

From Values to Passion to Enlivened Practice: A Palette of Possibilities

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Abstract: This narrative offers a palette of possibilities for linking micro and macro practices that arose from interviews with social workers who were viewed as addressing the profession's dual purpose of individual well-being and social justice in their practice. I begin with my own experiences and desires to link micro and macro together as a clinical social worker and community organizer. An interlude describing the way the social workers stretched my thinking comes in between the themes. I conclude with a final reflection on the impact of their stories and implications for future research and practice.

Keywords: macro practice, social justice, social work methods, social work practice, values

In Pursuit of Fresh Possibilities

In my 26 years as a social worker, I have witnessed the power of relationships to support individuals' struggles for well-being and to galvanize collective action against social injustices. I've long been frustrated with the duality of the profession's dual purpose (individual well-being and social justice) and the corresponding micro/macro method divide because dualities tend to fuel conflict and competition (Jackson, 1993), diminishing the profession's ability to have the kind of impact we want to have (Haynes, 1998; Marsh, 2002). As a clinical social worker, I've seen how some psychological defenses reinforce dichotomies (e.g., splitting and idealization/devaluation), and have worked with individual clients as they develop the capacity to hold tensions and paradoxes. Now as a social work educator, I try to help social work students develop the capacity to hold tensions and paradoxes. I encourage them to think holistically by providing them with conceptual frameworks that describe health and diversity as differentiation with integration within individuals, families, groups, and communities (see, for example, Bloom & Farragher, 2013; Cozolino, 2013; and Siegel, 2012). Most recently I interviewed social workers who traverse the micro and macro worlds in an effort to find additional ways to reimagine the divides, debates, and dualities so pervasive in our profession. I wanted to know how they promote the dual purposes, and most importantly, how they make sense of these micro and macro divides: How do they see it? What do they do?

This paper alternates between my reflections on what I heard during the interviews and the social workers' ideas and experiences themselves, and in some cases I include my thoughts and the interviewees' direct quotes within the same sentence. I organized the social workers' stories in relation to how my own thinking stretched and expanded during the research. I conclude with further reflections and questions that (hopefully) spark the readers' imaginations for conceptual frameworks and practice actions.

While engaging in qualitative research with 18 social workers in a range of practice settings, I was heartened to hear participants describe their practice in a unifying manner, yet surprised by

their realness, immediacy, and their sense that what they're doing is "no a big deal." Listening to their stories, I paradoxically found their practice actions to be both novel and familiar within our current practice environment. Instead of focusing on fulfilling job description duties, they were activated by a fundamental sense that something was not right or fair in various circumstances and experiences with clients and community members. While these experiences stirred up their anger or cognitive passion, participants recounted the ways they responded in very matter-of-fact ways. One participant simply said: "I see the need and then I act.," while another said, "When I see gaps I try to do something."

Kaleidoscopic Images

After a few interviews I felt myself becoming enlivened and intrigued. How did they come to think and practice in this way? Participants often used familiar social work terms, so I started using a kaleidoscope as a metaphor to listen for varying understandings. I discovered that their stories clustered into various images of how micro and macro practices are interconnected. Two initial images felt familiar to me because they resonated with my experiences of engaging in micro and macro actions at different points in time while understanding the ways that those actions are mutually beneficial: 1) separate, yet linked efforts; and 2) micro/macro inform and benefit each other.

Separate Yet Linked Efforts

A few social workers talked about doing micro and macro practice at different points in their career. Their choices stemmed from valuing "the equitable, respectful treatment of everyone." At some points they specifically worked to address racism, gender discrimination, and LGBT issues because these are some injustices "that are still prevalent [but] not necessarily acknowledged." At other moments these social workers sought to ensure "that people have what they need to live a dignified, healthy life and that resources are available to all who need them."

After receiving her MSW, Dawn focused on individual well-being as a clinical social worker. She then addressed food insecurity, coordinating the town's food bank while her children were young. Dawn returned to clinical social work years later, helping her child and adolescent clients come to know "that they're valuable and they're unique and that they have something to give to the world." Kya had the opposite experience, initially engaging in community organizing before becoming a clinical social worker. She shifted her focus because she came to believe that "you really need to have individual therapy as part of someone's healing...or preparing to, to protest...to stand up and speak out...to be an advocate." From personal and professional experiences Kya remarks, "How are you an advocate if you feel as if you are worthless?"

In contrast to these sequential actions, Ann engages in concurrent micro and macro activities. Her commitment is divided between paid and volunteer work. She promotes individual well-being as a clinical social worker during the day, and advocacy, according to her, "Comes at six o'clock when you go to the NASW meeting" due to employment constraints. Ann has testified on issues related to elders and "I even went and brought a two-year-old baby with me once up to the... to the Capitol."

Dawn, Kya and Ann engage in micro and macro activities done sequentially or concurrently. Macro activities with friends were instrumental in forming commitments to social justice. Ann's experience with an NASW committee "taught me that the people that can make a change are... is anyone... You know, it's not just for the people in power." All three feel a deep obligation to act: "We're all responsible for this world. I might not be responsible for certain problems, but I have the responsibility to try to help change them."

Micro/Macro Inform and Benefit Each Other

Some participants spoke about the ways that their micro and macro practice activities become more impactful when informed by the other. Dana, a senior center director who cultivates a welcoming environment for all the seniors in the town, found that seniors with various mental illnesses experienced greater well-being after participating in program activities. Dana thinks this is because "people know that they can share stuff here...with staff...with each other...they are comfortable, they... they, realize that it's okay to be human." Instead of just linking these older adults with mental health services, Dana works with her staff to innovate ways of including people with Alzheimer's disease and other chronic illnesses into the life of the senior center. When faced with new situations, Dana says, "We just have to figure out how we're gonna do that, and we get 'em involved." Informed by individual interactions, these changes to programs and activities have had positive results: "And now we have people who are flourishing with... where they weren't years ago."

Individual experiences are also vital to Sue when she is constructing social policy. As someone who "was so much more comfortable in a spreadsheet than I was writing a paper" prior to earning her MSW, Sue learned the power of stories during her internships. She strongly believes that "solutions have to be developed down on the ground, and then brought up, because I think...those of us who are in advocacy, we hover lots of times around fifteen, twenty thousand, thirty thousand feet, and the ground is different." She also sees the need for policy practitioners to inform micro practitioners because "the person who is actually doing the work one on one with that client may not see the bigger picture, so there is a role for all of us to pull all of that together."

Sometimes it's one horrific event that spurs social workers into social action. After a tragic murder of a young child, Maya organized efforts to provide preschool for all children and started a child abuse prevention task force "because leaving your child with a boyfriend who's abusive ends up in death" and in this town "they're all our children." Many other times, it's the patterns amongst individual cases that spark action at the macro level. Lana, a school social worker for K-12 in a small town initially noticed the number of absences in the high school was "really growing." She started a task force to look at school absences and discovered that the problem started in kindergarten. She organized teachers to start altering the culture of "'it's just kindergarten. They can miss a week for Disney World'" by having them call parents when absences occur. She encouraged teachers to "start that conversation" early on. "Not to say 'Why hasn't your kid been in school?,' but 'Hey, we're noticing he's had four absences over the past month... What's going on? Do you need something?' Start there. Start that conversation." Lana's recognition of the pattern and subsequent school-wide analysis has circled back to proactive

individual responses early on.

The school social workers in particular framed their work with individuals within a social justice lens. They provided numerous examples describing the need to be fair with students: “there are rules, legislation, and ways that we need to behave in society that treats everybody fairly.” Critiquing the negative impacts of such policies as “zero tolerance,” Charles clarified: “And fair doesn’t mean everybody gets the same thing. It means what’s equitable and based on your needs.” Agreeing that “everybody needs to be held accountable,” Charles underscores the need to attend to how this occurs. He finds it essential for individual student experiences to inform the interpretation of macro policies so that accountability “will look differently for different individuals” because “there’s always grey area!” And in fact, “if you don’t take them into effect, then you’re dealing out un-injustice.”

Participants illuminated how micro and macro activities can inform each other in senior centers, community practice, and schools: Older adults with mental illnesses flourish when senior center programming is adjusted to include them; social policy addresses unmet needs more effectively when informed by personal experiences; schools can treat students fairly by holding them accountable according to their specific situations; universal preschool can protect children from domestic violence; and timely phone calls from teachers to parents can prevent unnecessary gaps in students’ school attendance and learning. Notable impacts in all these arenas resonates with Sue’s sense that there’s a vision of interconnection that is beyond grasp: “I feel like we’re at this edge of innovation that we’re not tapping into.”

Interlude

Early in my career I was hired as a clinical social worker and volunteered my time with political campaigns and social action committees. I saw the need to do both kinds of work, but similar to Ann, I did concurrent micro and macro work, removed from the daily experiences of the communities in which I worked. After moving into academe as a social work educator and shifting to macro practice activities, I more fully grasped the importance of being in relationship with a range of people. Opportunities in my personal life led me to engage in community organizing training and ongoing volunteer work as one of several leaders who guide the organization with two paid organizers. Community organizing deepened my understanding about how individual relationships and social change efforts need and benefit each other. I found that large scale actions happen best when those at the grassroots level are in relationship with each other and with those at the macro level who make policy, legislation, and other large-scale decisions. Relational power became my connecting thread between and within individual/micro activities and social change/macro activities. Yet I continued to struggle with how to conceptualize relational power within social work’s micro and macro methods. I lacked the language to make further connections within our professional categorizations.

So I returned to the participants’ responses with a renewed desire to see beyond my existing frameworks. My experience in both clinical practice and community organizing helped me identify two additional conceptualizations of micro/macro interconnections: 1) that social justice could, and in fact must, be promoted in smaller contexts; and 2) that a unifying view of practice

or identity could lead social workers to view micro and macro activities as similar. The social workers stretched my thinking to consider possibilities I had not previously imagined.

Smaller Context for Social Justice

Participants talked about two ways that organizations serve as a smaller context for social justice: by providing information to clients and seeking to change the mindsets of professionals. Dana frequently speaks up with older adults within her own senior center when she encounters biased comments. She told me, “I’m not willing to accept that,” and turns that determination into action by reminding seniors that everyone is treated with respect at the center, and by providing educational programming where seniors can learn and ask questions about groups of people they might not be familiar with. Dave, a child welfare worker, shares information about opportunities with clients so they develop “the ability to know what’s available to them.” Dave understands that clients can prematurely close some doors because people in their social networks aren’t familiar with what’s possible or how to access it. By sharing this access information and helping clients learn how to navigate complex systems, Dave tries to promote socioeconomic justice.

Several participants spoke about the ways they seek to influence the mindsets of professional colleagues and administrators so clients can be understood and get the help they need. Joan, a clinical social worker within a hospital where the medical model is the dominant framework sees herself as an oboe, the one in an orchestra who brings a different sound “to be that voice, to be the one that says, ‘Let’s take one step back and look at this situation from a different perspective.’” Jada also invites other professionals to consider a different perspective in her work with mothers who abuse substances. She tries to change the mindset of child protective service workers (CPS) and family court officials by sharing the circumstances and the “forces working against this family” rather than “villainizing the mothers.” Facilitating complex understandings, for Jada, is “a smaller context for social justice” that has a ripple effect across systems: “To, little by little, try to change the mindset about that...changes where money gets spent...what gets funded and what doesn’t, what happens ultimately in the lives of, you know, a pair of moms and kids.”

By speaking up in the face of bias, offering opportunities to learn about various groups of people who live in the U.S., providing information about how to access complex systems, and seeking to change the mindsets of other professionals, these social workers remind us of the powerful middle spaces where supportive spaces are potentially created and decisions that impact large groups of people are made.

Unifying Views of Practice and Identity

This final conceptualization of micro/macro connections is the one that gave me pause. Stacy’s viewpoint, “It’s all the same...I see the micro and the macro as exactly the same thing” was at first surprising and perplexing. I wondered how psychotherapy and program development could possibly be viewed as “the same thing.” Digging deeper, I found that the “same thing” for Stacy reflects her belief that “you’re using yourself in exactly the same way,” as she is “assisting somebody on a micro level...versus providing the community assessment.” The “same thing,”

therefore, is about how Stacy conceptualizes use of self. She sees herself as a “conduit for change,” using her assessment skills to coordinate social services in a small town. She notes that the knowledge base may vary, but, “It’s just different obstacles and challenges that come up for you.” For Stacy, a “conduit for change” uses oneself to link, connect, and bridge current gaps to enhance well-being for individuals and communities.

Charles also views himself as a “conduit for change” as a school social worker. Being “visible and valuable” to students, parents, teachers, and staff is the way that he has been able to notice and respond to individual situations as well identify the need for school-wide responses, such as altering the culture when students return from suspensions. A “conduit for change” for Charles involves helping to “create an environment that allows the student to be welcomed back...and be allowed to be a different person.”

A few other social workers in disparate roles also provided understandings regarding their use of self, which led them to see micro and macro practices as similar kinds of activities. Lisa, a clinical social worker at an intensive outpatient program, describes clinical and organizing work as forms of advocacy against institutional cultural norms. Lisa works with people who have recently been hospitalized for psychiatric issues: “I feel like the hospital system just wants to...get them stable...I wanna get people up to here, to like being happy, or exuberant, or creative, or, like, working towards something.” For Lisa “the bottom line is advocating,” advocating with the client during an intake to help them shift from a goal of “stable” to a goal of “exuberant,” and then organizing other clinicians to stand together against procedural and scheduling changes that interfere with the program’s effectiveness. Lisa is “trying to get them to all act together and say this is not fair for us and it’s not fair for the patients.” As a clinical social worker, Lisa strives to motivate and advocate for and with her clients and her coworkers.

Micro and macro are similar for Joel and Jeff because of the similarities between their professional and social identities and the way they translate those identities into practice activities. Joel sees himself as “a social worker who’s in business” who has a responsibility to work to “heal the world” (*tikkun olam*). Although he is no longer a practicing Jew, he still identifies with the spiritual beliefs from the Judaic tradition. Jeff’s view of himself as “the public servant, who happens to have a private practice,” and his identity as a gay male parent informed his practice actions. Initially he worked with LBG clients, and in recent years developed a specialty with transgender youth in clinical and macro practice.

The overlap between professional and social identities makes micro and macro actions inseparable for Joel and Jeff. Joel views his work managing a group private practice office in broad, flexible terms: “When I hear gaps in services, inadequacies in communal coordination or understanding, I try and propose, make, facilitate something that might help,” without concern about whether it is a clinical or macro practice action. Joel offers “adjusted fees and some pro bono work because the community deserves and needs us to be available,” organizes a coordinated network of providers, conducts book drives, and advocates for greater mental health coverage and access. Jeff, too, has done pro bono clinical and macro work, including informally organizing a statewide referral network of therapists who work with LGBT clients and their families, and volunteering his time to help people know where to get help with issues regarding

identification as a sexual minority or transgender person.

Joel's and Jeff's particular configuration of professional and social identities impact the scope of their practice actions. Joel thinks broadly as he responds to gaps and inadequacies by "rolling up [my] sleeves and assisting others to be fair and to make life more manageable and healthier for other people." Jeff, in contrast, has a more singular focus: Helping LGBT clients "understand and articulate" specific forms of injustice, and encouraging them to "join with other people who feel the same way, and to stand up to the oppression when you safely can, singly or, you know, jointly."

From Kaleidoscopic Images to Palettes of Possibilities

As I moved from the more familiar ways of conceptualizing micro and macro activities (separate yet linked, and micro/macro informing and benefitting each other) into newer territory (honing in on smaller contexts for social justice, unifying views of practice and identity), my image shifted from a kaleidoscope of familiar concepts to an expansive palette of possibilities. The social workers selected these possibilities because of what they value and because they had unifying views of how they use themselves in practice, not because they had a preferred method. I discovered this when asking about their understandings of well-being and social justice. They described passionate commitments to specific values (e.g., respect, fairness, inclusion) that illuminated injustices and unresponsive services and stirred their desire to respond using the micro and macro practice methods that were available to them and best suited for a particular situation. Individualized unifying views of practice (e.g., "the bottom line is advocating," "conduits for change") and identity (e.g., "the social worker who is in business," "the public servant who happens to have a private practice") facilitated their ability to consider and select a wide range of methods.

In retrospect these newer conceptualizations helped me see that I've experienced my practice in this way as well. I've always viewed myself as a social worker who tries to "do what it takes" no matter what role I'm playing: clinician, organizer, instructor, or committee chair. Reflecting further led me to discover that my actions have also been fueled by values: a passionate desire for fair and just actions that respect the dignity of everyone involved, and alter structural inequities. Over the years I've been searching for images, metaphors, or language that help me imagine and use the wide range of practice options available to me. My conversations with participants helped me formulate a way to talk about the profession's purpose and identify areas for continued scholarship.

I've begun to find some language to articulate this new perspective: When practice understanding and actions (including how we conceptualize micro and macro interconnections) are grounded in the profession's values, we have a greater capacity to promote a unifying purpose, a "just sense of well-being" (Keenan, Limone, & Sandoval, 2017). Practice methods are in the *service of* pursuing what is valued. Although many social work practitioners and educators would suggest that we've always thought about methods this way (e.g., O'Hare, 2009), the divides and debates between micro and macro seem to foreground method and sideline the values and purposes that would inform a solid assessment and corresponding method selection.

What the participants taught me are that micro and macro methods form a palette of possibilities that are selected and pursued because they become the means to enact and promote greater realization of respect, dignity, equity, fairness, and inclusion. Operating within particular possibilities and constraints (based on their practice context, work responsibilities, what they've seen modeled, etc.), social workers flexibly see (assess) and act (intervene) across method with varying systems, in pursuit of a "just sense of well-being." This appears to be done through individualized unifying views of practice or identity.

But could participants be suggesting more than a unified purpose grounded in the profession's values? Are those with a unifying view of practice or identity pointing to something more? What else is implied in such a vision? If there is a unified purpose, then there are likely similarities between and within micro and macro methods. Participants provided some preliminary ideas for similarities: viewing one's use of self as the same across methods, and commitment to values of respect, fairness, and inclusion. Reviewing recent scholarship leads me to speculate that there may also be a set of skills that would be similar (e.g., Hardina, 2013; McLaughlin, 2011). Both micro and macro competencies appear to include critical thinking, ethical decision-making, formulating assessments, identifying goals, evaluating processes and outcomes, and a whole host of interpersonal skills: engagement, group leadership, coordination, collaboration, advocacy, etc. Perhaps there are some common factors underlying all practice methods (Cameron & Keenan, 2010). Empirical research could provide potential support for the skills associated with the unifying views of use of self that participants reported. Conceptual strategies, such as the use of images like Venn diagrams could also disrupt the current binary divide between micro and macro methods by organizing overlapping similarities from which differences diverge.

So where does that leave the profession's thinking about micro and macro practice? Fundamentally, participants' views provided new points of entry into a long debate that has, unfortunately, simply reinforced the micro/macro divide. Their ability to practice out of unifying views of practice (e.g., "conduits for change") or identity ("the public servant who happens to have a private practice"), grounded in respect, fairness, and inclusion, provides a third option, a fresh angle for consideration.

Current scholarship also encourages such flexible, integrated thinking to increase impact. Anti-racism work, for example, uses an image of a "web of resistance" to capture how values inform learning and conversations. This multifaceted web promotes just spaces of encounter, opportunities to recognize and heal internalized oppression, and collective actions to challenge injustices within organizations, communities, and nations (Garran & Miller, 2015).

Trauma-informed systems of care are likewise making space for new possibilities of responsive practice across ecological levels (e.g., Bloom & Farragher, 2013). Scaffolding is another image being proposed within mental health and substance abuse to disrupt existing silos, shift what is foregrounded and backgrounded, and make space for additional possibilities to be imagined (Keenan & Grady, 2014). The social workers I spoke with sparked my creativity and supported my efforts to hold a "yes, and" stance that uses a flexible palette of possibilities for understanding enacted out of an integrated grounding in what social workers value. I was profoundly impacted by their experiences and am working to invite, model, and share practice

stories to broaden social workers' palettes of possibility beyond job descriptions and roles. In this digital age of new images and metaphors, perhaps the profession, too, can shift from dualities and micro/macro divides into palettes, webs, scaffolds, and networks that holistically frame thinking and actions in pursuit of a "just sense of well being" for all.

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