

The Horse and the Herd: Steadying the Shift Between Micro and Macro-Direct Social Work Practice

Consider the picture below. What do you see?



Did you say to yourself, “Five horses”? If you did, you are correct – but not entirely. Even acknowledging the space surrounding these horses may be incomplete. Did you consider that these horses may actually be part of a herd? If you did not, you are not alone. Most of us are not aware of how essential a horse’s herd is to its psychological well-being and, therefore, how important it is to acknowledge that element of this picture – a recognition that makes our perception complete.

This deeper understanding of the picture reflects the real world of horses and holds true for us as human beings,

as well. Even people who spend most of their time by themselves interact with others at some point, and those same people are always affected by the lives of others. Recognizing that all individuals are part of a larger system (part of a seen and unseen “herd”) is essential to fully understanding who they are and, for us as social workers, how best to serve them.

A quick sprint through time reveals that the focus of social work has shifted back and forth between “the horse and the herd” since the late 1800s, giving primacy to either the individual or the community. This shifting has, in part, been a result of the impact of historical events and has helped shape the images that come to mind when people both inside and outside of our profession think about social work. Some remember the social workers of the past who stood on the street corner with their black welfare books wide open or see today’s clinicians working in private or group practices with individuals and families. Others see an image that is oftentimes a combination of legendary people such as Jane Addams, Mary Richmond, Grace Coyle and Saul Alinski. Colleagues like these are remembered for their work in establishing charity organizations, resettling new immigrants, using the power of small groups and advocating for community development and change. Regardless of which image we envision, we realize that throughout the history of our profession there have been decades where the primary focus of the social worker was on the individual (often referred to as the “case”), as in the 1920s, 1940s, 1950s, 1980s and 1990s. There have been other times in our history where the focus shifted and was on organizations, communities and policies (often referred to as the “cause”), as in the 1930s and 1960s. In the 2000s, with the economic recessions of 2001 and 2007-2008 and the heightened awareness of the growing disparities in health care and education, attention is again being paid to the world of policy.

In the January 2016 NASW News, NASW Chief Executive Officer Angelo McClain reminded us of our profession’s common cause – social justice – and of the need for us to fulfill our role as social justice change agents in this era. As social workers, we have

the power to become active leaders as we respond to the call of addressing a multitude of social issues constantly growing in complexity and number. As McClain noted, the newly formed Special Commission to Advance Macro Practice provides an example of this response.

The commission’s vision and mission are rooted in what has become known as the 2012 Rothman Report. In this already seminal work, John Rothman explored concerns regarding the place of macro practice in social work, demonstrating that our profession’s ability to address individual problems on a community and societal level has been “truncated” (p. 25). The commission’s formation intentionally reified this argument by taking concrete steps to remedy this situation.

Central to the commission’s work is the awareness that social justice can only be completely attained when all are considered – individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities. The commission has been on a national campaign to ensure that schools of social work redress the imbalance in curricular focus and most effectively prepare practitioners for the real world. With “Macro Matters!” as their rallying call, the now 200 commission members (with more than 60 of them representing professional departments, schools and colleges) know that the low number of macro-trained social workers threatens the social work profession’s ability to influence and shape public policy, provide quality social services and ensure the well-being of our communities.

The Commission is not alone. Last year our Council on Social Work Education and the Fund for Social Policy Education and Practice came together to launch the Coalition for Policy Education and Practice. Efforts have also remained underway in many of our field education departments to provide students with such an integrated experience. In our classes, however, micro or clinical social work is still oftentimes referred to as direct practice. Our language ignores that there is nothing indirect about macro practice. These practitioners work directly with groups, organizations, communities, policies and even nations.

Such purposeful attention begins to build a bridge in our course content. Steadying the shift and finally closing the growing micro-macro divide in academia forces us to attend to both of the ends of our one client system, enabling us to view the world as it actually is. Appreciating that both micro- and macro-direct practice are essential helps us remember that the lives of individuals, families and groups contribute to shaping procedures and policies in our organizations and communities, and that the most thoughtful and effective procedures and policies are those that take individuals and their families into account.

To help keep this message alive and ensure that our profession remains prepared to challenge a wide array of multidimensional societal issues, the commission is committed to steadying the shift. It has set a goal of dramatically increasing the number of students in our programs that are in macro-direct concentrations/methods from less than 10 percent to 20 percent nationwide by the year 2020 – "20 in 2020."

Going back to our picture, we can now better understand why seeing the five horses and the space surrounding them is accurate; yet, remembering that no healthy horse is ever far from its herd completes our understanding. As social workers, seeing and attending to either micro- or macro-direct practice needs may also be accurate. However, appreciating and addressing the needs of both ends of our client system makes the services provided by our profession complete.

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Sources:

"The Herd" by Jackie Merritt, MA in Fine Arts

<https://www.acosa.org/joomla/special-commission>

<http://www.cswe.org/CentersInitiatives/85122.aspx>

NASW-PA PACE COMMITTEE

"It is easier to spend a few months and some money electing the right people than to spend years and a lot of money trying to get the wrong people to do the right things." -Debbie Stabenow, MSW, U.S. Senator

WHAT IS NASW-PA PACE?

The Political Action for Candidate Election (PACE) Committee is the political action committee (PAC) of NASW, dedicated to advancing social workers' values and public policy goals in campaigns, elections and building political relationships with elected officials. NASW-PA PACE evaluates Pennsylvania House and Senate candidates as well as the gubernatorial candidates in respect to social work values and professional issues.

WHY CONTRIBUTE TO PACE?

NASW-PACE uses your contributions to help elect candidates who will advance the profession and advocate for social justice. NASW-PA PACE builds relationships with key politicians which in addition to hard work, takes money. When each member contributes a few dollars, our profession can make a major financial impact during elections and set the political climate to accomplish our goals.



PACE works to encourage, support and elect legislators aligned with social work values and NASW-PA policy issues. Interested in becoming involved? Contact Tara Breitsprecher, tara@nasw-pa.org

Learn more about NASW-PA PACE Committee online at www.nasw-pa.org/pace