

Reflections from the Guest Editors: Navigating Change in a Time of Uncertainty

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Abstract: This first Issue in the Special Series affirms that helping professionals cannot remain neutral during periods of social and political upheaval. Instead, the reflections gathered here demonstrate the need for justice-centered, culturally responsive, ethically grounded, and action-oriented practice that responds directly to the realities shaping marginalized communities and the professionals who serve alongside them. Through narratives of advocacy, resistance, healing, leadership, education, and community engagement, readers are invited to reflect on the responsibilities of helping work during divisive times and to consider how advocacy, ethics, and collective care remain central to professional practice.

Keywords: collective care, resistance and resiliency, cultural responsiveness, ethical practice

In moments of political uncertainty, helping professionals are called to do more than provide services. We are asked to lead, advocate, teach, organize, heal, mentor, and remain ethically grounded while navigating systems shaped by inequity.

Across the United States and beyond, practitioners, educators, clinicians, and community advocates continue to confront shifting sociopolitical realities marked by threats to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; restrictions on reproductive rights; educational censorship; immigration instability; racialized violence; reductions in health and human services funding; and widening disparities affecting Black, Brown, immigrant, LGBTQIA+, and other historically excluded communities.

These conditions shape not only the communities we serve but also the emotional, ethical, educational, and professional experiences of those working within social work, healthcare, behavioral health, education, advocacy organizations, and community institutions. In keeping with the interdisciplinary mission of *Reflections*, this series welcomes narratives from social work, healthcare, nursing, behavioral health, public health, education, legal advocacy, community practice, and other helping professions whose work intersects with justice, healing, and human dignity.

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The evolving national climate is not a distant backdrop to helping practice; it is a force that directly shapes the conditions under which professionals teach, lead, advocate, heal, and serve. This Special Issue begins a critical conversation as helping professionals continue navigating increasing demands for social change while also working to preserve spaces where advocacy, resistance, reflection, and dissenting voices remain valued, protected, and supported. Across disciplines, the contributors in this issue illuminate both the urgency of this moment and the innovative strategies professionals continue to develop in response.

The “Urgency of Now” emerges as a central thread throughout this issue, as shifting policies and institutional changes increasingly create barriers to social equity while simultaneously challenging helping professionals’ ability to provide services, foster learning environments, and perform professional responsibilities without fear of retaliation, funding loss, surveillance, or professional consequences. The narratives gathered here remind us that helping work does not occur outside of socio-political conditions. Rather, the helping profession is deeply interconnected with policy, institutional power, community resistance, and collective survival.

Reflections, Narratives, and the Importance of Space

As Guest Editors, we are honored to introduce this first Issue in the Special Series “Navigating Change: Reflective Insights for Helping Professionals in Shifting Political Landscapes.” What began as a single Special Issue call evolved into a multi-Issue series after overwhelming response—and exceptional quality in the submissions received from helping professionals across disciplines.

As *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping* celebrates more than 30 years of creating space for storytelling, critical reflection, and interdisciplinary dialogue, this Special Series continues that tradition by providing a forum within which helping professionals can document, examine, and learn from experiences navigating complex social, political, and institutional realities.

The breadth and depth of these narratives underscore this need. We approached this Issue not only as scholars, but also as helping professionals, educators, advocates, and witnesses to the emotional and structural realities shaping our communities, classrooms, organizations, and institutions.

This Issue speaks directly to practitioners, educators, students, policy advocates, researchers, and interdisciplinary helping professionals committed to justice-centered practice. While the contributors represent diverse disciplines and lived experiences, their narratives collectively reinforce the importance of advocacy, ethical leadership, culturally grounded engagement, and critical reflection during periods of disruption and institutional change.

In upcoming Issues in this series, we especially welcome contributions from nursing, law, and other helping professions whose voices have historically enriched *Reflections* and remain vital to

this ongoing conversation. Your perspectives deepen interdisciplinary dialogue and strengthen the collective work of justice, healing, and human dignity.

Atop the Legacy of HBCU Advocacy and Justice

This Special Issue also builds upon the foundational essay “HBCUs Respond: Social Justice and Social Work Education in a Trump Era” (Estreet et al., 2018) previously published in *Reflections*. In that earlier work, we reflected on the responsibilities of HBCU social work educators during the first Trump administration, examining advocacy, curriculum transformation, student engagement, and the role Historically Black Colleges and Universities take in preparing students to respond to shifting political realities. As Guest Editors, we—Dr. Kenya C. Jones of Clark Atlanta University; Dr. Anthony T. Estreet, previously of Morgan State University and now Chief Executive Officer of the National Association of Social Workers; and Dr. James T. Freeman of Johnson C. Smith University—value how our professional experiences within HBCUs continue to shape our perspectives on justice-centered education, culturally responsive pedagogy, transformative learning, and collective empowerment.

Jointly, our experiences have reinforced the enduring importance of advocacy, community engagement, critical consciousness, and leadership development rooted in equity and liberation. Dr. Estreet’s national leadership through NASW also provides a broader policy and advocacy lens on the ethical, professional, and structural challenges confronting helping professionals and marginalized communities across the country.

This first Issue on “Navigating Change” reflects a collective response to these ongoing realities. The authors represented throughout this edition offer narratives rooted in advocacy, ethical leadership, trauma, resilience, racial justice, education, philanthropy, healthcare, and community empowerment. Together, these narratives illuminate how helping professionals continue to navigate uncertainty while sustaining commitments to collective care, justice, empowerment, and transformative practice.

Flowing between their varied themes, this Special Issue’s articles flow intentionally between their varied themes from policy and education to healing and community resilience. Some narratives directly confront structural inequities and sociopolitical realities, while others illuminate the emotional, relational, and spiritual consequences these shifts create within helping practice and professional identity.

Taken together, the contributions reinforce the interconnectedness of personal experience, professional ethics, community engagement, and systemic change. They also remind us that helping work is not separate from public life; it is shaped by it and helps to shape it.

Reflections from This First Issue of the Special Series “Navigating Change”

Collectively, the manuscripts presented in this first Issue invite readers to examine helping practice through multiple lenses, including advocacy, healthcare, education, leadership, ethics, historical memory, trauma, philanthropy, and community resilience.

Hayes and Goldblatt Hyatt examine the development of a reproductive justice collaborative grounded in advocacy, abolitionist frameworks, and collective accountability. The article reflects the emotional and ethical labor required to sustain justice-centered work during divisive times while emphasizing solidarity and collaboration in supporting vulnerable communities.

Francis offers a deeply reflective narrative centered on affirming LGBTQIA+ individuals within healthcare and mental health practice. Through the lens of nursing and helping relationships, the article highlights the importance of culturally responsive and affirming care amid rising hostility toward LGBTQIA+ communities.

Robertson provides a powerful reflection on academic freedom, censorship, identity, and faculty vulnerability within increasingly restrictive educational climates. The article captures the emotional and professional toll of educational surveillance and ideological policing while emphasizing the importance of resistance and truth-telling within higher education.

In the next article, Wright explores advocacy through ethical decision-making models and Afrocentric principles such as humanistic values, autonomy, and empowerment; this work reminds us that ethical leadership within helping professions requires adaptability, courage, and a willingness to confront systemic inequities directly.

Cornelius revisits the legacy of Marcus Garvey and the historical foundations of racial uplift, self-determination, and collective empowerment. By connecting Garvey’s work to contemporary helping professions, the article reinforces the enduring significance of Black leadership traditions and liberation-centered practice during periods of social instability.

Childs and Robinson center the voices of emerging social work leaders while examining educational inequities, policy implications, and the ethical responsibilities of helping professionals advocating within public school systems. The article highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, student advocacy, and critical race perspectives in responding to educational disparities.

Estes offers a timely reflection on the ethical, emotional, and professional realities of reproductive healthcare following the *Roe* and *Dobbs* decisions. The article highlights advocacy, accessibility, interdisciplinary partnerships, and the role of practitioners responding to shifting reproductive policies and barriers to care.

Grape and Lane reflect on systemic inequities intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, racial violence, and political unrest. Through their experiences as social work educators, the authors

challenge neutrality and call for purposeful action within classrooms, institutions, and helping professions committed to justice-oriented education.

Riddley, Savage, Howard, Baggett, Anderson, and Dyson examine how shifting political landscapes are reshaping social work field education, particularly within Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Reflecting on student safety, field supervision, advocacy, and innovative placement models, the authors demonstrate how social work educators are adapting field education to ensure meaningful, equitable, and ethically grounded learning experiences while preparing future practitioners to navigate increasingly complex practice environments.

Onifade concludes the first Issue by examining Black self-reliance, infrastructure development, Pan-African traditions, and collective economic empowerment as pathways toward resilience and liberation. The article reinforces the Issue's recurring emphasis on historical memory, community responsibility, and collective survival during unsurety.

Together, these narratives remind us that helping professionals are not passive observers of political change. We are active participants in advocacy, healing, resistance, mentorship, education, philanthropy, and community transformation. Across disciplines and perspectives, the contributors challenge the myth of professional neutrality while emphasizing the importance of ethical leadership, collective responsibility, culturally grounded practice, and community-centered care.

Creating Space for Collective Voice and Reflection

As was described in the Artist's Statement, the cover photograph for this Special Issue, "Shared Spaces," offers a visual invitation into the central themes woven throughout these narratives. Rather than a single profession or event, the image presents a quiet landscape that symbolizes the reflective spaces helping professionals intentionally cultivate within classrooms, counseling offices, hospitals, community organizations, neighborhoods, and places of healing.

The empty swings remind us that helping work begins by creating space—for listening, mentoring, teaching, grieving, healing, organizing, and imagining new possibilities. The mature trees represent resilience, rootedness, protection, and the collective wisdom that sustains communities across generations. Looking beyond the trees, the open field and distant horizon symbolize hope, renewal, and the belief that even amid uncertainty, opportunities for justice, transformation, and human flourishing remain.

Like the reflections contained throughout this Issue, the photograph does not prescribe a single interpretation. Instead, it invites readers to pause, reflect, and consider their own role in creating spaces where dignity, compassion, advocacy, and collective care continue to grow.

What became immediately clear throughout the review process was that this Special Section met a profound need within the helping professions. The overwhelming number of submissions represented one of the largest responses to a Special Section theme in *Reflections* history and

affirmed the urgency of creating spaces where professionals can critically reflect, document lived experiences, challenge oppression, process collective grief, and imagine possibilities for justice, healing, and liberation.

The expansion from a single Special Issue to a multi-issue Series reflects both the urgency of the topic and the desire among helping professionals to share and connect during periods of social and political change. It also reinforces the importance of interdisciplinary dialogue, as contributors represent a broad range of helping professions committed to justice, healing, education, healthcare, community engagement, and human well-being.

As guest editors, we are deeply grateful to each author who entrusted us with their reflections, scholarship, vulnerabilities, and experiences. We also recognize the helping professionals across communities who continue to labor within difficult systems while upholding commitments to dignity, justice, equity, and collective liberation.

We offer special appreciation to Rosa James for her contributions as an additional reviewer. Her thoughtful feedback, generosity of time, and commitment to the integrity of the review process strengthened this edition and supported the development of the “Navigating Change” Special Series.

The reflections gathered throughout this Issue underscore that helping professional practice cannot be separated from the political, social, and institutional realities shaping the lives of individuals and communities. In a sociopolitical climate characterized by intensified attacks on equity and inclusion efforts, helping professionals are called to move beyond technical competence toward practice that is critically reflexive, culturally responsive, anti-oppressive, trauma-informed, and grounded in advocacy for human rights and social justice.

Consistent with the Council on Social Work Education (2022) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards and the National Association of Social Workers (2021) Code of Ethics, the narratives in this Issue reinforce that helping practice is inherently ethical, relational, political, and justice-oriented. The implications for practice are both immediate and substantial: Helping professionals must be prepared to confront structural inequities, engage policy realities at the macro level, collaborate across disciplines, protect the dignity and worth of marginalized communities, and sustain reflective and accountable practice even amidst uncertainty and resistance.

Educators must continue preparing students for justice-oriented leadership and ethical advocacy, while organizations and community leaders must remain committed to culturally responsive and equity-centered approaches despite shifting political pressures and funding realities. Far from peripheral, the concerns of advocacy, collective care, inclusion, and social justice remain central to the ethical mandate and contemporary relevance of the helping professions.

Taken together, the narratives in “Navigating Change” affirm that helping professionals are not merely responding to political upheaval but are actively shaping more just and inclusive futures

through practice, reflection, resistance, solidarity, and transformative action. In a time when silence is often rewarded and truth is increasingly contested, these narratives remind us that helping professionals remain essential voices in advancing justice, healing, and human dignity. The urgency of this moment demands not only reflection, but courageous action rooted in humanity, ethics, advocacy, and collective care.

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