Balancing Micro and Macro Practice: A Challenge for Social Work

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The time to recalibrate the imbalance between micro and macro social work is now. There is an important initiative in progress, as we will show, to infuse the foundational macro component of our profession into the classroom and field to achieve a more equal footing with its clinical counterpart. This effort reflects and reinforces the understanding that social problems require complex and sustained intervention at all levels of social work practice. It has gained momentum since President Obama’s identification as the “community organizer-in-chief,” along with significant nationwide movements in the past several years, such as the “Occupy” social protests and immigrant rights actions. In the context of these developments, there is a growing awareness of the relatively small percentage of social work students enrolled in macro methods who will be prepared to actively participate and provide skilled leadership at the grassroots, policy, coalition, and electoral levels (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2012). This awareness was fortified by a recent study of the membership of the Association for Community Organization and Social Administration (ACOSA), where macro faculty reported a problematic level of support from their schools/departments in this area of social work education (Rothman, 2013).

Historically, the social work profession took root having a twofold micro–macro mission. Pioneer social worker Mary Richmond represented service to individuals and families needing aid to alleviate difficulties in social functioning. Her contemporary counterpart, Jane Addams, represented social reform through environmental change to meet broad human needs. This dual approach to practice has defined the profession since its inception. Indeed, during the Progressive era, according to historians, the macro area had a strong presence that “dominated the attention of social workers” (Ehrenreich, 1985, p.12). Porter Lee (1929) characterized the dual micro and macro practices of the profession in terms of “cause” and “function,” discussing both their complementary relationship and the tension between them.

In 1917, Mary Richmond published her pioneering book, Social Diagnosis, which for the first time put forward systematic methods for use by social workers, in particular those working with individuals and families, in keeping with Abraham Flexner’s call for a firmer knowledge base at a 1915 meeting of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections. Shortly thereafter, in the 1920s, the psychoanalytical theories of Dr. Sigmund Freud entered the American scene and were eagerly grasped to bolster casework’s intellectual standing. Micro practice was off and running (although it has struggled over time with defining its own uniqueness compared with other mental health disciplines). During the Great Depression years of the 1930s, macro practice achieved considerable recognition and prominence as the country grappled with large-scale social and economic issues.

The 1930s saw a surge of macro-level social work during the Depression, resulting in the Lane Report issued in 1939. It was the first to identify the educational foundation for community organization in social work (Betten & Austin, 1990). Kenneth Pray (1947) presented community organizing as a social work method in his transformative address to the National Council on Social Welfare right after World War II, while through the 1950s the focus was on defining the scope of social work broadly to include “the social” (Bisno, 1956).

Nevertheless, it wasn’t until 1962 that the profession acknowledged community organization as a legitimate practice method on equal footing with casework when it included a macro component in...
its mandated curriculum structure (CSWE, 1962). That policy change was driven by Harry L. Lurie’s incisive analysis of the “community organization method” in the CSWE far-reaching national curriculum study (Lurie, 1959). The ideologically liberal years of the 1960s saw the expansion of community organizing, along with planning and administration in health and human services, but it was a temporary uptick (Fisher & Corciullo, 2011).

The two major social work professional bodies, CSWE and NASW, have consistently professed and mandated adherence to principles that include a decided macro focus. The NASW Code of Ethics (2008)—for example, Section 6.01—mandates a clear macro responsibility:

Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments. Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and...the realization of social justice. (pp. 26–27)

The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards document of CSWE articulates that “social work’s purpose is actualized through its quest for social and economic justice, the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty and the advancement of the quality of life for all persons.” (CSWE, 2008, p. 1).

Despite these aspirations and formal commitments, the broader community and societal aspects of social work practice have not received appropriate support and standing in the field. We see this in the contemporary composition of social work personnel nationally, preponderantly weighted toward clinical practice. A report by the NASW Center for Workforce Studies (Whitaker & Arrington, 2008) stated that in the professional workspace of social workers: “only two percent of time each week is dedicated to community organizing and policy/legislative development” (p. 8). Mott (2005) spelled out some consequences:

Despite the growing consensus on the critical importance of grassroot organizations...the field of community change faces a mounting crisis of leadership. There is a severe shortage of people who are fully prepared for key positions in the field. (p. 8)

For many years, CSWE has reported on the small percentage of students in macro methods, the latest being its 2011 data (CSWE, 2012). The 2011 data identify the percentage of MSW students enrolled in specific macro areas as 8.8 percent. This breaks out as follows: management or administration, 2.4 percent; community planning/organization, 2.1 percent; combined community planning and management administration, 2.7 percent; social policy, 1 percent; combined social policy and program evaluation, 0.6 percent.

Despite a clear macro presence in social work through groups like ACOSA and the National Network of Social Work Management (formerly Managers), efforts over many years to rectify the micro–macro imbalance produced inadequate results (see Abramovitz, 1998; Austin, Coombs, & Barr, 2005; Betten & Austin, 1990; Bisno, 1956; Lee, 1929, Specht & Courtney, 1994). For this reason, ACOSA in 2010–2011 engaged in a survey of its membership—composed in the main of macro faculty—to assess problems they experienced in teaching in schools and departments of social work (Rothman, 2013). The survey, which went to the full membership of some 350, drew replies from 172 respondents. Participants were asked to report on “the level of support” they experienced and observed in their situations, and, when support was relatively low, to indicate “how this is manifested.” They were also asked with respect to the macro area, “What can ACOSA and/or the profession do to increase support?” The survey findings are summarized concisely for purposes of this commentary.

About a third of the respondents reported troubling problems they encountered in schools and departments. These ranged from uncooperative, sometimes obstructive attitudes of clinical colleagues, to lack of resources provided by the deans and too little or no hiring of macro faculty in a range of schools. Respondents also pointed to inadequate recruitment of and provision of scholarships to macro students. Many schools do not have a macro concentration, and almost all have a low percentage of macro course offerings. In the preponderance of schools, the curriculum is primarily clinical. One respondent’s comments reflected a deep concern: “Macro practice has always been a stepchild—that hasn’t changed.”
Respondents recommended a series of actions to strengthen the place of macro practice, including an increase in macro faculty hiring; additional macro courses and concentrations; focused recruitment of macro-oriented students; greater macro presence in NASW publications; adoption and promotion of ACOSA macro competencies; and effort to increase public awareness of macro-focused social work, among others.

The survey report strongly recommended the establishment of a special commission which is now (as of July 2013) the Special Commission to Advance Macro Practice in Social Work, composed of respected professionals across the spectrum of social work. The commission is in the process of reviewing survey and other proposals and developing a plan of implementation. This commission appointed by the ACOSA Board, is cochaired by Darlyne Bailey, dean of the Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research, Bryn Mawr College, and Terry Mizrahi, professor of Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College and a former president of NASW.

The commission’s report and proposals in 2014 will offer social work a historic opportunity to address the attenuated standing of macro practice in the profession. This is an opportune time for social work to deliberate and take action to calibrate the micro–macro balance to carry out the profession’s dual missions.

REFERENCES


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