

Why Macro Practice Matters

By

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¹ A longer version of this essay was commissioned by the Special Commission to Advance Macro Practice in Social Work initiated by the Association of Community Organization and Social Administration (ACOSA) in 2013. It is an outgrowth of the Special Commission's outreach to macro social work educators and practitioners who were asked to answer the question: "Why Macro Matters" in 2014 9-2015

The social work profession faces many challenges today including attacks on the concept of social welfare itself. On a global level, the effects of public health crises, civil conflicts, and natural disasters, once considered local problems, have now acquired an international dimension. In the U.S, serious divisions have erupted over the “Black Lives Matter” movement, issues like marriage equality and reproductive rights, and what constitute appropriate societal responses to terrorism, climate change, child poverty, and increasing inequality.

It is ironic, therefore, that while macro interventions are increasingly critical, macro practice has become “a marginalized subfield in social work” (Fisher & Corciullo, 2011, p. 359) as recent statistics by CSWE (2012) and NASW (Whitaker & Arrington, 2008, pp. 7-8) confirm. Rothman (2013) found considerable faculty resistance to the integration of macro content into predominantly clinical curricula, a devaluing of this content by some deans and directors, and a general lack of interest in or understanding of macro practice among many students. Many programs pay scant attention to macro content in either their courses or field placements.

Yet, the need for the structural approach of macro practice is now increasingly critical, particularly if the social work profession is to realize its goal of social justice (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012). Macro social workers play an essential role in transforming private troubles into public issues (Mills, 1963; Schwartz, 1969) and in translating awareness of these “troubles” into concrete policies and programs, which interventions at the individual and family level cannot (Mizrahi & Morrison, 2013). Macro practitioners provide an understanding of community structure and dynamics and the processes that affect the design and delivery of social services (Homan, 2016); collective efforts to empower clients and constituents (Burghardt, 2013); and recognition of how complex issues affect diverse communities differently. These knowledge and skills are essential components of *all* social work practice.

An underlying assumption of macro practice is that most societal conditions accepted as “givens” are neither “natural” nor inevitable. Through this critical lens, macro social workers pose questions about how problems are identified, defined, explained, and addressed. Merely posing these questions and emphasizing both socially just means and ends reveals new “truths” and increases the possibility of systemic change (Mizrahi, 2015; Reisch & Garvin, 2016). Macro practice, therefore, is a *collective and collaborative* form of social work which seeks to create *purposive* change (Meenaghan, Gibbons, & McNutt, 2005; Netting, Kettner, McMurty, & Thomas, 2011). It enables people to create “good communities” (Warren, 1978).

Macro social work practice pushes the boundaries of the profession by fostering a “big picture” perspective that analyzes people’s issues “outside the box” and focuses on the prevention of problems, not merely their amelioration. It embodies social work’s commitment to social justice and social change by promoting structural solutions to systemic inequalities and various forms of oppression that go beyond individual adaptation and resilience. It reflects the recognition that *all* social workers work with people within the context of communities and organizations that are affected by social policies.

Like practice with individuals, couples, families, and groups, macro practice involves working *with* people, not merely with or within “systems” (Burghardt, 2013). Like “micro” practitioners, the changes macro social workers seek make conscious use of evidence gleaned from research and knowledge obtained from practice experience. Like efforts to produce changes in individuals, and families, macro level changes require information gathering, effective problem definition and issue framing, resource mobilization (of finances and people), strategic planning, targeted action, and reflective evaluation or praxis (Reisch, 2012). Perhaps of greatest importance, micro and macro social workers are both committed to the foundational values of the profession (NASW, 2015). How they express these values in their practice may differ, but these means are complementary and mutually supportive.

Throughout the history of the social work profession, while small in numbers, macro practitioners have been leaders in translating the profession’s ethical imperative of social justice into practice (Reisch & Andrews, 2002). They have embodied this pursuit of social justice in three complementary ways: Expanding people’s genuine participation in identifying their needs and developing effective ways to address these needs; embracing a non-hierarchical definition of “expertise” that acknowledges the wisdom of clients and constituents; and promoting an inclusive definition of leadership that cultivates new, indigenous, and diverse leaders.

Although the label “macro practice” is a fairly recent invention, under other names it appeared in workers’ struggles to organize unions, radical political organizations and social movements, and in the self-help/mutual aid organizations that excluded and marginalized minorities created for survival purposes (Betten & Austin, 1990; Fisher, 1994). In the early 20th century, macro practitioners played a major role in establishing the U.S. social welfare system. They developed public and non-profit social service organizations at the local and state levels. They conducted research on poverty, child welfare, juvenile justice, factory conditions, and

public health issues, and trained a generation of social researchers. They helped organize labor unions, especially for women and immigrants. They helped pass laws banning child labor and creating mothers' pensions, establish public health standards, housing codes and occupational safety requirements, and introduce many of the features of modern urban life that we take for granted today. Macro practitioners also helped democratize the concept of community and industry, used research to illuminate social issues, and modernized the concept of human services administration (Reisch, 2008). Without these efforts, the social work profession would have lacked the foundation it required to develop and thrive (Wenocur & Reisch, 1989).

During the 1960s, macro social workers developed new models of service, helped create Medicare, Medicaid, the Older Americans Act, the Food Stamp Program, and the Economic Opportunity Act, and played important roles in the National Welfare Rights Organization, the United Farm Workers, and various civil rights and anti-war groups (Reisch & Andrews, 2002). In today's conservative climate, macro practitioners have heightened public awareness of poverty, the HIV/AIDS crisis, domestic violence, chronic homelessness, environmental racism, the needs of immigrants and refugees, and the importance of human rights. Macro practitioners are also increasingly involved in electoral politics, forging multicultural, cross-national, and interdisciplinary alliances; addressing new issues such as climate change, global poverty, civil conflict, human trafficking, police violence, mass incarceration, LGBTQ rights, and growing inequality; and using new technologies, particularly social media (Mizrahi & Morrison, 2013).

Without macro practice, social work would be a dramatically different profession. Through often risky activism, macro social workers have helped all social workers engage in practice that is often unpopular, unrecognized, and underfunded. In the future, the knowledge and skills that macro practitioners possess will be more critical than ever. Social work scholars and educators will need to play a critical role in educating nimble and strategic students and assuming leadership at the tables of influence—where policies are made and implemented (Rothman, 1999). This requires the entire profession to address such questions as: (1) What are the barriers that make it so difficult to bridge the gap between micro and macro practice in social work curricula? (2) To what extent does the problem lie with learner (student) readiness or with faculty readiness and preparedness? (3) To what extent are we dealing with a profound difference in worldviews or approaches to practice?ⁱⁱ

The growth of macro practice is in the collective self-interest of the social work profession as a whole and the people with whom we work. Social work can no longer promote itself as a “value-based profession,” committed to social justice, human dignity, and human rights, without recognizing the importance of organizing and advocating for these values at the community, organizational, societal, and global levels, and of playing a leadership role in formulating and implementing policies and programs that reflect them (Wronka, 2008). Responsibility for the survival of macro practice within social work, therefore, lies with its major professional organizations and the schools of social work that educate the workforce of the future (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014).

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"For further information about efforts to promote macro practice in social work or to get involved in such efforts, please contact Dr. Darlyne Bailey, Dean of the Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research at Bryn Mawr College, and Dr. Terry Mizrahi, Professor, at the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College, the Co-Chairs of the Special Commission on Macro Practice. They can be reached at dbailey01@brynmawr.edu and tmizrahi@hunter.cuny.edu.