Macro Practice in a Micro World: The Story of Youth Futures

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Abstract: The dichotomy of micro and macro practice is one that many social work students struggle with, especially when so many social workers just want to become therapists. My own experience in moving between the two worlds involved skepticism towards macro practice while training to be a therapist, then moving on to the world of academia where macro practice seemed to gain more value, then working in macro practice for a few years, and then trying to convince other students of the value of macro practice once returning to academia. One semester, a talented student taught me that macro practice was still alive and well in social work, and that macro was not just a part of the social work identity, but a fundamental part of what social workers do every day. She did this by creating a homeless youth shelter with the help of her cohort during one fateful fall semester.

Let's be honest. Social work has evolved into a clinical profession despite our infancy in community practice. Year after year I teach students who want to be clinicians more than anything. The cry of "I want to help people" usually means "I want to sit in a nice chair and have clients pay me to help solve their problems." Despite all the rhetoric used to emphasize the importance of policy work, research, and macro practice, most social workers simply aren't interested. At least, I know I wasn't. Perhaps I'm projecting my own experience onto my colleagues who studied with me, but I saw going into the field of social work as a shortcut to becoming a therapist and I believe they did too. In any case, I had always intended to become clinician. The University of Utah provided me with an opportunity to study the arts and ways of the social worker as a master's student. Fortunately, I was pretty good at the whole social work thing. My practicum supervisors loved me, I loved my professors, and I loved what I was learning. I loved most of what I was learning anyway.

One of my first classes in the MSW program was referred to as Policy. I really didn't see the point of it other than it gave me a small overview of what the profession entailed. Honestly, I don't remember much from that class other than it required a really difficult paper at the end called a PRINCE policy analysis. I had already gained my undergraduate degree and I just assumed this class just another one of those unpleasant hoops you have to jump through to get a degree. I felt the course didn't provide a takeaway for becoming a therapist. To be sure, I don't blame the professor. She was a talented and knowledgeable person who had done a great deal of work in policy.

My second semester I had to take another class that also seemed totally unnecessary. My cohort and I cynically referred to it as macro practice. The coursework wasn't particularly difficult, but the class required us to go find a systemic injustice and try to solve it. I remember thinking to myself, "Man, another one of these hoops! When will they end?" The other classes like micro practice, mezzo practice, and human behavior in the social environment all seemed so practical compared to this!

Something did happen at the end of macro that softened my heart a little bit, however. One set of students set up a classroom environment simulation for at-risk adolescents for their final presentation. While each presenting student spoke, the audience of students had to sit calmly, quietly, feet on the floor, hands still on their desks, no talking to peers, no looking anywhere but forward, and no crossing their legs. Students gave five minute presentations. Between shifting from one student to the next presenter in the group, all of the students listening were either punished or rewarded for how well we did. We were mostly punished. It was an incredibly difficult task, but a remarkably effective presentation. We all learned from our peers that holding still really sucks, and if we had a mental illness, were teenagers, and had to do that, I know at least I could imagine my symptoms getting worse. I started, albeit slowly, to see the light. Systems could make people worse.

I guessed I would have to start paying a little more attention to macro practice and systems. Too bad that class was over. Looking back on the class, I remember vividly that one presentation from my peers, Mahan and Lipman, et. al.'s movie *Holding Ground*, (1996) (an excellent video for macro practice classes), and some guy named Alinsky. My own project was a lamentably forgettable one focused on trying to get movie theaters to offer more diabetic friendly food. All we learned is that movie theaters get most of their money from concessions, and they would consider changes if the demand was high enough.

Still, I didn't see macro practice as essential to being a therapist. At best, I only saw it as part of the identity of a social worker, but not necessarily a part of the work they actually did. Macro practice was still something other people did—non-clinicians. I went full speed ahead imagining myself as the guy in the comfy chair getting paid to help solve other people's, and I got pretty good at it.

Now, my reflections on being a therapist can wait for another time, but let's just say I found in the field that full-time therapy, while mostly seeing clients, felt like I was mainly doing paperwork. The hours of time spent with clients would zoom by, while the paperwork would just drag on and on. Within a year of graduating from my master of social work program, I decided I needed to go back and get a Ph.D. to further my career. Mostly, it stemmed from the idea of being able to mentor new social work students, something I came to find as somewhat more rewarding than work with clients. I would later discover that supervising was a form of macro practice, and one that built nicely on the skills of micro practice. Little did I know it, but I was starting to gravitate away from micro practice and into macro.

Moving into Macro

In my Ph.D. program, I started to embrace the idea that social workers need to work on social systems to improve people's lives. The social environment people lived in was much more impactful than many of the micro level interventions we threw at them. I still loved micro practice. In fact, I continued working as a therapist throughout my time as a social worker, and even to this day. The time I spent working with addicted clients, homeless veterans, and immigrants on a micro level helped me build the skills necessary for macro practice, but it also reinforced the idea that systems mattered more in the long run than my one-hour sessions or two-

hour groups. The time I dedicated to the clinic declined as I focused more and more on macro level work. My Ph.D. program allowed for such a focus.

Research became a huge part of what I learned as a Ph.D. student, but what I really loved to do was teach. I signed up to teach as many classes as I could. The two classes that made themselves available for most regular rotations turned out to be a bachelor's level macro practice class and advanced research in mental health for master's students. For anyone who has ever taught before, you know that nothing teaches you more about a topic than having to teach about it.

Teaching macro practice served me well. I had a chance to redefine it for myself. I began to realize that almost any work I did outside of seeing individual clients or meeting in group therapy sessions counted as macro practice! Every staff meeting I attended was an opportunity to engage in macro practice. Every time I collaborated on a grant, or talked programing to my supervisor, or represented social work in the public was macro practice! My clinical directors, people I respected who still saw clients were actually macro practitioners. By teaching the class, I saw all the ins and outs of how macro practice framed micro practice in greater detail, and I was able to arrange the class in a way that made sense for me given my experience as a clinician. I began to see the value of the approach and grasped the concepts better than I did in my master's program (again, not to fault the teacher, but more about my attitude towards the class serving as a major hindrance). How it served me best, though, is it allowed me to conceptualize information about agencies, personnel management, organizational structure, funding sources, and community integration well enough to take on a clinical director position that had opened up after I'd finished my doctoral course work and was working on my dissertation.

This particular clinical directorship opportunity allowed me to take on macro practice in all of its most basic definitions and to flex my new skills. I got to work with policy, had to do a lot of research to evaluate my programs, supervise students, focus on community needs, and even do a little community organizing. Plus, I developed a great love for refugees and immigrants, the primary group of clients I served. I even did some therapy here and there, but this is where I really jumped into the deep end of macro practice. And, wow, was it deep! After a year or two, swimming in the deep end became very difficult.

One fateful Saturday evening, I received some terrible news. I noticed on Facebook a number of my former students were posting comments like, "I can't believe it!" and "Oh, I'm so sorry," on another former student's wall. I learned that one of my former students, Joel, had died in an accident. I was crushed. I'd had clients die before, and while it's always sad to lose a client, grieving a client seemed infinitely more doable than the loss of this former student. Joel had just received his clinical license, was working with children in the local mental health authority, and had been married for less than a year. I still feel that same sense of sorrow just writing about it. I taught this student's little brother as well, and saw him and Joel's young widow at the viewing. I remember waiting in line to see them and just thinking to myself, "What am I doing with my life?"

Looking back, I don't recall exactly what my thinking process was, but I do remember the situation I was in. I had pushed my little macro program to grow too quickly and I was burning

out faster than I could put out fires. When I had started my clinical director job a year or so earlier, I had two therapists, a full-time and part-time case manager, and a part-time billing specialist. By the time Joel died, I had seven full-time therapists, a clinical coordinator, three case managers, a contracted psychologist, a part-time practice nurse practitioner, two full-time billing specialists, and was well under way to starting a community center complete with a program supervisor, three after school teachers, and a handful of interns and volunteers. I'd pushed the program to grow by applying for lots of grants, increasing the number of grants funding the program from three to over ten. My own naiveté and blind ambition pushed the program growth too quickly to be manageable. The work became overwhelming and my family was paying the price. I remember at Joel's viewing that I decided it was time to get back into teaching. As much as I still loved refugees and macro work, I decided I was no good to either if the stress killed me, and I would have little to no respect for myself if I let my job get in the way of keeping my family. Whatever self-care I was doing, it wasn't enough (or had been thoroughly overwhelmed by lack of sufficient planning), and the loss of my student helped me realize I needed to make another career change, one that social work graciously offers.

I was fortunate that a small state university with a bachelor's level social work program, only 40 minutes from where I lived, had an opening the following fall for a tenure-track position. I'd finished my PhD by then and they were looking for someone who could teach macro practice, policy, and research. I hadn't taught policy yet, but I was willing, and I knew that with sufficient preparation, I could easily do so. I was hired and began teaching the next year.

Returning to Academia

Once at my new university, I realized I was in a rather precarious position: I was assigned to teach the very classes students in social work programs didn't want to take. I decided I needed to see this for what it was—a challenge. I embraced my task and lovingly called the group of macro courses I teach the "social work gauntlet." Since all students had to take a policy course, a research course, and macro practice, they'd all have to go through the gauntlet before they got their degrees.

Granted, the program I was in, like most schools of social work I've experienced, leaned toward micro practice. When I started, most of the faculty had an outside part time job as a therapist or emergency department worker. For that matter, I did too. Most students also identified with the desire to become therapists eventually. All my students asked the same questions I did when I was in graduate school: "How is this going to make me a better therapist?"; "What is the point of learning how to work with communities if I'm going to work with individuals?"; and "Can't I just hope my work with individuals can have a ripple effect on communities?" This attitude of questioning was nowhere more apparent than in my macro practice class.

I feel like I need to mention one macro student who helped me out a great deal during that difficult first semester: Arianna. Arianna befriended me right before classes started and helped guide me through the ins and outs of students and the proclivities of the cohort I was teaching that first semester. Despite how helpful she was, macro was by far the most difficult class I taught that semester, at least for me. Students were disengaged, bored, and spent a lot of time

sitting in the back of the classroom on Pinterest. The class only had about fifteen students in a classroom set up for forty, making the classroom feel empty, even when all the students were present. That emptiness seemed to only heighten the sense of isolation when teaching. Whenever I asked a question, Arianna was the only one who ever answered. It felt incredibly lonely.

I'd inherited from the previous teacher's syllabus a final project that required students to identify a systemic problem using Kirst-Ashman's and Hull's (2011) PREPARE model, and then to fashion a kind of treatment plan using their IMAGINE model. They had to then follow through with their plan and create some sort of macro level change in an organization or community. If I recall correctly, everyone in that class did a fundraiser—lamentably forgettable fundraisers. The only exception was Arianna who applied for and received a grant to provide a kind of respite movie experience for families with children on the autism spectrum. That was the only project I felt I could be proud of in that class. That first semester of macro was full of disappointment, frustration, and a fair amount of bad reviews. I knew the class would need some sort of change to make it work.

During the semester, I recalled that Kirst-Ashman and Hull refer to a character named Saul Alinsky in one of their chapters. He appeared to be a controversial figure that might make the class a little more exciting. In fact, I vaguely recalled his name from when I took macro practice myself. I made it a point to do some more research on Alinsky. I went to our library and picked up a worn 1971 edition of Alinsky's book *Rules for Radicals* (if you haven't read this book, you no longer have any excuses not to). I read it between fall and spring semester and was enthralled. His take on community organizing and macro practice was creative, aggressive, results-oriented, and practical in terms of how targets are selected and tackled. I talked to my chair and asked if I could make it part of the required reading. He liked the idea and gave me the go-ahead.

Reading an original text like Alinsky's book had some interesting effects on students. Some loved him, some hated him, but everyone had an opinion and was engaged when it came to his readings. Playing up the controversy of Alinsky was fun personally, but it also had the strange effect of making me want more from my students. The first semester teaching Alinsky, students still mostly did fundraisers for their class projects. Worse than that, most of them did half-hearted projects. I recall the last night of that class was one of the worst in my career. Students came up for presentations, were burned out, and gave lackluster presentations. It seemed like even though they'd all read *Rules for Radicals*, none of them had actually embraced the fact that given great opportunities and hard work, they could accomplish wonderful things. Most of them had great chances to make social changes and ended up squandering them.

I was furious. I was somewhat disappointed in my students, but more than that, I recognized they were burnt out. On top of the class I was teaching, these poor bachelors students were also writing capstones and doing their first semester of practicum placement. I decided for the following year when teaching macro practice, I was going make some serious changes. All small scale (<$1000) fundraisers would be banned. Such projects filled a very small and unending need that all agencies have for money and rarely make real sustainable changes that benefit clients or change systems. Self-care was also to become an integral part of the macro practice class. After all, I'd nearly burnt out doing macro practice myself, so who was I to expect any less

of my students? They would all have to demonstrate a fair amount of self-care throughout the semester so they wouldn't end up like that very frustrating second class.

A Student with a Dream

In fall semester of 2014, my macro practice class had a new set of rules and expectations. No fundraisers unless they were large scale or built into annual events. Projects must have accomplished something tangible. Students were to read Saul Alinsky and find ways to challenge their horizons of what is possible and how to look outside of their micro paradigm to change the world. Fortunately, I'd had a year to try to prime all the students through my policy and research courses on the value of macro practice. Now, it was time to put it into action and see what my students were actually capable of.

Well, I was in luck. That fall, a bright and talented non-traditional student with a dream entered my classroom, forever changing what I believed to be possible in a classroom. Her name was Kristen, and she had some experience working in an agency that gave out referrals and information about social services over the phone. One thing she'd noticed when talking on the phone to her clients was there were no homeless shelters for teens in our community, a fact that left her bothered because there were so many homeless teens and parents calling for just such a referral. Her decision to study social work was guided by the idea that she would need to fill this important gap in services in our community, and she was determined to make sure that need was met.

Before Kristen walked into our class, she had done a fair share of work to prepare for such a task. She and her partner purchased an old house in the community that they would one day turn into the shelter. She learned the reason there were no homeless shelters was because state policy did not allow for them, meaning any place that knowingly provided shelter for homeless youth had to contact their parents right away or turn them over to child protective services within 72 hours, or risk being charged with harboring a delinquent youth. What did Kristen do? She worked with one of our adjunct faculty, a local congressperson, a community policy advocate, and the state office to get the policy changed so that shelters for homeless youth could actually exist.

As you might be able to tell, Kristen was already bound for macro practice greatness. She had, however, also approached my class for help before taking it herself. She asked students from my summer macro course to try to fundraise for her shelter, but by then I was really dead-set against fundraisers, and the original plan was likely to bring only tens of dollars as opposed to the thousands that she needed. Kristen decided that to push the program forward, she'd have to take her idea to the class herself when she finally took it.

I vividly remember the night she pitched her idea. We were discussing what came to their minds when they heard the term macro practice, as well as what kinds of projects they could do to address community problems. I got a lot of typical answers like fundraisers. They were all told if they did a fundraiser, it had to be on a relatively massive scale or it had to become an annual event since the need for money would never really go away. Then, Kristen raised her hand. "I

want to start a homeless shelter for teenagers. Would that be an acceptable project?" I was a little floored. I stammered for a second and said, "Yes. That's macro practice embodied. Such a task is huge, though. Probably a bit unrealistic to take on in one semester." She then explained to me that she'd done a lot of the prep work for the project, had asked for fundraising help in the past, and was now ready to try out something big.

The students who heard about her project were eager to help. They even offered the idea that they should all work on this project together as a class. I reminded them groups had to be limited in size to three people (a policy I have for all my classes, otherwise someone invariably ends up slacking and getting a good grade on the coattails of their peers). We continued to brainstorm for potential solutions when suddenly Kristen offered the idea of having multiple groups of three team up to take on different tasks of setting up the shelter. Reminded of Alinsky and his principles of power, "Power goes to two poles: to those who've got the money and those who've got the people" (Alinsky, 1971, p. 127), I decided this group of groups would be an excellent way to push such a big project forward. It also mimicked how macro practice invariably ends up working—teams of teams. For that matter, the students were excited to see that they could contribute to a real macro project, even if they did not have to come up with the idea. I gave them the go ahead, excited to see what they could accomplish.

Kristen, it turns out, was quite the leader. Eighty percent of the class joined her and her cause, and she was able to delineate major tasks each group could start on. One group worked on a grant offered by the school to students working in the community. A second group worked on putting together a policy manual for the agency. Another group worked on putting together an annual poetry slam fundraiser. A fourth group did a series of fundraising events in front of a local Walmart for several weekends. Kristen helped manage the other groups as well as apply for a much larger grant from the university to get the shelter commercially ready.

I think in order to show the progression of the program, it would be best to look at each student's progress individually. The project that I imagined would have the least impact turned out to have one of the biggest. Over the course of several weekends, a small group of my macro practice students (who further recruited some of my Introduction to Social Work class students), hung out in front of a Walmart collecting money from any of the customers coming and going that wanted to donate. They were collecting in-kind items as well, so if customers didn't want to give them cash, they could buy items the shelter needed from a provided wish list. It was a surprising success. After four weeks in front of Walmart asking for collections, they had raised over $10,000! On top of that, they'd garnished enough attention that the local media caught wind of what they were doing and did an article on Kristen and her project.

It wasn't long after the local media picked up the story that larger newspapers started to pay attention. It was one of those feel-good articles—students working on their own to create a program that met community needs - plus it was the first dedicated homeless shelter for teens in our state. Before we knew it, Kristen had calls coming in from local business people dying for a piece of the action (and healthy tax deductions). She was inundated with donations from individuals and organizations looking to support the program. My student had become a local celebrity, and even the university couldn't ignore it.

That kind of publicity helped significantly. Kristen had the opportunity to apply for a large university grant that would help make the building she owned get up to code so the organization could open sooner. The funding committee was often reluctant to fund such projects since they usually supported program initiatives and not material support. In fact, one of the biggest issues they faced was who was going to own the materials purchased with the grant? I remember going to the funding committee meeting with my student and advocating for her and her program. She did most of the talking. I just stepped in as a new faculty member in full support of Kristen and the program she was setting up. I have to think in the end, she actually got the grant because the committee was afraid of being on the wrong side of history. Still, there was another $18,600+ in the coffers for the agency to get started, and to this day, it is the largest grant the committee has ever given for a single project.

One of Kristen's close friends headed up another grant proposal that would help organizations become certified as safe harbors for homeless youth, where they could get a quick bite to eat and then be referred to the homeless shelter. Such training programs already existed and this program was set up to bring out a group to train the trainers that would then certify agencies that would become the safe harbors for kids. That program was quite the learning experience for my students because once they had the grant, they had to convince the people that would be providing the training to come out to our state, find out how to board them, recruit people to be trained, find a place to host the training, and cover basic logistics for everyone. For students who had never taken on such projects before, it was a massive learning experience. Still, they got their grant and added another $3000 of value to the cause.

Another group had the less-than-glamorous job of writing up the organization's policy manual. I'm sure this group felt a little jealous that everyone else working to get the shelter opened was starting to get some really tangible results, as well as a fair share of media attention. This group received none of that attention. On top of that, they felt lost because Kristen was too busy dealing with incoming calls to dedicate a lot of time to them. They came to me, frustrated and looking for guidance. I was able to remind them that policies exist primarily to solve social problems, so they would have to think about what kinds of social problems the agency would likely encounter as they hosted homeless teens. They thought for a second and said, "Well, they'd better not have drugs or sex in the shelter, right?" Exactly. They thought a little longer and said, "I think we can handle this then." I encouraged them to look at policies other homeless shelters and youth residential programs had to help flesh out their policy manual and familiarize themselves with the format of policy language. Their contribution ended up becoming a major part of the agency's employee manual, which in turn saved Kristen significant time, leading to the agency being able to open sooner.

Finally, one group put together a poetry slam to raise awareness and funds for the new shelter, which would be named Youth Futures. It attracted some of the best poets from the state to come together and support the program, and it gathered a fair amount of media attention. I took my policy class to the slam, and I even shared one of my own idealistic poems from my time as an undergraduate student. From there, the poets went up and did their magic. Everyone in attendance was quite moved by their words and expressions, leading to my rather large policy class to take notice of the problem the community was facing as well as raise their own

awareness of their ability to make changes in the community. This particular project did not raise much in terms of funds; if I recall correctly, it was less than $150. But still, the awareness raised brought further attention to the community need and the program designed to meet that need.

In the end, the projects and publicity raised over $250,000 over the course of one semester. The homeless shelter opened its doors the following spring and has been running successfully ever since. Kristen and I did multiple presentations on her accomplishments and what made it work, and she was awarded the distinguished graduate from our college upon graduation where she shared the story of her work at commencement. Now, a couple of years later, Kristen still sends representatives of her agency to me at the beginning of each semester to ask if more students want to get involved. Usually, at least a couple of them do.

The impact this ambitious student has had on social work students in my program would be difficult to measure. Before working with Kristen, macro practice was seen as just another hoop to jump through. Students still come to my class with the same idea. "I want to be one of those social workers sitting in a comfy chair getting paid to help solve other people's problems." Now, with Kristen's example and the prompts of Saul Alinsky, students know they must do great things for the community when they take my class, and prepare themselves accordingly.

As for me, I've learned that macro practice is essential for micro practice to exist. I think of all of the homeless teens out there in my community and how they might never get the individual services they need if it weren't for the fact that Kristen took up the challenge as a macro practitioner. The same is true in every agency for which I've worked. Macro practice creates the context that allows for micro practice to even exist. Now when students come to me with the same questions I had as a social work student about macro practice, I can point them to Kristen's example and say, "Because your ability to sit in a comfy chair and help solve individual's problems is contingent on believing a change can be done within the context of macro practice." My hope is that my students walk away with that idea, because I certainly have.

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