

THE FUTURE OF MACRO SOCIAL WORK

F. Ellen Netting

Abstract: *Macro social work is social work. History tells us that the profession was birthed from diverse traditions in which relief work, reform work, and radical work interfaced. Yet different traditions were grounded in different assumptions, spurring different ways of knowing and doing. This versatility is a hallmark of the field and it will serve macro social work well into the future. A profession that seeks to sustain, advocate and change, with the intent of increasing quality of life, will always need practitioners who can recognize diverse worldviews, understand multi-layered contexts, deal with limitless inter-connections, and be invigorated by conflict.*

Keywords: Advocacy, Change, Sustainability, Quality of Life, Multiparadigmatic practice

INTRODUCTION

Macro social work *is* social work. A profession that defines itself as based in a person-in-environment perspective is "macro" because the larger environment must be considered in every practice decision-making process. A professional education is "macro" when its purpose is "to prepare competent and effective professionals, to develop social work knowledge, and to provide leadership in the development of social delivery systems" (CSWE, 2001), encouraging expansion "beyond interpersonal direct practice foci" (Wagner, Newcomb, & Weiler, 2001, p. 114). Therefore, the future of macro social work lies with every person who carries the title of social worker regardless of setting or role.

For the purposes of this article, macro social work is defined as *efforts within and outside organizational, community and policy arenas intended to sustain, change, and advocate for quality of life*. These efforts are "in concert with vulnerable and underserved populations [since] macro practice skills are necessary to confront inequalities. If the social worker is unwilling to engage in some macro practice types of activities relating to [various] environments, he or she is not doing social work" (Netting, Kettner, & McMurtry, 2004, p. 10).

In this article, a brief historical and current context is provided, followed by an examination of critical factors influencing macro social work for the next twenty-five years.

HISTORICAL & CURRENT CONTEXT:

MULTIPLE WAYS OF KNOWING & DOING MACRO SOCIAL WORK

Before the dawn of social work as a U.S. profession, feminist historians identify three traditions of women's organizing: benevolence, reform, and rights. Missionary work and orphan asylums to address immediate needs emerged in the late 1700s as benevolent efforts, followed by reformers in the 1830s who created organizations to advocate for causes such as abolishing slavery or eliminating brothels. In the 1840s and 50s a third tradition focused on women's rights. Each tradition of organizing held different sets of assumptions and goals, attracting different members, and often fraught with tension. Each tradition

sought to advocate for populations at risk and to change organizations, communities, and policies – but in different ways (McCarthy, 2003; Scott, 1993).

In searching for the role of advocacy in the history of the profession, Schneider and Lester (2001) identify “three separate and distinct social work movements [that emerged] in the last 20 years of the 19th century, [each with] a different perspective about wealth and poverty as well as the responsibilities one owed to the other and to the developing social systems” (p. 10). Charity organizations focused on *community justice*, settlement houses focused on *social justice*, and the third movement out of the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School focused on *distributive justice* (Schneider & Lester, 2001, p. 10).

Reisch and Andrews (2002) write an alternative history of social work in *The Road Not Taken*. Their focus on radical social work gives “voice to the effects of nonmainstream social service and social work organizations on the creation of U.S. social welfare and the emergence of social work theories and methods” (p. ix). They reveal a complex array of strongly held beliefs about the target(s) of change, ranging from social reform within the system to direct assaults on societal structures.

Similarly, Reamer (1993) explores the various ideologies regarding the provision of social welfare, revealing widely varying conceptions and multiple models that have influenced the profession's development. The history and context of social work macro practice continues to be written and rewritten as new analyses reveal important diverse perspectives on the profession, its underlying philosophy, and the methods used to carry out strongly held assumptions.

In these writings are important messages for the future. First, there are multiple pre-existing traditions within and outside the field that converged in the early 1900s as the profession emerged. Their convergence does not imply agreement about one best way, but reflects different beliefs about what the profession should be and do. This diversity of thought will continue into the future and is a strength of the profession. Second, since histories are filtered through each writer's lense, some voices are more privileged than others. The interpretation of different traditions reveal diverse perspectives within the context of the times. Thus, feminist historians, advocates, and radical social workers felt the need to write their own histories so that alternative voices are heard. Historical reflections, representing different views, will continue to contextualize the profession. Third, the conflict among strongly held beliefs about what actions are necessary in order to do social work were divergent in the beginning of the profession, just as they are divergent today and will be tomorrow. Within continuously changing contexts there are and will be divergent views, perspectives, and strongly held beliefs about what actions should occur in order to perform the work of the profession. Last, perhaps it is through the divergence of assumptions, thoughts, and actions that the future of macro social work lies and which reflects the profession's contribution to the larger society. The future of macro social work, thus, is tied to expecting and respecting the inevitability of difference.

CRITICAL FACTORS INFLUENCING MACRO SOCIAL WORK

It is impossible to predict the future and perhaps that is a key to the future of macro social work. For a profession diverse in its traditions, interpretations of traditions, and alternative methods, social workers are curious, adaptable and continually faced with the

unexpected. This facility at dealing with and instituting change will be particularly helpful as we face the future.

Given rapid contextual changes, in twenty-five years social workers will have unimaginable tools to use in the conduct of their practice. Yet, whatever technological advances may occur, there will be unexpected and unintended consequences. It is the need to be savvy in assessing complex situations, understanding context, forming connections, and living with conflict that must characterize macro social work in the years to come.

Assessing Complexity

Assessing situations is a hallmark of macro social work. Just as there have been divergent assumptions about the purpose of social work, there are diverse, deep underlying philosophical assumptions held by individuals and groups in organizational and community settings. Reamer identifies five areas about which philosophical assumptions vary: 1) the goals of government, 2) the rights of citizens in relation to the state, 3) the obligations of the state toward its citizens, 4) the nature of political or civil liberty, and 5) the nature of social justice (1993, p. 2). The 2004 U.S. presidential election revealed just how deeply various assumptions are held and how diverse they may be. The conflict between groups who hold divergent views will continue and social workers must be adept at assessing these assumptions, many of which may be so deeply felt that they are difficult to articulate.

It is encouraging to see social work writers focusing on assumptions at the world view or paradigmatic level, in attempts to emphasize the importance of assessing complexity at its roots. For example, Mullaly (1997) argues that "social work must engage itself in ideological analysis and become more cognizant of various theories of the state" (p. x). He then presents four paradigms (neo-conservatism, liberalism, social democracy, and Marxism) that offer different explanations for social problems, the ideal social welfare system and the interpretation of social problems, and the nature and form of social work practice (p. x-xi).

At the organizational level, Netting and O'Connor (2003) build on Burrell and Morgan's (1979) four paradigms (functionalism, radical structuralism, interpretivist, and radical humanist) as do Martin and O'Connor (1989). The intent of these writers is to encourage social workers to recognize that words and actions are only artifacts of deeply held views. Thinking that a person can change another's actions is one thing, but recognizing that these actions are tied to views of the world that form a person's, group's, program's, organization's, or community's identity reveals the difficulty one may encounter in approaching, much less making, change. The future of macro social work is dependent on recognizing what one is up against (what the profession is up against) in carrying out social work values. Being able to assess the situation means being able to recognize when worldviews are clashing and to distinguish between views that can be changed and those that may require years (if ever) to change. Assessing the situation also requires recognizing that diverse assumptions are often embedded in the same structures, leading to paradoxical situations. For example, a program may be designed by planners with one set of assumptions, only to be located within an organization whose staff have different assumptions and in a community with even different assumptions about the population to be served.

There is no room for naivete in the future of macro social work, but there is great room for self awareness about the worldview one holds and with which one feels most comfortable. Equally important is for macro social workers to be able to step out of their comfort zones and work multiparadigmatically, and live with paradox (Netting & O'Connor, 2003).

Understanding Context

The future of macro social work depends on being able to take what is learned from the assessment of situations and move toward understanding context. Whatever actions or in-actions are identified in the assessment process need to be viewed within a larger context.

In macro social work the arenas in which and with which one operates are typically group, organizational, interorganizational, community, and policy settings. It is encouraging to see social workers writing about community organization and including content that just as likely might be included in management or policy textbooks. For example, Hardina (2002) talks about legislative analysis, program planning, and budgeting as part of community organization, not allowing practitioners to engage in compartmentalizing skills needed in program design and development from policy analysis. Contextually, it is important to see one's program design as the implementation of policy decisions or one's budget as highly political.

The recognition that interorganizational relationships, collaboration, partnering and related terms are not just verbiage but require seeing the organization in context reveals the connectedness among organizations. Mulroy (2004) introduces a conceptual framework of "Organization-in-Environment" having implications "for a future-oriented practice that emphasizes external relations and their political dimensions: strategic management, interorganizational collaboration, community building, regional action, and a commitment to social justice" (p. 77). She explains that this model helps in understanding contextual complexity in a global economy. She refers to research by Alter and Hague (1993) in which "they contend that the growing number of partnerships, alliances, joint ventures, consortia, obligational and systemic networks represent a stunning evolutionary change in institutional forms of governance. They predict that interorganizational networks are the future institution" (Mulroy, 2004, p. 89).

Thus, macro social work will be performed in a dizzying array of changing structures and program designs that do not always conform to one's experience, yet open opportunities for alternative and virtual relationships. For example, Roberts-DeGennaro (1997) identifies "five different types of coalitions, each serving a different purpose and each requiring a different structure and different activities" (Waysman & Savaya, 2004, p. 124). Social workers can gain from recognizing that considering context generates the emergence of diverse approaches. Being versatile is a prerequisite for macro social work.

Forming Connections

If structural arrangements will emerge in which new connections are made, there are also trends toward relationship building between different roles, disciplines, and professions. In elaborating on directions for the *Journal of Community Practice*, the editors look

to the future as one of increasing interdisciplinarity. "Barriers fall, silos collapse, and insights emerge from new combinations – whether these combinations are admixtures of disciplines, expertise, methodologies, or even characteristics of those who understand a particular scholarly enterprise" (Alvarez, Gutierrez, Johnson, & Moxley, 2003, pp. 2-3). The editors continue with emerging themes relevant to community practice, calling for humanists, artists, social scientists, life scientists, and others to join with social workers in facing hard issues of community practice. In their presentation, they recognize what macro social work brings to community practice – a commitment to facilitation and process – a classic theme that informs the future. Knowing what to "do" in process is an important legacy to carry into the future – macro social workers risk turning multiple ways of knowing into *doing*.

Mancini, Mare, Bryne, and Huebner (2004) allude to the connections that must be made between the worlds of program professionals and evaluators. These connections must occur within increasingly complex systems in which context is pivotal, manifested "in many communities [in which] there is interaction across systems, as well as interactions between levels within systems" (p. 10). Similarly, Lennon & Corbett (2003) link policy intent to program implementation and impact analysis, recognizing that accountability requires asking questions about how policies are implemented and evaluated for their effectiveness. Again, these approaches focus on the implementation process, not stopping with an enacted policy or a program design, but pushing macro social workers to figure out how to carry out intent – to move to action.

Mixed methods research, university-community partnerships, interdisciplinary relationships, interorganizational collaboration, and a host of other concepts jump from the pages of professional journals and from conversations with practitioners. Although the terms may be used differently, the message is clear. Whether approaching groups, programs, organizations, coalitions, or communities social workers have to consider multiple contexts in which diverse stakeholders interact, and they must be able to evaluate those interactions and impacts in an accountable manner.

Living with Conflict

With such complexity, multiple contexts, and diverse connections social workers will find macro practice to be increasingly conflictual. This conflict goes beyond ambiguity and uncertainty, but fully reflects the possibilities that any movement toward change may be met with strong clashes of values because someone's or some group's worldview may be challenged. Additionally, as the number of nonprofit organizations grow, as government seeks to devolve responsibility to the local level, as the push for accountability escalates, macro social workers face practice challenges.

Macro social workers face an increasingly challenging dilemma in the future. Advocacy programs and organizations attempt to formalize the more radical language of social work into action. They are typically formed around a "cause" and often attempt to empower diverse groups who are oppressed. Such organizations may be called social movement, social change, alternative, and social reform organizations. They may engage in activities such as lobbying, campaigning, even social protest to achieve their goals. If they are truly

advocacy organizations, they likely depend on nontraditional funding sources and to their dismay they may see mirrored images of their methods in organizations and groups that are advocating just as strongly for the status quo. The methods used by radical groups do not belong to radicals of one political persuasion. Thus, the competition among interests will likely continue apace as diverse organizational forms emerge within local communities. Some will be hybrid organizations that identify as both service providers and as advocacy organizations. Others may consider advocacy their single mission. Campbell's (2002) study of nonprofit organizations examines the paradox that occurs when program leaders focus on direct service outcomes "over which they have control and for which indicators are readily available, they risk default on the larger question of accountability to publicly valued goods. On the other hand, if they try to demonstrate the impact of their particular projects on community wide outcomes, they risk taking credit inappropriately or shouldering the blame for indicators beyond their control" (p. 243).

Reisch and Andrews (2002) reveal a number of struggles that have occurred in the history of radical social work in the U.S. These include the move from cause to function, tension between liberals and radicals, and perceived incompatibilities between radicalism and professionalization. They conclude that "it is not enough . . . to use words like 'empowerment,' multiculturalism,' 'oppression,' and 'social justice.' The test of social work's commitment to its underlying values lies in the willingness to struggle on an often mundane, day-to-day basis to translate these values into deeds, as our professional forebears did individually and collectively" (p. 231).

IMPLICATIONS: SUSTAINABILITY, CHANGE, ADVOCACY, & QUALITY OF LIFE

Earlier, macro social work was defined as those efforts within and outside organizational, community and policy arenas intended to sustain, change, and advocate for quality of life. In light of the factors highlighted in the previous section, what does it mean for macro social work to sustain, change and advocate for quality of life?

Sustainability

Sustainability is a word used often by community practitioners. According to Hart (1999) sustainable communities develop natural, human, social, and built capital. Natural capital is everything from trees to waterways, whereas human capital involves people's skills and well-being. Social capital focuses on connections as individuals, groups, friends, and organizations come together. Built capital focuses on infrastructures such as roadways and housing. Together, these four types of capital can be strengthened and sustained to protect and restore communities for future generations. Therefore, macro social workers must know how to assess natural, human, social, and built capital within communities, understand the context, form connections, and live with conflicts that are inevitable in any situation involving multiple people.

Change

Change is a concept well known to social work. Social workers know that any change, no matter how small, may be met with resistance. The future of macro social work lies in

recognizing that change, like power, can be used in positive as well as in destructive ways. Change can be incremental or radical or anywhere in between. In the future, macro social workers will witness changes that they are resistant to, as well as work toward changes that have unanticipated consequences. Whether one is working toward policy, organizational, programmatic, or community change (or all of the above), it will be important to assess the complexity of the situation, understand the context, form connections with anyone who will be affected by the change, and expect conflict.

Advocacy

Everyone is doing advocacy but some persons are advocating for the status quo (Ezell, 2000). There is a mythology about advocacy that must cease. Advocacy is a codeword in social work for change, sometimes for radical change. Yet, advocacy can be for sustaining and maintaining what is, for not losing more ground when current programs are threatened, for keeping a community intact when a highway is designed to cut it in half, for keeping a plant open when a small town's citizenry will lose their jobs, and a host of other possibilities. Macro social workers will also find that they are faced with advocates who hold different worldviews, different philosophies, and opposite values from their own. Advocating carries so many meanings that future social workers will have to be clear about which form it is taking in a world in which everyone is advocating for something.

Quality of Life

Quality of life is a complicated concept because no one's quality of life may be identical to anyone else's. Yet, the push toward outcome-based measurement tends to lump quality of life outcomes into groups, making assumptions about individuals that may or may not fully increase their self-perceived quality of life. Outcome-based measurement is part of an accountability movement that will continue apace in the years ahead. It will be incumbent upon macro social workers to be certain that persons served have a voice in determining those outcomes, that measurements are sensitive, that alternative methods of measuring success are used, that outcomes are not always determined by persons one or two steps removed from consumers, and that being accountable means being accountable to consumers, as well as to decision-makers and funders.

A strength of macro social work is in the knowledge of direct practice that professionals bring to the public arena. Social workers (unlike their colleagues in business, political science, sociology, public administration, health administration and other macro programs of study) engage in work with individuals and groups in the field, under professional supervision, in order to graduate as a social worker. Thus, social work professional education requires seeing the faces of the persons with whom and for whom one advocates. This exposure gives voice to direct practice experience (sometimes called clinical or micro) that is not always required of other non-clinical professionals who are educated to manage, plan, and change organizations, communities, policies, and even societal structures. Conversely, to perform the role of direct practice or clinical social work, exposure to macro content is part of one's professional education, mandating that practitioners always consider context rather than focus solely on the individual. Exposure of all professional social workers to

person(s)-in-context is critically important to the future of macro social work.

CONCLUSION

Macro social work *is* social work. History tells us that the profession was birthed from diverse traditions in which relief work, reform work, and radical work interfaced. Yet different traditions were grounded in different assumptions, spurring different ways of knowing and doing. This versatility is a hallmark of the field and it will serve macro social work well into the future. A profession that seeks to sustain, advocate and change, with the intent of increasing quality of life, will always need practitioners who can recognize diverse worldviews, understand multi-layered contexts, deal with limitless inter-connections, and be invigorated by conflict.

References

- Alter, K., & Hague, J. (1993). *Organizations working together*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Alvarez, A. R., Gutierrez, L. M., Johnson, & A. K., Moxley, D. P. (2003). The Journal of Community Practice: A social work journal with an interdisciplinary perspective. *Journal of Community Practice*, 11(3), 1-12.
- Burrell, G. & Morgan, G. (1979). *Sociological paradigms and organizational analysis*. London: Heinemann.
- Campbell, D. (2002). Outcomes assessment and the paradox of nonprofit accountability. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, 12(3), 243-259.
- Council on Social Work Education.(2001). *Educational policy and accreditation standards*. Alexandria, VA: The Author.
- Ezell, M. (2000). *Advocacy in the human services*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Hardina, D. (2002). *Analytical skills for community organization practice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hart, M. (1999). *Guide to sustainable community indicators*. North Andover, MA: Sustainable Measures.
- Lennon, M.C., & Corbett, T. (Eds.). (2003). *Policy into action: Implementation research and welfare reform*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press.
- Manicini, J. A., Marek, L. I., Byrne, R. A., & Huebner, A. J. (2004). Community based program research: Context, program readiness, and evaluation usefulness. *Journal of Community Practice*, 12(1/2), 7-21.
- Martin, P. Y., & O'Connor, G. G. (1989). *The social environment: Open systems applications*. New York: Longman.
- McCarthy, K. D. (2003). *American creed: Philanthropy and the rise of civil society 1700-1865*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Mullaly, Bob (1997). *Structural social work*. Ontario, Canada: Oxford.
- Mulroy, E. A. (2004). Theoretical perspectives on the social environment to guide management and community practice: An organization-in-environment approach. *Administration in Social Work*, 28(1), 77-96.
- Netting, F. E., Kettner, P. M., & McMurtry, S. L. (2004). *Social work macro practice* (3rd edition). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Netting, F. E., & O'Connor, M. K. (2003). *Organization practice: A social worker's guide to under-*

- standing human services*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Reamer, F. G. (1993). *The philosophical foundations of social work*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Reisch, M. & Andrews, J. (2002). *The road not taken: A history of radical social work in the United States*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- Roberts-DeGennaro, M. (1997). Conceptual framework of coalitions in an organizational context. *Journal of Community Practice*, 4, 91-107.
- Scott, A. F. (1993). *Natural allies: Women's associations in American history*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schneider, R. L. & Lester, L. (2001). *Social work advocacy*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Wagner, M., Newcomb, P., & Weiler, R. (2001). The 2001 educational policy and accreditation standards: Implications for MSW programs. *Advances in Social Work*, 2(2), 112-118.
- Waysman, M. & Savaya, R. (2004). Coalition-based social change initiatives: Conceptualization of a model and assessment of its generalizability. *Journal of Community Practice*, 12(1/2), 123-143.

Author's Note

Address correspondence to: F. Ellen Netting, School of Social Work, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1001 West Franklin Street, Richmond, VA 23238-2027. E-mail: enetting@vcu.edu