a term from social work, each of us is an [intersectional](#) human being - , however, that the “we” in social work really is ubiquitous. In truth, no person can be neatly packaged into a box.

Going back to the article if social workers are charged to practice a “focus on knowledge of systems of oppression, opposing discrimination, and respect for ... diversity,” they must seek to address *all* forms of oppression and discrimination, including religious and political. When social workers dig deep and use the Code of Ethics as a compass or anchor, it becomes clear that no persona or political ideology is sufficiently able to hold all that the Code requires.

This paper puts forth the position that a *progressive-only* approach to social work education and practice actually violates the field’s Code of Ethics and core values. This is true the other direction as well; for example, a full triumph of a Christian nationalist approach to social work (or government) would equally interfere with personal and collective well-being. Extremes of any form are antithetical to a healthy and productive civic, social, political, and cultural dynamic. As imperfect as the Founding Fathers were, they sought to establish a governmental system that protected each and all against domination of any one political platform or power structure –be that ideological, political, or religious. They committed their all – their “lives...fortunes, and...sacred honor” to uphold a different way of life and leadership. They wanted to protect the right of people to have and hold different beliefs, with the hope that Americans could not only co-exist harmoniously but solve problems collaboratively.

At a recent transformative mediation training, a story was shared about a peacebuilding conference. One of the panels included an attorney representing a religious organization seeking to defend what was then called “traditional marriage” and the head of a well-known gay/queer rights organization. As orthogonal as they were in position, they realized that they were each talking past each other. Rather than fight against one another, these two main constituents in this state-level battle over religious and gay rights led to a remarkable solution that held space for all and protected both parties in significant ways. Instead of staying stuck in a [prisoner’s dilemma](#) situation, policies moved forward – and so did relationships.

In the session following the panel, a man interrupted the presenter and said something to this effect, “I can’t believe that no one is saying anything about what just happened during that panel

discussion! You who are religious should be ashamed of yourselves! We need to *stand our ground!*”

The facilitator — a religious parent of two queer children — took a deep breath. He reflected on the many ways he could respond, and had the presence of mind to lean into this situation. He grabbed a portable microphone, made his way to the back of the room, and engaged with this man.

“It sounds like you are in a lot of pain. Do you want to tell me about that?”

The man nodded, and proceeded to talk about painful experiences in his family and with his gay brother, with whom he obviously didn’t see eye-to-eye. (Rule #1 in transformative mediation is to listen, to let each person vent. This allows them to be heard, to feel seen, and to get emotions moving with the hope that they can flow through a person rather than stay stuck and come out sideways another time.)

The facilitator then turned to the rest of the audience and asked, “How many of you are affected by this issue in one way or another?” All hands went up.

He then turned back to the man and asked, “Is it okay if we go back to something you said?” The man agreed. “What did you mean by ‘We need to stand our ground!’? Who is included in the ‘our’?”

“Does this include me? Others in this room? What about your brother?”

Soon everyone in the room — especially this man — could see where this was going. There is no ground in these debates and conflicts that only belongs to a select few. The reality is that we are all sojourners on this place called Earth. We are all humans, born with inherent worth and dignity. We all started life with birth and we will all die. We all need to eat, drink, sleep, and connect with others. We all have stories that influence how we see, experience, and engage with the world — and each other. We each and all have nervous systems that want to drive our busses — but that hinder our ability to connect and to problem-solve. We are all citizens. We get to decide the degree to which courage is infused into our citizenship.

It takes intentionality, discipline, and courage to not let “fight or flight” define our lives, our relationships, or our politics. And that is the great human experiment: To discover ways to learn to do better, together.

This paper has sought to share some tools, principles, and models to help us all on this journey toward both personal and collective peace. As the saying goes, “What we focus on grows.” It is our hope that we can keep our eyes on the highest-level goals we can — with a vision that transcends personal, social, political, or ideological differences.

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Work degree to complement her career focus on helping people and systems grow and improve. Michelle is currently an intern with ProSocial Workers.

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