

# Using Twitter in Reclaiming Macro Practice, and Affirming Our Social Work Roots

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**Abstract:** This article addresses some of the current discourse concerning the divide between micro and macro practice in social work. Today's ever-changing socio-political and environmental landscape requires social workers to look beyond internal divisions and focus on the central values that drive the profession. With an increasingly diverse population and more complex problems including globalization, the redistribution of political power, increased privatization of services, and increased exposure to the influence of social media, social work is more relevant than ever. We suggest social workers bridge the divide in practice and education by embracing technology through #MacroSW chats on Twitter and by refraining from thinking of micro and macro practice as polarized constructs, while remaining true to the profession's foundational roots of social justice, knowledge, and ethics.

**Keywords:** micro practice, macro practice, polarization, social media, technology, collaboration, Professional Learning Network (PLN)

## Introduction

The field of social work is fluid and dynamic due to its constantly changing environment. Integrating Macro + Micro social work is more relevant than ever due to the social worker's unique skill in helping people and systems navigate an ever-changing socio-political and environmental landscape. Today, we face issues related to globalization of industry and human migration; the privatization of services; redistribution of political power and authority to local governments and the non-profit sector; an overall decline in civic and political participation, decreased privacy in social life; increased exposure to social media and its impact on the public's perception of social and human rights issues; and conflicts inherent in the shifting demographics and diversity of the nation's people and cultures (Reich, 2013a).

## Micro and Macro Polarization

Social Work incorporates a continuum of interventions focusing on particular systemic units of analysis. Micro social work focuses on providing increasing degrees of resource identification, guidance, and support for vulnerable populations at the individual and family level. Mezzo social work focuses on small groups and systems, and macro social work concentrates on planned change interventions for large groups including institutions, communities, neighborhoods, and populations. All three levels naturally overlap and are interrelated. The polarization between micro and macro perspectives has resulted in loss of focus on the profession's common ground—namely what we would describe as social work's core focus on the interface between the person and the environment. This loss of focus distracts us from initiating efforts leading to sustained planned and systemic change. A number of problems can be articulated that stem from not utilizing an integrated perspective that aligns all areas of social

work practice as equally important.

One problem is the disappearance of macro social work. Macro social work has become a marginalized subfield within the profession, as clinical social work (a subset of micro social work) is promoted as both more relevant and more accessible (Fischer & Corcicullo, 2011, p. 359). Less than 9% of all MSW students were enrolled in all combined macro practice areas (Council on Social Work Education, 2012). Less than one in seven social workers identify macro practice as their practice focus (Whitaker & Arrington, 2008, pp.7-8) meaning schools of social work are producing a shortage of macro social workers, particularly in high need, low-income communities with limited access to power (Reisch, 2014).

Another challenge is that macro social work practice is often labeled “Indirect” practice. This is a misnomer. Macro social work practice integrates all forms of practice and realizes our profession’s historic and foundational commitment to social justice, human rights and social change. Macro social work practice asserts that all social work professionals work within communities and organizations—both formal and informal—and that understanding how social policy affects one’s work is essential to effective practice (Reisch, 2014).

A third problem is the lack of systemic change skill development and competency. Newly minted social workers often start with diminished ability and an unwillingness to develop necessary skills and thought processes to identify and utilize organizational and community strengths. These skills are needed to empower clients and communities to mobilize for systemic change (Koerin, Reeves & Rosenblum, 2000; Hymans, 2000).

Finally, there is a disconnect between macro practice curricula, faculty, and students. Many programs pay scant attention to macro content in field work or classroom curricula. Rothman (1999) found deans and directors of social work programs devaluing macro content and resistance among social work faculty in integrating macro practice content and field work into some BSW and MSW curricula. In addition, there appears to be a general lack of interest in understanding macro practice among social work students (Reisch, 2014; Kasper & Wiegand, 1999).

### **Personal Experiences with Bridging Micro and Macro Divides**

My personal experiences have taught me the necessity of bridging micro and macro social work practice divides. I, Sunya Folayan, come to macro practice after many years as a clinician, transitioning into an encore career utilizing technology, prevention and research. I am especially interested in the mental and financial health care of women, and more specifically, women of color. I started my multi-faceted social work career more than 40 years ago at the age of 19 when I convinced our local social and rehabilitation services center’s county director to find a job for me while I obtained my first social work degree. Four weeks later, I had a state car, an expense account and the title “Social Work Aide.” I traveled all over my home state of Kansas, traveling on rural highways to supervise home visits. Since our local office was in the state capital, I frequently delivered official documents to state and local agencies, and I assisted child protective service workers with getting caught up on paperwork. After graduate school in North

Carolina, I started working with the families of alcoholics in an outpatient program. From there I went to a well-established community family service agency. Once licensed, I began a private practice that lasted for nearly 25 years. I have enjoyed the flexibility and utility of having a social work degree, because I have been able to have many career experiences within the profession. I have been a clinician addressing the needs of families. I conducted groups in an inpatient psychiatric unit of a hospital, and worked as the facilitator of batterers men's groups. I coordinated domestic violence capacity building initiatives for rural agencies serving women in Alaska, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina. I trained domestic violence advocates in the Caribbean. I wrote and helped implement curricula to help the United States Marine Corps address domestic violence and to increase communication between civilian and military police. I performed employee assistance counseling with clients in television stations, grocery stores, a hospital, fortune 500 companies, and textile chemical plants. I have been a community organizer in New York. I have collaborated and advanced learning with social workers in England. I have coordinated a social work department at a Historically Black College (HBCU) combined with teaching. During that time, I helped write curricula in preparation for re-accreditation by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). I am the co-founder of a womanist and social justice-based non-profit organization focusing on intervention and prevention of domestic violence amongst women and girls of color.

The tradition of self-help and mutual aid societies requires a hands-on-all-roles approach that is still prevalent in communities today (Betten & Austin, 1990). It is essential that one learn how to develop innovative programs to solve complex problems at the grassroots level because there is often limited or no funding for such programs. As a non-profit manager in a grassroots agency, I had to learn to tap into the cultural history and traditions utilized before the establishment of settlement houses and charity organizations became known. I also needed to learn budgeting, business management and a new set of leadership skills. In every career endeavor, navigating seamlessly between micro-(mezzo)-macro practice modalities has been essential. There is no separation between micro-macro as I have relied on each element of practice to inform the others.

### **Using Twitter to Address the Micro + Macro Divide**

Technology will play an increasing role in the growth of our profession and cultural competence in the future. I believe Twitter will also aid social work practice in mitigating the micro+macro polarization that caused some of the challenges addressed earlier. One of the most empowering aspects of transitioning to a new phase of my professional life in social work has been becoming a partner of the #MacroSW chat team on Twitter (<https://macrosw.com>). As a partner of this online community, I work with a group of social workers, organizations, social work schools, and educators working to promote macro social work practice. I have grown and stretched as a social worker through this collaborative because it has shaped my professional learning network (PLN), which uses one's resources (typically social media) to communicate with other professionals, to collect or bookmark information related to their professional interests, and collaborate with others on projects (Richardson & Manacebelli, 2011). A PLN is nothing new to the social work profession. We call it life-long or career learning, and prior to the Internet and social media, social workers wrote letters, made phone calls and met at conferences to network

for professional growth. Today, we can use all types of digital tools to connect with others, share resources and even create meaningful connection around almost any topic.

My PLN has informed my understanding of the micro-macro divide, and it has allowed me opportunities to work beyond the divide. First, through Twitter, I am able to learn about macro social work practice at any time in any place. I stay current regarding trends in the social work profession by reading articles, blog posts and other relevant sources. My online interaction and my professional relationships with social workers who utilize the highest standards of ethics and practice push me to stretch myself to higher standards of practice. Because I am online, I am challenged to move past my comfort zone to learn new technology and take on new tasks, all of which contribute to my personal and leadership skill development.

Second, I am able to network with practitioners. I interact with social workers across the country and around the globe on a regular basis in conversations that encourage participation and networking with other social workers to create common language. The common realization is that the divide between micro and macro practice keeps us from focusing on the “how to” of creating planned change initiatives at all levels of social work. I am able to nurture relationships that contribute to my personal development. My network of international social work colleagues who wish to engage in online social work discussions and my chat presence have created new business opportunities for domestic and international travel.

Finally, through Twitter I have found that I can make a meaningful impact on my profession. My visibility has increased and given me a larger platform to share information about my life at the intersections of social work practice. I am part of a larger effort to influence CSWE and National Association of Social Workers (NASW) on the importance of micro+macro integration, and the rebranding of macro practice. I have increased my social capital, met new allies, and have confirmed and affirmed my identity as a macro practice social worker, further increasing my understanding of all interrelatedness of practice areas. I can use social media as a tool to disseminate knowledge throughout all areas of practice about the social justice issues I am most passionate about: financial capability; self-care and mental health for women of color; and food access in marginalized communities.

### **Advantages of Participating in Twitter Chats**

While little research has been done on the ways that Twitter and other forms of social media can be incorporated into social work practice, we do know that social workers are beginning to use social media for communication and networking (Goldkind, Wolf & Jones, 2016; Sage & Sage, 2016). Social work educators are beginning to use Twitter to help students connect with practitioners and mentors outside the classroom (Hitchcock & Young, 2016; Taylor, 2014). Further, Twitter has the potential to connect social workers across the planet (Hitchcock & Taylor, 2016; Shelly, 2014). Anecdotally, during my discussions about social media technology and Twitter with colleagues, we affirm that technology and the #MacroSW chat helps bridge the gap between micro and macro in several ways. First, it increases the ability to interact with and engage a vast and diverse population of social work professionals who would not be able to come together under normal circumstances, allows one to affirm social work identity in a

supportive and collaborative manner. For example, our chats bring educators, students, researchers, grassroots citizens, and policy makers, interdisciplinary colleagues, and social workers from other countries together to share common concerns about the depth and complexity of issues facing our local and global communities. Social workers use this as an opportunity to discuss self-care, provide humor, affirm expertise and accomplishment, and to relieve stress in healthy ways based on a shared understanding of the nature of our work.

Second, we experience social workers coming together excited to create community and to discuss problems and solutions to today's complex and changing issues such as mass incarceration, income inequality and the needs of transgender children from a community and policy perspective. For academics, the chats provide a great opportunity for social work students to engage with practitioners on issues of professional standards of practice. The chats encourage student participation at a crucial time in their social work education—#MacroSW provides opportunities for learning about macro social work and the interrelatedness of practice areas while they are still in the formative stages of their social work development.

#MacroSW Chat topics discussed are timely and diverse and include: Building Micro-Macro Common Ground: Grand Challenges and Grand Accomplishments of Social Work; Trauma Informed Care; Technology Standards in Macro Practice; Macro Practice Ethics; Advocacy; Political Awareness and Advocacy; Developing Effective Agency and University Partnerships; and more. Chat transcripts and archives are available at <https://macrosw.com/chat-archives/>.

### **Additional Solutions to Bridge the Micro/Macro Divide**

As a social worker who is continually striving for a holistic perspective, I offer the following practices and solutions to address the problems inherent in the micro/macro divide for the individual social worker. First, one should embrace macro practice as the integration of all forms of practice, keeping in mind that macro practice uses collective and collaborative efforts in program and policy development, and innovative services that enhance the quality of life (Begun, Berger, Otto-Salaj, & Rose, 2010). For example, the non-profit I co-founded is concerned about the connections between food insecurity, mental health and poverty. We observed that as women became more knowledgeable about food production and involved their friends, families and children in gardening, new community advocates began replicating what they learned in their neighborhoods. Next, we moved to apply for funding to plant an edible food forest to provide not only food, but therapeutic activities in cultivation that foster hope and change. In 2015, we hired farmers and scientists to engage a group of military veteran mothers, battered women with children—many of whom were living with emotional disorders—along with neighborhood residents to participate in a series of hands on demonstrations on how to plant and maintain a sustainable food forest. Next, we advocated for the county food policy decision-making council to diversify its leadership board to include grassroots women and women of color. All of these entities have had to work through a variety of social and personality issues to come together for the ongoing welfare of their projects. For this, we engaged a local dance company to choreograph a series of “eco movement” workshops to allow participants to express themselves, articulate conflicts, and work for the common good through performance. We are now in the process of helping the women we have worked with to train as

farmers, so they can eventually purchase small parcels of land for farming and food production. A final frontier is to help these women to gain access to food distribution networks and to create businesses of their own in sustainable practices: recycling, hospitality, waste management—domains which have typically been white and male. We have noted stronger voices advocating for their needs. We observe more family involvement and less hunger, and more receptivity to mental health services and greater awareness about the importance of maintaining holistic health.

Second, macro practice articulates the profession's ethical commitment to both individual and social change. Social workers must be mindful of this perspective. This focus can enable social workers to focus on our common roots and the prevention of societal problems, not merely developing remedial efforts (Reisch, 2014). As in all levels of practice, our greatest instrument is the use of self. Awareness of our personal biases, areas of privilege and limitations is as essential as knowing our strengths. It is equally important that we examine where we are as a profession and work to eliminate any silos that keep us as a profession isolated, uninformed and ineffective in being the social change agents we are to be.

Third, we should advocate for 20% macro student participation and identification in all social work programs accredited by CSWE by 2020. This can be done by supporting CSWE programs efforts to help students understand how community, organizational, management, and policy processes are integral to effective practice with every population and problem we engage in (Reisch, 2014). For example, require budgeting and management courses in all social work programs so that students learn a broad range of skills, and emphasize the importance of undergirding the NASW Code of Ethics (2015) foundational values of social justice in every aspect of student learning and professional practice.

To support CSWE's implicit curriculum, increase and encourage the development of stronger university-community partnerships (Begun, et. al, 2010). Another example could include utilizing social media in the classroom and modeling effective technology skills to students. Support students in utilizing social media, such as #MacroSW on Twitter, as a tool to advance the profession in the following: social work identity formation, advocacy, relationship building, education, diversity and inclusion, and dismantling hegemony.

Fourth, we can eliminate discussions of "indirect" practice, and we can emphasize the common ground among us that recognize all social workers work within the context of individuals, communities and organizations, as all are affected by social policies (Pierce, 1989; Netting, Kettner & McMurty, 1998). Along with this, we need to emphasize the importance of working collaboratively with people not merely with or within "systems" (Burghart, 2013) and the importance of common core of values intrinsic to the profession of social work.

Fifth, we can encourage all social workers to assume leadership in macro practice strategies, thereby promoting and ensuring social work promotes strategies that lead to substantive change affecting the lives and well-being of our society. (Wenocur & Reisch, 1989; Reisch & Andrews, 2002). Macro practitioners should familiarize themselves with macro competencies for effective practice, and be intentional about ongoing self-development. As educators, it is our

responsibility to introduce macro competence standards to students and to identify and nurture attributes that lend themselves to macro skill development. (Regehr, Bogo, Donovan, Anstice, and Lim, 2012).

### Conclusion

The Social Work Code of Ethics is comprised of many parts. It is a beautifully written document of principles, centered in social justice and human rights. While it has been adapted and changed to meet the needs of today, its unifying essence remains unchanged. There is no micro/macro divide within it. The most powerful tool we bring to our work is the use of ourselves. If we are fragmented, disconnected or divided in our thinking, it will manifest in our work. We cannot afford to talk across the profession at one another, isolate ourselves in silos, or believe we are the only profession interested in making change. We must use technology in ethical ways that will advance our work. Working apart from community creates division. If we elevate one part of our profession and devalue another, we will not be empowered to foster the changes our society needs at this crucial time. Would we say our hands are more important than our feet? Can a tree prosper without its roots? We think not, and we urge a recommitment to the holistic embrace of our professional practice which neither elevates nor devalues its parts, and which always beckons us back to its' center.

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