

Why Macro Practice Matters

By

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Why Macro Practice Matters – By Michael Reischⁱⁱ

Introduction: The Changing Environment of Social Work Practice

The social work profession faces many challenges in today's dynamic, complex, and uncertain environment. These include persistent ideologically-motivated attacks on the concept of social welfare and on government as a problem-solving institution; the wide-ranging impact of economic globalization; the privatization of social life and the overall decline in civic and political participation; the devolution of political authority and power to local governments and the for-profit sector; the "industrialization" of social work; the impact of social media and the 24/7 news cycle on the public's perception of social issues; and the conflicts produced by the nation's increasing demographic and cultural diversity (Reisch, 2013a).

Although some of these issues have existed for years, they have recently acquired new urgency as a consequence of both domestic and international developments. As a consequence of economic globalization, human migration on a massive scale, the effects of climate change, and the spread of digital technology the world is much more inter-connected. The effects of public health crises, civil conflicts, and natural disasters, once confined to nations or even to communities, now give every problem an international dimension. The rapidity and global reach of communication speeds the dissemination of information and simultaneously demands more rapid, often less thoughtful responses to crises. Instant communication also illuminates the persistent gulfs that exist among and within nations even about the meaning of these events.

In the U.S, serious divisions exist over the "Black Lives Matter" movement, marriage equality, and reproductive rights, and how to respond to terrorism, climate change, and increasing inequality. This fragmentation is also reflected in our vocabulary. Words like "empowerment" and "social justice" are used to rationalize fundamentally different goals. In

addition, by the 2040s, people of color will comprise the majority of the U.S. population. The backlash against this demographic certainty has already begun in politics; it has profound implications for the future of U.S. society and our sense of community (Reisch & Jani, 2012).

The Disappearance of Macro Practice in Social Work

It is ironic, therefore, that in an era when macro interventions are increasingly critical, macro practice has become “a marginalized subfield in social work” (Fisher & Corciullo, 2011, p. 359). Recent CSWE statistics (2012) indicate that less than 9% of all MSW students are enrolled in all the macro practice areas combined. Research by the NASW Center for Workforce Studies reports that social workers spend “only two percent of time each week ... [on] community organizing and policy/legislative development” and less than 1 in 7 social workers “identify macro as their practice focus” (Whitaker & Arrington, 2008, pp. 7-8). This has produced a considerable shortage of macro social workers particularly in low-income, low-power communities where they are most needed (Mott, 2008).

This problem is reflected in the climate and curricula of many schools of social work. A survey conducted by Rothman (2013) found considerable resistance among social work faculty to integrating macro practice into BSW and MSW curricula that primarily emphasize education for clinical careers, a devaluing of macro content by some deans and directors, and a general lack of interest in or understanding of macro practice among many students. Although generalist practice has been established as the core of social work education for several decades, many programs pay scant attention to macro content either in their coursework or field placements.

Yet, as U.S. society becomes more diverse, the need for the structural approach at the core of macro practice has become increasingly apparent, 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, such as unemployment, domestic violence, homelessness, and mass incarceration, into public issues (Mills, 1963; Schwartz, 1969) and in developing strategic interventions that translate awareness of these “troubles” into concrete policies and programs that address them. They promote structural changes to address people’s problems that are not or cannot be solved solely by interventions at the level of the individual or family. Such changes could involve the replacement of critical actors through leadership development and participation in electoral politics; the redistribution and redefinition of social, community, and organizational roles; the revision of society’s reward structure; and policy changes that affect the allocation of resources, rights, benefits, opportunities, status, and obligations (Mizrahi & Morrison, 2013).

Macro social workers play a critical role in each of these change processes by expanding our understanding of community structure and dynamics and the intra- and inter-organizational processes that affect the design and delivery of social services (Homan, 2016). They help empower people through collective efforts and develop and administer policies, programs, and new and more responsive services that enhance people’s lives and well-being (Burghardt, 2013). They recognize how issues may affect diverse communities differently and how race, ethnicity, class, gender, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, ability, and immigration status influence people’s lives and life chances. Because of their ethical commitment to individual and social change, *all* social workers need to appreciate this interconnectedness.

Underlying Assumptions

One underlying assumption that guides macro practitioners is that most societal conditions often accepted as “givens” – such as poverty – are neither “natural” nor inevitable. Macro social workers even question whether the damages caused by “natural disasters,” such as Hurricane

Katrina, are entirely “natural.” By looking at the world and our practice environment through this different lens, macro social workers pose such critical questions as: Who defines what is a problem in our society or in the organizations in which we work? Who interprets why these problems exist? Who decides which problems get attention and of what type? Who defines what constitutes a “need” and acceptable forms of “helping”? Merely posing these questions helps reveal new “truths” and increases the possibility of systemic change (Mizrahi, 2015).

Because all social workers practice within systems that are often hostile to the interests of our clients and constituents, macro practitioners pay particular attention to how issues are defined and by whom, how their extent or severity is assessed, who or what is defined as the target of intervention, and what causal factors are excluded or treated as marginal. They focus on both change goals and change processes (Reisch & Garvin, 2016, in press). This dual emphasis is essential in today’s fractious political climate because of the importance of asking: Who determines a policy or program’s goals? Who initiates and controls the change effort? How are the people affected by the change involved? How is “success” or “failure” defined? And, who will assess the outcome of the intervention and by what means?

The Definition and Components of Macro Practice

Widely accepted definitions of macro practice include two common elements: Macro practice involves intervention “with organizations, communities, and groups of people” (Meenaghan, Gibbons, & McNutt, 2005), and that its goal is “to bring about *planned change* in” those systems (Netting, Kettner, McMurty, & Thomas, 2011, emphasis added). In other words, macro practice is a *collective and collaborative* form of social work which seeks to create *purposive* change. The components of macro social work have been further divided into more specific functions (See Figure 1). Through these forms of practice, social workers help communities perform their

five major functions (Warren, 1978): production, distribution, and consumption of tangible and intangible “goods;” socialization; social control; social participation; and mutual support.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

Macro social work practice is the integration of all these forms of practice. It pushes the boundaries of the profession by fostering a “big picture” perspective that enables social workers and society as a whole to analyze people’s issues “outside the box” and focus on the prevention of problems, not merely their amelioration. Macro practice explicitly 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 is important, therefore, to clarify a few key points about macro practice that are often obscured by our professional rhetoric. Contrary to frequent usage, macro social work is not “indirect practice.” *All* social workers work with people within the context of communities and organizations that are affected by social policies. Understanding communities, organizations, and the policy process, therefore, is an essential component of effective practice with every population and problem with which the profession engages.

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 are purposeful and planned and make conscious use of both 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 – social justice, human dignity, and respect for diversity in all its forms. The means by which they express these values in their practice may differ, but these means are complementary and mutually supportive; they are neither in conflict nor occur on parallel, non-intersecting tracks.

Macro Practice and Social Justice

Although macro practice in social work occurs in a wide range of fields and takes many diverse forms, there are certain common elements that distinguish macro practice, as listed in Figure 2.

[Insert Figure 2 Here]

The NASW *Code of Ethics* (2015) explicitly and implicitly reflects the social justice values and goals underlying these practice skills:

Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully. Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to *improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice*” (*Code of Ethics*, Sec. 6.04, emphasis added).

Throughout the history of the social work profession, macro practitioners have played a particularly critical role in this regard. While small in numbers, macro practitioners have been leaders in translating the profession’s ethical imperative of social justice into strategies that change the structures and systems that affect people’s lives and well-being (Wenocur & Reisch, 1989; Reisch & Andrews, 2002).

Macro social workers embody the profession's ethical imperative to pursue social justice in three complementary ways. They emphasize the importance of expanding the genuine participation of clients, constituents, colleagues, and coalition partners in the identification of human needs, the development and implementation of various strategies to address these needs, and the evaluation of which strategies are most effective. This emphasis, which influenced the development of the profession's core concept of "empowerment" (Simon, 1990), assumes that people should use existing institutions as means to achieve democratically determined ends, work to restructure these institutions, or create more responsive, alternative institutions.

Macro social workers also embrace a more inclusive, non-hierarchical definition of "expertise" that reflects a belief not only in the efficacy and utility of "non-partisan," scientific problem-solving processes by "objective" experts (e.g., "evidence-based practice"), but also in the wisdom of clients and constituents to identify their needs and interests and contribute their insights and experience to the processes required to address them effectively.

Finally, macro practitioners value an inclusive definition of leadership that underscores both the need for efficient decision making in community groups, social service agencies, and advocacy organizations, and the importance of cultivating new indigenous leadership from the diverse communities with whom they work.

A Brief History of Macro Practice

Before the emergence of professional social work in the U.S., people of every racial, ethnic, and religious background organized services to meet their needs, mobilized their communities to fight perceived injustices, and advocated for reforms that would improve their lives and make the nation more democratic and more equal (Fisher, 1994). Although the label "macro practice" is a fairly recent invention, under other names its earliest practitioners recognized the inter-

relationship between meeting basic human needs and creating meaningful social and political change. Efforts to combine these goals were most effective when they responded with sensitivity to demographic changes and new cultural norms and values; were open to new ideas from multiple sources; recognized the relationship between social movements and community-based services; integrated research findings into practice in a manner that reflected the profession's values and ethics; and took the necessary risks to propose, develop, and implement innovative solutions to long-standing problems.

The roots of macro practice, therefore, cannot be found merely in the soil that produced mainstream social work agencies, such as the charities organization societies (COS), settlement houses, and public welfare departments. Macro practice also emerged from workers' struggles to organize unions, from radical political organizations and diverse social movements, from immigrants' rights groups, and, perhaps above all, from the self-help/mutual aid organizations that excluded and marginalized minorities created for survival purposes (Betten & Austin, 1990; Fisher, 1994). Over the course of the 20th century, macro practice within the social work field evolved in response to rapid socio-economic and political change, the impact of external events, such as depression and wars, the influence of new ideologies, domestic and foreign, and new identities in the 1960s and 1970s, and the interaction of the heterogeneous communities that comprise U.S. society (Rothman, 1999).

The Progressive Era (~1890-1918). During the Progressive Era when organized social work first appeared, macro practitioners such as Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, George Edmund Haynes, and Forrester Washington played a major role in establishing the foundation for 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. Through their involvement in advocacy efforts, various social movements, and inter-racial coalitions 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 (playgrounds, street lighting, and kindergartens, for example) that we take for granted today. Without these efforts, the social work profession would have lacked the organizational, community, and societal bases it required to develop and thrive (Wenocur & Reisch, 1989).

The New Deal. After the decline of the Progressive Movement, most of the social work profession turned inward in the quest for higher occupational status – a pattern that repeated itself throughout the 20th century. Macro practitioners, however, continued to advocate for social reforms, such as social insurance, democratize the concept of community and expand community participation, use social scientific research to analyze persistent social issues, and modernize the concept of human services administration. During the 1930s their efforts began to bear fruit. Macro practitioners, such as Harry Hopkins, Frances Perkins, and Mary McLeod Bethune, were key architects of the New Deal. Others, such as E. Franklin Frazier, Jacob Fisher, Bertha Capen Reynolds, and Mary van Kleeck, criticized the Roosevelt Administration for its failure to provide sufficient assistance to millions of Americans, particularly African American and Latinos.

Macro social workers also participated actively in the reform and radical movements of the decade, often in leadership roles. They promoted the democratization of industry through labor unions and of social service organizations and through more active roles for clients and the influence of the democratic values of social group work (Reisch, 2008). Reflecting the tenor of

the times, they embraced a conflict model of practice in the community organizing field, first developed by Saul Alinsky in the “Back-of-the-Yards” neighborhood in Chicago.

Between the world wars, macro practitioners also attempted to define the core knowledge, skills, and values underlying their work. They published numerous texts and articles that articulated the intellectual basis and interlocking components of group, community and organizational practice (Austin & Betten, 1977). As a result, just prior to World War II the profession recognized community organization and group work as social work methods.

World War II and the Post-War Period. During World War II, macro practitioners developed and administered new child care and health care services for the burgeoning war-time work force, organized relief for refugees, and helped military personnel and their families cope with the stresses of loss, separation, and readjustment to civilian life. After the war, they led the struggle to expand the New Deal to include fair employment practices, civil rights, and universal health care.

The anti-Communist hysteria of the McCarthy era, however, repressed much of this activism. From the late 1930s through the early 1960s many macro practitioners endured professional blacklisting and legislative persecution (Reisch & Andrews, 2002). Consequently, once again the organized social work profession redirected much of its efforts away from social and community change to providing social services and status enhancement through credentialing and licensing. Even macro social workers rejected conflict-oriented approaches to practice in favor of more politically appealing methods, such as top-down, expertise driven community planning, an emphasis on organizational efficiency and professionalism, and incremental strategies for policy change (Specht & Courtenay, 1994; Wenocur & Reisch, 1989).

The War on Poverty. The “War on Poverty” of the 1960s revived interest in social and political change among macro practitioners and the profession as a whole. Macro social workers developed new models of service, such as Mobilization for Youth in New York City, and directed Community Action Programs throughout the nation, which shifted the locus of power and resources within low-income communities. Macro practitioners like Whitney Young, Director of the Urban League, held leadership positions in NASW, the National Conference of Social Welfare, and government agencies at the local, state, and federal levels. They helped create Medicare, Medicaid, the Older Americans Act, the Food Stamp Program, and the Economic Opportunity Act. Inspired by the new social movements of the period, macro social workers also helped organize the National Welfare Rights Organization, the United Farm Workers, and various civil rights and anti-war groups (Reisch & Andrews, 2002).

Recent Trends. During the last quarter of the 20th century, the conservative political environment required macro practitioners, particularly those employed in large public and non-profit organizations, to adopt defensive strategies to protect the fragile gains of the 1930s and 1960s and to survive during a period of fiscal austerity and anti-social welfare ideology. Yet, even in this climate, macro practitioners heightened public awareness of long-standing social justice causes, such as poverty, and raised awareness of emerging issues such as the HIV/AIDS crisis, domestic violence, chronic homelessness, environmental racism, the needs of immigrants and refugees, and the importance of international human rights. They developed new conceptions of practice that guided the identity-based organizations that appeared during these years and designed new organizational models, such as those based on feminist practice, new forms of service delivery, such as wraparound models, and new tactical approaches to

community work and advocacy that made creative use of media. Macro practitioners also became increasingly involved in electoral politics, both as candidates and campaign staff.

In the 21st century, as a consequence of the widespread impact of economic globalization, macro practitioners recognize more than ever the need to forge local-international linkages in their work, to address new issues such as climate change, global poverty, civil conflict, human trafficking, police violence and mass incarceration affecting communities of color, LGBTQ rights, and growing socio-economic inequality. They are using new technologies, particularly social media, forging new multicultural, cross-national, and interdisciplinary alliances in their advocacy and community organizing efforts, and adapting to practice environments that are increasingly inter-disciplinary and shaped by new fiscal realities (Mizrahi & Morrison, 2013).

In sum, as Figure 3 below illustrates, macro practitioners have played a major role in shaping the profession of social work and in achieving its mission and goals. Without macro practice, social work in the U.S. would be a dramatically different profession. In the future, the profession of social work will confront new practice challenges and practice realities.

[Insert Figure 3 Here]

Conclusion: An Eye to the Future – Making Macro Practice Matter

In the years ahead, macro practitioners will have to revise their definitions of community and community intervention, develop new measures of practice effectiveness, reconcile the often conflicting interests of multiple actors and constituencies, clarify the meaning of such terms as empowerment and social justice, and forge new alliances to overcome persistent social and cultural divisions, both in the U.S. and the global environment (Reisch, 2013b). To be effective in this environment, macro practitioners will need to adapt to unprecedented cultural, demographic, economic, and technological developments. The type of 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.

If social workers are to honor our commitment to social justice and human dignity in the future, we must learn how to practice in an environment in which definitions of need and the meaning of giving or receiving help have significantly changed and where they are applied differently based on an individual or group's demographic and cultural characteristics. Categories of need and societal responses to need are primarily determined not by those who experience them, but by powerful individuals and groups who often lack substantive expertise and whose values are also at odds with our ethical commitments. Overcoming these conceptual and political obstacles will be at the core of all social work practice in the decades ahead. Macro practice has played a critical role in addressing these challenges throughout the profession's history (Rothman, 1999). Through often risky social and political action, macro social workers have given the profession the “moral cover” needed to engage in work that is often unpopular, unrecognized, and underfunded.

Today macro practitioners are primed to take a proactive stance in rebalancing micro and macro perspectives and interventions in the classroom and field (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014; Stone, Austin, Berzin, & Taylor, 2007; Austin, Anthony, Knee, & Mathias, 2015). It is the contention of this article that the survival of macro practice is in the collective self-interest of the social work profession as a whole and the people with whom it works. Social work can no longer promote itself as a “value-based profession,” one that is 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). The responsibility for ensuring the survival of macro practice within social work lies both with its major professional organizations and with the schools of social work that contribute the knowledge that informs our practice and educate the workforce of the future (Rothman, 2013).ⁱⁱⁱ

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Figure 1: The Components of Macro Practice

Community Practice	Management	Strategic Planning
Neighborhood and community organizing	Developing and managing stakeholder relationships	Building Inter-organizational relationships to enhance service delivery
Organizing functional communities	Modeling appropriate professional behavior	
Social, economic, and sustainable development	Initiating and facilitating innovative change processes	Policy Practice
Inclusive program development	Demonstrating effective cross-cultural interpersonal and communication skills;	Identifying and assessing the impact of problems & issues that affect individuals, families, and communities;
Social planning		Analyzing the effects (positive, negative, and unintended) of existing policies
Coalitions	Encouraging active involvement of all staff and stakeholders in decision-making	Developing alternative policy solutions
Political and social action	Establishing & promoting, the vision, philosophy, goals, objectives, and values of the organization	Creating and implementing strategies to achieve them; Implementing policy decisions
Movements for progressive change	Planning, promoting, and modeling life-long learning	Evaluating policies and programs in terms of their effectiveness, efficiency, and effect
	Designing & developing programs	

[Sources: Weil, Gamble, & Ohmer, 2013; Hassan & Wimpfheimer, 2014; Jansson, 2014]

Figure 2: Common Macro Practice Skills

- Working with task-oriented groups
- Individual and group supervision
- Resource development, mobilization, and management
- Marketing or promoting a service or cause
- Negotiation and participatory management
- Inter-organizational planning and leadership development
- Community, organizational, and policy analysis
- Program development, implementation, and evaluation
- Advocacy, lobbying, public education, and coalition-building
- Media relations and public speaking
- Cultivating and exercising leadership
- Managing planned change and conflict
- Assessing the strengths and assets of communities and organizations;
- Facilitating the empowerment of clients & constituents & the groups to which they belong
- Communicating effectively across class, racial, and cultural boundaries
- Analyzing the structure, dynamics, and culture of human service organizations and the communities in which they exist
- Determining when and how to exert influence in communities and social service systems (Source: Austin & Lowe, 1994).

Figure 3: Past Accomplishments and Future Challenges for Macro Practice

Past Accomplishments

Analyzed root causes of inequality & injustice

Demonstrated conflicts between market-oriented values & those of social welfare & social work

Critiqued cultural norms that stigmatized marginalized individuals and groups

Raised public consciousness about critical issues

Promoted alternative visions of society, community, and social services

Emphasized the importance of power dynamics at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels

Focused on revising existing organizations or creating new ones to meet human needs

Created new, more responsive, and more participatory forms of service

Promoted structural and institutional change

Shaped social work’s conceptual vocabulary

Provided much of the profession’s leadership

Future Challenges

Increasing social& political inequality

Persistent racism, sexism, and homophobia

Fiscal austerity & social welfare cutbacks

Impact of privatization on social services

Competition for scarce resources

Major demographic & cultural changes

The impact of technology on services

Increasingly complex client needs

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