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GUEST EDITORIAL

## Yes, Macro Practice Matters: Embracing the Complexity of Real-World Social Work

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In his essay, “Why Macro Practice Matters,” Michael Reisch gives a compelling invitation to social work scholars to consider the contributions of macro practitioners to our profession and to society. I agree with much of what he says and share his dismay at witnessing the ways in which micro- and macro practice seem to be increasingly disconnected from each other.

Four questions are posed at the end of his essay that invite the reader to consider how macro practice can be rebuilt in schools of social work. These are (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? and (3) To what extent are we dealing with a profound difference in worldviews or approaches to practice? Answering these questions is critical if we are to move beyond critique to proactive solutions that help the profession meet its highest ideals—and the challenges practitioners of all stripes find in their everyday practice. My answers focus largely on structural barriers and incentives that reinforce differences rather than capitalize on them. They are based in the belief that macro skills are not just desirable, but essential for high-quality clinical practice—and vice versa.

Reisch’s first two questions are perhaps best answered together. In my view, these barriers are real, but laying blame at the feet of either students or faculty (or both) risks missing the important structural impediments that are at the root of the problem.

First, the issue of student readiness is, I believe, largely a red herring and can be dispensed with. Schools may say, “But our students are mostly micro” in response to why they have so few macro-focused faculty or courses. But students need both, and many are not just open to macro ideas but craving them. We are currently witnessing a renaissance of student activism on college campuses. Students are fully aware of the structural inequities that surround them and want to work to change them; it is their macro skills that are going to help them succeed. When I see smart, well-intentioned students mistaking demands for goals or misidentifying the power structures that could lead them to choose better targets, I cringe. These skills are not “obvious” but can be learned in courses that specialize in macro practice.

Of course, there will always be students who only want to focus on clinical practice. However, education should expose students to new ideas and skills, including being inspired by things they didn’t even know existed. We encourage college students to think broadly, requiring them to take a diverse range of courses across departments and divisions, even as they specialize in a major. We should do similarly in schools of social work by helping our students understand how micro and macro practice work together and how each area is needed to achieve true and lasting change. Obviously a full complement of courses that engage macro content and courses that bridge the curriculum is needed to do that—but is something many schools do not have. Even human behavior and the social environment (HBSE) courses, in which the reciprocity between systems and individuals is ostensibly the point, tend to focus much more heavily on the “HB” than on the “SE,” (Taylor, Austin, & Mulroy, 2004) likely influenced by the faculty members who are engaged to teach HBSE.

This brings us to the second point, around faculty readiness to take on the challenge of a revitalized macro tradition. This is a challenge that I believe is also largely driven by structural constraints. There are important incentives in place to convince our best and brightest PhD students that specializing in policy, organizations, or community organizing might be a mistake for their career and incentives for deans and directors to pass over scholars doing important work in these areas when engaged in faculty hiring.<sup>1</sup>

First, the Council on Social Work Education (CWSE) requirements that faculty have 2 years of post-masters “practice” experience—and many schools’ relatively strict interpretation of what constitutes “practice”—means that some newly minted PhDs with expertise in macro topics have a difficult time finding jobs outside of the most elite schools which typically have the most capacity. For these PhD students, who may have done a “macro track” as a masters student, having 2 years of (clinical) practice experience doesn’t make sense. And yet many schools, with tight budgets, want all their faculty members to have that experience so they can “teach across the curriculum.” We cannot expect faculty who have been trained in clinical practice and whose expertise is based in that tradition to teach students macro practice. It is unfair to the faculty and unfair to the students. Why would we expect students to get excited about policy or management if they are being taught those things by someone who did not choose to specialize in those topics?

But second, and perhaps more vitally, there are growing expectations around external funding and the number of publications required for tenure that systematically discourage and delegitimize the kind of work that many macro researchers do. This is nothing new, of course. Since the 1920s at least, social work has dealt with its feelings of insecurity by trying to professionalize and emulate fields with greater legitimacy. By becoming more “scientific” and aligning ourselves with federal priorities, we hope to gain more respect in the scholarly community and consolidate our claims to expertise. To be clear, finding better ways to intervene with people who are experiencing hardship or to prevent unwanted outcomes is important and laudable work. But by focusing on intervention work to the exclusion of the structural reform work that distinguishes our profession from public health or psychology, we do ourselves a disservice.

Obviously, when the interests of a faculty member are aligned with those of government funding agencies, this is a wonderful thing for all involved. Important research comes out of that partnership and I do not intend to critique this. Rather, I want to point out that those preferences are narrow and that for faculty whose interests lay elsewhere, there are real pressures to adjust interests to fit those preferences. Government funding generally does not support work that focuses largely on structural critique, organizational reform, or community building. Practice with individuals has always been better funded—that is part of why casework has achieved dominance throughout our history. In the social movements literature they call this “channeling”—whoever provides the resources has the ability to drive the agenda. In the organizational theory world, we would call it resource dependence. It is macro skills, of course, that allow for this kind of analysis.

Perhaps a way out of this conundrum is to address Reisch’s final question: “To what extent are we dealing with a profound difference in worldviews or approaches to practice?” I think that there are differences in worldviews and approaches to practice—but these differences have been with us from the beginning of the profession and we should embrace them rather than view them as the source of divisiveness. In my view, it is a strength of social work that we have room for such different approaches to practice, all in service of addressing society’s most troubling problems. The question should not be whether the problems in society can be best resolved by changing people (e.g., individuals and families) versus changing structures (e.g., communities, policies, organizations) but rather how scholars and activists who focus on those different levels can create more

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<sup>1</sup>I must point out here, that as a “macro” scholar myself, I have been privileged to spend my entire career in departments and schools that do not subscribe to this viewpoint. My mentors at UCLA only encouraged me to think more broadly about the organizational and political dimensions of my work, and my rich and interdisciplinary set of colleagues at the University of Chicago have improved my work immeasurably. My conclusions are based on participant observation in the field, primarily from talking to colleagues and students at other schools and witnessing changes in discussions at annual meetings.

holistic change by communicating and working together better. Doing that would be a real innovation, giving social work the potential to make a bigger difference in society and to improve our legitimacy and funding dilemmas in a more forward-looking way.

A hallmark of our profession is the recognition that micro level issues are often the result of macro level problems and that macro level social change often starts with micro level interactions. Think of the problems faced in low-income communities of color. We know that supports are needed for people to cope with mental health issues and trauma, but we also know that structural change is needed to prevent further trauma and violence from occurring. To recapture the legacy of macro practice that Professor Reisch so richly details, we must be more open to learning from each other. We must see the value each tradition brings to our profession and how both perspectives enrich our individual and collective learning and growth; for example, advocacy practice, one of my areas of expertise, could be enriched if students also were to develop expertise in micro skills such as motivational interviewing, group dynamics, or conflict and change. At the same time, many an intervention study would be improved if more attention were paid to organizational context that shapes implementation. In other words, it's time for social work to acknowledge that the macro-micro divide is false.

Appreciating each other for the differences we bring to the table should include our scholarly traditions and our expertise. In-depth, qualitative studies that reveal the complexities of people's lives, communities, or organizational dynamics must be valued as much as large-scale interventions. That is easy to say but harder to execute when one is bringing \$1 million in indirect costs to the school and the other is not. This requires a renewed and sustained commitment by leaders of schools of social work to diversify faculty expertise and to release tenure from the tyranny of grantsmanship.

To strengthen and reform our curriculum, we should start by thinking more about what the unique strengths of our profession are. What does it mean to learn policy analysis in a *social work* school or nonprofit management from a *social work* perspective? For example, we could bring in research on the role of emotions in policy preferences—social work is ideally situated to explore that. Or we could teach management from a critical management studies perspective, which engages more directly with values and justice than many traditional frameworks. Both of these would require bringing in the latest research rather than relying on textbooks. Too many macro practice courses rely on secondary texts, full of description but short on analytics. Macro practice should not be just a weekly march through different policy areas. Knowing the basics of how policy has responded to social problems is important, but this type of survey course inspires few people. We need to bring in the most innovative and thought-provoking research to push and inspire our students, whose growing activism on campus, in politics, and on social media indicates that they are indeed ready for the challenge.

Finally, in challenging our students to grapple with the real complexities and dilemmas faced by those working in policy and administration, we need to question the dichotomy between micro and macro practice that so many curriculums reinforce. This may mean envisioning a new curriculum, type of teaching, or field engagement that brings them together. Although I want to refrain from privileging any specific model here, many cases exist. I would argue that *both* sides of our curricular divide need to be revitalized to respond to an increasingly complex social service world.

## Reference

Taylor, S., Austin, M., & Mulroy, E. (2004). Evaluating the social environment component of human behavior and the social environment courses through an analysis of course outlines. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 10(3), 61–84.