Defining Macro Practice

Chapter Content Areas

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MACRO SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

What is macro social work practice? You will grapple with this question not only as you read this book, but also throughout your career as a professional social worker. Indeed, practitioners and educators often differ when asked to define macro social work practice. If you were to ask the instructors in your program for their definition, you might be surprised at the variety of responses. Definitions would most likely vary depending on the era of the social worker’s professional education, the program from which he or she graduated, and his or her practice experiences.
For many social workers educated in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the term macro practice probably still seems somewhat foreign. These social workers are more familiar with the notions of social casework (Perlman, 1957), environmental work (Hollis, 1972), innovation and change with organizations and communities (Rothman, Erlich, & Teresa, 1976), social welfare administration and research (Friedlander, 1976), and group work for social reform (Roberts & Northen, 1976). It would not be unusual for social workers of this era to perceive macro social work in terms of community organization, administration, research, or policy development. Indeed, much of this same language continues to be used today, as social workers have a propensity to define macro practice in terms of the roles they enact or the functions they perform.

**BOX 1.1**

In one of the original books written on the topic, Meenaghan, Washington, and Ryan describe macro practice as “the broad area of change/dynamic adjustment within the human service area as it relates to the human service practice specialties of planning, administering, evaluating, and organizing human service activities” (1982, p. 6). In a more recent text, Meenaghan describes macro social work practice in terms of intervening with organizations, communities, and groups of people (Meenaghan & Gibbons, 2000).

Conceptualization of macro practice, as of social work practice in general, has changed over the years and continues to evolve. From the very origins of our profession, social workers have demonstrated innovation and flexibility in defining their roles and tasks in relation to the needs and demands of those served, as Gibelman describes:

Fluidity exists with regard to how the profession defines itself and the boundaries of what constitutes social work practice. Some of these debates about identity and status have been waged since the earliest days of the profession... various definitions have emerged about the purview of the profession in what can be termed an evolutionary and consensus-building process. (1999, p. 299)

Indeed, social work is a dynamic profession in that, both knowingly and also perhaps in less rational ways, its identity has been responsive to social conditions and climate. “Social work practice and education have long been influenced by development in the broader U.S. economy, particularly as they affected such issues as employment and unemployment” (Reisch & Gorin, 2001, p. 9). In addition, popular beliefs, dominant U.S. interests, cultural norms, historical events, and market or global forces have helped to shape what constitutes a social work perspective for helping professionals at any given point in time.
Throughout this book, social advocacy and community organizing are referenced as two particularly important methods within social work practice for creating social change. Indeed, these are macro-level approaches familiar to almost every social worker. However, the prominence of community organizing and social advocacy in this book is not intended to negate or minimize the value of other social work methods (e.g., social planning, locality development, policy development, research, and administration) in macro practice. To the contrary, a variety of approaches for use in macro social work practice are examined and endorsed in this text.

One of the more challenging aspects of being a helping professional involves the ability to question and reflect on one’s conscious use of self in relation to professional ideals, the enactment of professional roles, the place of practice, and the social-cultural context of human existence. Given that macro practice is a fluid notion, make this pledge early in your professional career: Never lose a commitment to define macro social work practice as a component driven by the will and wants—the determination—of consumers of services.

Indeed, it is the hopes and desires of the people being served, not necessarily those of the people in positions of power and authority, that are the foremost consideration for social workers. Although it is important to work within the established mandates and norms of agencies and our profession, our primary alliance is with the consumers of social services. In any form of social change, power inherently lies in the strengths and resources of these consumers themselves, whether they are individuals, families, or groups of people (Saleebey, 1992). However we choose to define macro social work practice, respect for the consumer-driven nature of social work practice is paramount.

**WHAT DOES “MACRO” MEAN?**

Macro means large-scale or big. In social work, it involves the ability to see and intervene in the big picture, specifically with larger systems in the socio-economic environment. Macro social work practice can include collaboration with consumers to strengthen and maximize opportunities for people at the organizational, community, societal, and global levels. Indeed, many social workers would argue that it is the macro level—the attention given by social workers to the big social issues of importance to consumers—that distinguishes social work from other helping professions (Glisson, 1994).

Historically, another term that has been used to describe macro social work practice is indirect work. Although this term is becoming less popular, the word indirect served for many years as a reference to social work’s commitment to environmental modification and the alleviation of social problems. Whereas direct practice connoted face-to-face contact with clients aimed at supporting or strengthening them as individuals, indirect practice was the catch phrase for change efforts involving the environment and the social welfare system (Pierce, 1989, p. 167).

For many other social workers, the “macro” in “macro practice” is synonymous with community organizing. Rothman (1964, 1974, 1995) provides the
social work profession with a pointed conceptualization of large-scale change that emphasizes three basic modes: locality development, social planning, and social action. As summarized by Weil (1996), **locality development** focuses on community capacity building and the role of social workers in engaging citizens in determining and resolving community-based issues. **Social planning** refers to the use of a rational problem-solving strategy aimed at combating community problems. Social workers use their knowledge and skills in research, assessment, and program implementation as they work with clients to identify logical steps and means of addressing community problems. **Social action** references the ability of social workers and consumers of services to confront and change power relationships and the structure and function of important social institutions in communities.

As can be seen, the term *macro* has several connotations, both general and specific. In this text, preference is given to the term *macro social work practice*. Indirect practice is often viewed as a nebulous, uncelebrated term in social work (Johnson, 1999), but conceptualizing macro practice primarily in terms of community organizing is limiting. *Macro social work practice* is more specific, suggesting the importance of strengthening higher order social systems—organizations, communities, and societies.

As a contemporary illustration of macro practice, consider the frustration many people feel with health care and mental-health care in the United States. For those fortunate enough to have medical insurance, the advent of managed care has forced people to try to learn a new and often confusing terminology of co-payments, provider status, benefit levels, preferred drug lists, average lengths of stay, and diagnostic groupings (Long & Heydt, 2000). A traditional, micro social work approach would focus on helping individuals and families to navigate health care delivery systems successfully. By contrast, a macro social work
approach emphasizes seeking ways in which consumers can redefine and change managed care, both locally and nationally, in order to achieve control over their lives and promote optimum access to modern medicine.

**HAS MACRO PRACTICE ALWAYS BEEN A PART OF SOCIAL WORK?**

The answer is yes, to varying degrees. Interest in promoting social reform and social justice to advance the well-being of people has been a major function of social work practice throughout the years. A more thorough answer, however, requires a brief overview of the historical development of macro social work practice in the United States.

Some of the first writings associated with the profession of social work provide insight into the importance of affecting larger structural issues in the lives of consumers. As a student of social work, take some time to acquaint yourself with some of the influential writers in the field—the “ghosts” of social work past. There is no substitute for reading the original words and impressions of these great authors and innovators.

Be forewarned that the following historical overview emphasizes social determinism. There is an underlying assumption about the importance of social forces (such as historical occurrences, political climate, and economic circumstances) in affecting people’s desire and ability to engage in large-scale social change. Such an outlook is useful for ascertaining the various factors involved in helping to shape the methods and forms of macro social work practice over the past century.

**MACRO SOCIAL WORK IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

**The Progressive Era: Mary Richmond and Jane Addams**

Mary Richmond is often described as one of the eminent founders of social work. In *Social Diagnosis* (1917), Richmond describes social work as consisting of a common body of knowledge based on collecting and understanding information, especially social evidence. Richmond was one of the first social workers to advocate for a more comprehensive method of inquiry and intervention, including a “wider view of self” (p. 368). Such an approach embraced an analysis of various forms of human relations, consideration of the social situation and surroundings, inquiries concerning social agencies, and an appreciation of economic conditions and neighborhood improvement (pp. 369–370).

While acknowledging that a majority of social workers at the turn of the twentieth century engaged in casework, aimed at “the betterment of individuals and families,” Richmond clearly recognized the need for “betterment
of the mass” (p. 25). But what is meant by “betterment”? The term implies strengthening, improving—making “better off.” At a very early stage in the development of our profession, Richmond acknowledges, “mass betterment and individual betterment are interdependent,” with the need for “social reform and social case work of necessity progressing together” (p. 25).

For Richmond, the movement from a focus on the individual to an emphasis on social concerns was directly attributable to the influence of the charity organizations. New methods emphasizing “social” diagnosis were born from campaigns by a number of social activists working to improve housing, promote child labor reform, and prevent the spread of diseases like tuberculosis. Richmond notes that in charity organizations, “some of [the] earliest leaders had grasped the idea of the sympathetic study of the individual in his [or her] social environment” (p. 32). Undoubtedly, as social activists worked to strengthen opportunities and economic means for their consumers of services, casework “had at its command more varied resources, adaptable to individual situations.” As a consequence, “the diagnosis of those situations assumed [a] fresh [and broader] importance” (p. 32).

Mary Richmond is one of the best known leaders of the Charity Organization Society (COS) movement, which was grounded in convictions derived from England. Leaders of the COS often “believed that many poor people were unworthy, so that applicants for aid should be carefully investigated. Records were to be kept about each case, and a central registry was developed to ensure that no person received aid from more than one source” (Suppes & Wells, 2003, p. 87). These written records eventually became important sources of documentation for use in advocating for social change and reform. Many would argue that these early efforts to advocate for reform on the basis of documented human need constituted the beginning of community welfare planning in the United States and eventually gave rise to the Community Chest movement and the community-based United Way system.

The relationship between human need, casework, and social reform is an interesting and profound theme when we consider the emergence of macro social work practice. Richmond was astute in advancing the argument that necessity, as evidenced by human struggle, was a driving force for social reform and ultimately responsible for reshaping casework into “social” casework. If Richmond’s perceptions are correct, then the movement of social work practice toward a more structural, macro orientation is directly related to consumer plight and not merely a philosophical position fashioned by progressive professionals.

Characterized by intense industrialization and massive immigration, the era from 1900 to 1920 was a decisive period for rethinking and reconstituting social services in the United States. Established in 1889 and based on the English model of Toynbee Hall, Jane Addams’s Hull House became a model for the settlement movement in large urban areas across the nation. In addition to providing a wide array of goods and services in the poorest neighborhoods, settlement houses and the settlement movement “concentrated on the totality of problems in a single geographical area . . . the central focus was on the experiences, thinking, and actions of local populations that could affect broad social and economic reform” (Haynes & Holmes, 1994, p. 65).
Settlement houses were neighborhood houses or community centers. In addition to addressing the everyday needs of local residents, they often provided recreational, instructional, and community programs (Federico, 1973, p. 170). From a macro perspective, settlement houses established a place for people to meet, express ideas, share concerns, and pool their strengths. From this new, informal setting emerged leadership in identifying, specifying, and organizing to meet the issues of the day.

Indeed, the very origins of group work are often traced to the settlement movement. Today, many people simply see group work as synonymous with group therapy. For settlement workers, however, group meetings were not merely a medium to educate and treat people, but also a forum for exploring community-based needs. In other social work classes, you will learn more about the multiple functions and purposes of group work. Here, it is important to make a mental note that group work is a valuable method for promoting larger-scale change and an important means of promoting collective action.

It is noteworthy that although charity workers and volunteers had been hearing the struggles and misfortunes of individuals for some time, the formation of settlement houses was instrumental in identifying and advancing a united voice from consumers. At settlement houses, social workers could listen and learn directly from the mouths of people living in turmoil. This resulted in new, often group-determined ways of identifying opportunities and contemplating social change.

Given this context, it is not surprising that charity workers began to think of help as something more than face-to-face assistance to the poor for the purpose of addressing basic, everyday needs. What emerged was a penchant to seek ways to improve the neighborhood for the common good of its inhabitants. “This meant, in other words, both strengthening the community’s capabilities and improving social conditions, policies, and services” (Perlman & Gurin, 1972, p. 36).

At the settlement house, people—individuals, families, volunteers, workers, community leaders, philanthropists—had a place to congregate, interact, and converse. What developed was a newfound community association—a “coming together.” This constituted the birth of community organizing, a term that is used in social work to describe efforts to strengthen community participation and integration. Recognition of community organizing as an area of practice reflects an important conceptual shift in thinking about the delivery of social services. For social work practice, additional credence was given to structural change and to widening the scope of practice beyond treatment of the individual person and family.

In summary, within the first thirty years of the twentieth century, the origins of social casework, group work, community organizing, and planning were established in the United States. Indeed, many social workers continue to perceive themselves as caseworkers, group workers, or community organizers. Caseworkers adhere to a more individual, case-by-case focus, whereas group workers and community organizers are more closely aligned with themes of social reform.
The Expansion of Social Work in the 1930s and 1940s

Given the position that the social and environmental conditions confronting consumers have historically helped to shape social work practice, the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression constitute significant social events that altered how most Americans, including social workers, viewed human need. As Garvin and Tropman (1992) suggest, “The Great Depression was a cataclysmic event in U.S. society and ushered in the era of public development” (p. 21). For those still harboring negativism toward the underprivileged and doubts about public responsibility for social conditions, the Great Depression represented a time for reconceptualization. Economic crisis and massive unemployment signaled the start of a new era for social work. Suddenly, without much warning, most citizens of the United States realized that the very fabric of our society required strengthening and enrichment to preserve both individual and common good.

Simply stated, work was not available during the Depression, regardless of an individual’s motivation or will. Banks had failed; finding one’s next meal was a challenge—and not just for the “other Americans.” In cities, the homeless built small settlements of cardboard and tar paper shacks. In rural areas, farmers, many of whom had gone into debt to purchase land and machinery, could not make a living selling their crops. The United States was in trouble, and widespread unemployment necessitated immediate and decisive societal action.

Eventually, a federal response to this economic catastrophe came in the form of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal. A myriad of public works and relief programs, the New Deal had as its backbone the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935. Social workers such as Harry L. Hopkins, who became a top adviser and New Deal administrator for Roosevelt, played an active role in the creation and implementation of New Deal legislation, policies, and social programming. To this day, the Social Security Act continues to fund many of the public assistance and entitlement programs that exist to help children and families.

The 1930s and 1940s were characterized by an ideological shift. Stimulated by the conditions of the Depression, “The [lingering] emphasis of the twenties upon the individual’s responsibility for his or her own destiny could not hold up under the circumstances of the thirties” (Garvin & Cox, 1995, p. 86). People in the United States, now more than ever, came to realize the value of government intervention in strengthening the country’s faltering socioeconomic system. Extensive and readily observable deprivation prompted citizens to view poverty as a public issue rather than a private trouble and resulted in the establishment of forms of social insurance, public assistance, and a variety of health and welfare services. This was a crucial period in the history of the United States, as intensive social planning and programming signified society as a legitimate unit of analysis for change.

The advent of World War II and deployment of troops to two battlefronts instilled solidarity in the minds of the American people and promoted a strong federal government and national leadership. First and foremost, national threat
demanded a societal response. Individuals were called upon to sacrifice for the common good in many ways—via military service, work in factories, and public service, as well as through the rationing of goods. Patriotism evoked an “all for one and one for all” mentality that accentuated the goal of winning a world war and served to downplay societal divisions.

Once again, the concept of social welfare and the perception of control over human need (public versus private) were being shaped by social events and occurrences as depression and war provided the broader societal context. The New Deal and World War II years opened the gates for a flood of social legislation and federal initiatives.

It is important to note that societal need and crisis often give rise to creativity and ingenuity among people. Human strengths flourish, individually and collectively, when necessary for the greater good. Times of distress can bring out the best in people. Need is often the precursor to invention, with people finding new and ingenious ways to rally when called upon. “A severely adverse event can serve as a ‘wake-up call’ . . . signalling that it is time to make significant changes” (McMillen, 1999, p. 459). People often benefit from adversity because they are forced to reevaluate their beliefs about the world and human potential.

During the 1930s and 1940s, social work became a national enterprise. As a result of the proliferation of domestic programs, social workers became heavily engaged in what would now be called social planning and social research. Social workers, like other Americans, had acquired a newfound appreciation for strengthening a high-order social system—our society. Although macro practice was not yet a term in social work vocabulary, the idea of macro social work practice was certainly taking shape and being formed.

**BOX 1.2**

Social planning involves framing solutions. It is based on specified goals and encompasses a comprehensive plan of action for creating social change. Consumers of services can be important actors in social planning, as they constitute both content experts—indicating what is needed—and skill experts—through use of their capabilities (Miley, O’Melia, & DuBois, 2001, pp. 268–269).

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**The 1950s and Early 1960s**

Some social historians point to the 1950s as the dormancy stage of social activism in the United States. Preceding decades had seen the federal government as an active participant in social-economic intervention. Now, with the war over, a “back-to-work” mentality held sway. It was once again seen as the responsibility of individuals and families to provide for the necessities of life.
Women played a major role in winning World War II. They were introduced to the labor force in great numbers during the 1930s and 1940s for employment in the military-industrial complex and as replacements for men serving in the military. It was during this period that many women demonstrated a newfound versatility and resourcefulness in balancing the demands of employment outside of the home with those of child rearing. But in the 1950s, with the war still a recent memory, it was time for families to reunite and redefine the nature of family—particularly in relationship to work.

From a macro perspective, “the period between the depression and the 1950’s was not a good one for the women’s movement. . . . The conservative swing after the war discouraged militancy among women. Even the League of Women Voters, hardly a radical organization, showed a decline in membership during this time” (Garvin & Cox, 1995, p. 88). Men had returned from overseas and reassessed their social and occupational dominance in a postwar economic system.

Meanwhile, on the political front, fueled by Senator Joseph McCarthy’s attack on those he deemed to be communists or “soft on communism,” the virtues of social programs were coming under heavy scrutiny. Indeed, “the 1950s saw an increasingly virulent series of attacks on public welfare and health insurance, both viewed as overtures to an un-American welfare state (Axinn & Levin, 1975, p. 235). Despite lingering unemployment, public sentiment grew in the 1950s for curtailment and reduction of the welfare rolls.

Although few would depict the 1950s as a progressive era with respect to large-scale social change, one of the most powerful court rulings in the history of the United States occurred in 1954 in the form of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka. Amid a postwar sense of overall self-satisfaction, economic laissez-faire, and political conservatism emerged a decisive civil rights action from the U.S. Supreme Court. In a unanimous decision, the Court ruled that segregation of children in public schools on the basis of race, even when physical facilities and other “tangible factors” were equal, deprives the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities (Rothenberg, 1998, p. 430). Hence, segregation in schools was struck down as a deprivation of equal protection under the Constitution as provided in the Fourteenth Amendment.

Although the 1950s and early 1960s hardly represented a radical age in American development, there was an emerging recognition of the need to create employment opportunities for the poor and upgrade the employment skills of the impoverished. At first, poverty was seen as “spotty” and regional in nature. In response, the Regional Redevelopment Act of 1961 targeted the development of new industry in areas suffering from a depletion of natural resources or a decline in the demand for traditional products (Axinn & Levin, 1975, p. 238). By the mid-1960s, however, research was demonstrating that poverty was not limited to any one geographic locale, but could be readily linked to economic and racial discrimination. “The Civil Rights Act of 1964 included a section prohibiting racial, sexual, or ethnic discrimination in employment and established an enforcement mechanism, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission” (Axinn & Levin, 1975, p. 239).
Many historians consider the election in 1960 of John F. Kennedy as president of the United States over Richard Nixon particularly noteworthy. Although Kennedy served as president for only three years, his election signified a refocusing on the role of the national government in improving the lives of all citizens. Many of you may be familiar with the challenge President Kennedy issued in his inaugural address: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

The 1960s also experienced an enormous increase in the number of people receiving public assistance, largely in the form of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The expansion of welfare rolls—the growing numbers of people applying for and receiving public assistance—revealed the magnitude of poverty in America and provided a gauge for measuring it. In an attempt to understand more fully the impact of social forces on joblessness, social scientists turned to the examination of racial discrimination and structural unemployment as dominant poverty-producing factors.

The early anti-poverty efforts of the Kennedy Administration were inspired, in part, by notable writings. Michael Harrington (1962) and others educated citizens about “the other America.” Harrington’s portrayal of the economic misfortunes of the downtrodden helped to dispel the myth that those experiencing poverty somehow deserved their suffering.

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<td>The migration of African Americans from the South to the North in search of better employment contributed to the emergence of densely populated urban areas, particularly in cities in the northeastern United States. Unfortunately, the economic prosperity of the 1950s did not translate into economic opportunity and prosperity for all Americans. Regardless of motivation, many people, particularly African Americans, found it difficult to secure employment as a result of factors beyond their control, including their inability to acquire needed skills and credentials, the limited availability of specific kinds of jobs, and discrimination.</td>
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The Mid-1960s to Late 1970s

During the mid-1960s, the profession of social work, in a not-so-subtle way, shifted its outlook toward helping. Remember, this was a period of appreciable social change and upheaval in the United States. Citizens of all ages were questioning the role of the United States in the Vietnam War. Riots were occurring in urban ghettos, civil rights demonstrations abounded, and women were seeking liberation in new ways. Other Americans struggled with the presence of social-economic inequality, particularly amid an observable material abundance in the United States.
Indeed, the mid- to late 1960s was a time when the very ideological tenets of capitalism came under scrutiny, as many people found that simply making money for its own sake was neither sufficient for happiness nor a noble endeavor in its own right. In this climate, social welfare, too, found itself in the midst of a shift—a reconceptualization from charity to social justice (Romanyshyn, 1971). Once again, many people began to see and believe that large-scale social change was necessary to truly improve and strengthen the well-being of the underprivileged.

President Lyndon Johnson’s 1964 declaration of a War on Poverty ultimately led to the creation of important societal and community efforts to bolster the nation and improve the general welfare of all its people. These initiatives included Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), a domestic version of the Peace Corps; the Job Corps, an employment training program for school drop-outs; and Head Start, a preschool educational program.

Massive expenditures on social programs inevitably prompted public and political scrutiny concerning the effectiveness of these programs and services. By the early 1970s, under President Richard M. Nixon, a more conservative, traditional approach began to reemerge, questioning community-building efforts and giving preference to a philosophy of self-help, individual responsibility, and private initiatives (Trattner, 1989, p. 305).

Although few would view the Nixon years (1968–1974) as a time of appreciable social advancement in the United States, President Nixon did in fact support—and even initiated—some interesting social policies with broad, wide-ranging implications. For example, it was during the Nixon administration that Daniel Patrick Moynihan proposed a guaranteed income for families via the Family Assistance Plan (FAP). Though never passed into law and widely criticized for the meagerness of its income allowances for the poor, the FAP represented the beginnings of a movement toward economic redistribution and a form of negative income tax. More important, the FAP signified that the role of the federal government in improving the lives of Americans had not been totally set aside, even by conservatives.

Life in the United States in the mid- to late 1970s was characterized by high inflation, rising unemployment, an aging population, and a mounting concern about overtaxation. Although many politicians (including President Jimmy Carter and Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy) and various labor organizations (such as the AFL-CIO) sought a workable national health care plan for Americans, little large-scale social change took place. Instead, by the late 1970s, the optimism of the mid- to late 1960s had given way to a sense of skepticism and doubt (Trattner, 1989, pp. 323–324).

The 1980s and Reaganomics

The election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980 can best be summarized as an attack on the welfare state in United States. The mood of politics and public opinion had clearly moved toward a belief “that taxes and government programs are to blame for the deep-rooted problems in the economy” (Piven & Cloward, 1982, p. 13). Instead of advancing policies aimed at improving and
strengthening social conditions as a way of eliminating poverty and injustice, human services and programs were now perceived simply as a “safety net.” Government was seen as a costly intrusion into the lives of Americans that ideally would be minimized or eliminated. If social programs were to exist at all, they should be tailored to helping only those in the direst circumstances. Social services were a last resort. In this view, it was time for Americans to “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps” and not look to the government for assistance. Most of the spending cuts fell on public-service employment, public welfare programs, low-income housing, and food stamp programs.

The crux of Reagan’s argument during the 1980s hinged on a belief that tax cuts and benefits for wealthy Americans would create an upward flow of income and monies that in turn would eventually “trickle down” to all Americans via a robust, healthy economy. In other words, followers of “Reaganomics” believed that as people became richer, economic opportunities (new business) and jobs would abound, even for disenfranchised citizens.

Unfortunately, Reagan’s attack on the welfare state in America was particularly harsh and punitive for women and children. Abramovitz (1989, p. 362) notes, “The administration’s decision to restrict AFDC eligibility, weaken work incentives, intensify work requirements, and otherwise shrink the program represented the beginning of the latest shift in the strategy for ‘encouraging’ AFDC mothers to work.” Mandating that single mothers work, while ignoring the lack of affordable child day care services and family health benefits, was both ill conceived and often punitive to children and parents alike. The irony was that while Reagan sought ways to strengthen the economic system, most notably the pockets of the wealthy, an increasing number of poor mothers were being forced to find innovative ways to provide sustenance, supervision, and health care for their dependent children. Reaganomics constituted an unkind lesson that “wealthfare,” benefits bestowed on the rich, often rests on the backs of the poor.

During the Reagan years, efforts involving macro social work practice turned to challenging the premises and misconceptions of conservative ideology and thinking. With special-interest groups, labor unions, various think tanks, and political action committees gaining power and exercising growing political and legislative influence in the United States, social workers acquired a new respect for the value of participation in the political sphere. As a result of Reagan’s attack on public welfare, social workers became keenly aware of the importance of political activism. Legislative lobbying and support for the participation of consumers of social services in the political process became a focal point—one born largely of necessity.

Once again, Piven and Cloward, as well as other social workers and social work educators, were at the forefront of this movement as they initiated voter registration and political awareness campaigns with a focus on consumers of services as a source of power. There was a beginning appreciation for the idea that political action could be driven by and owned by consumers.

By the very nature of our practice, social workers often have firsthand knowledge of the stories of people in need. Disillusioned by a seemingly uncaring and underfunded system, consumers of social services often feel
powerless and alienated. Consumers, questioning whether their voice or vote really counts, struggle to see the relevance of becoming politically involved. Piven, Cloward, and other social workers gave credence to the premise that when organized and informed, consumers can capture the attention and appreciation of politicians and policymakers.

The 1990s

In 1994, conservative Republicans achieved a major political victory as their party gained control of the U.S. House of Representatives. Built on the ideological foundation created in the 1980s by Ronald Reagan, and expressed in the newly written conservative rhetoric of House Speaker Newt Gingrich’s “Contract for America,” the mood of the country had seemingly become crystallized. Dominant beliefs included a continued emphasis on fiscal responsibility through the curtailment of government spending, a punitive outlook suggesting that only the very neediest should receive public assistance, an emphasis on traditional family structure and values, a reaffirmation of the primacy of work, and a desire for local or private control over human services (Long, 2000, pp. 64–66).

Though elected on a platform emphasizing social reform, improvement of social conditions for the poor, and the need for nationalized health care insurance, President Bill Clinton went on to sign into law one of the most restrictive pieces of social legislation in U.S. history—the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Labeled as “new federalism,” this piece of legislation exacerbated the plight of the poor by reducing federal spending for low-income people by a projected $55 billion over six years and further shifting social responsibility for the needy from the federal government to state, local, and private entities.

Although the 1990s were economically prosperous for many, with an unusually low unemployment rate, prosperity fell far short of reaching all Americans. Indeed, growth in the labor market involved the proliferation of low-wage service positions characterized by limited access to medical coverage, quality child care, or other family-friendly benefits.

During the 1990s, time restrictions were instituted that systematically drove consumers of public assistance from governmental rolls. Many Americans supported this move as fiscally responsible and as necessary in order to foster economic self-sufficiency by prying the poor away from dependency on the government. Unfortunately, the human consequences—both positive and negative—of forcing people in need off welfare remain largely unknown. How the poor fared through welfare reform, the real-life experiences and consequences of the legislation, clearly took a back seat to welfare reform’s cost-saving benefits for the federal budget.

Many people would assert that social welfare programs and services are less needed during times of economic well-being. At face value, this argument would seem credible, but social workers know that certain segments of society (those who are only marginally employable, children, persons restricted by
disabilities or by health conditions, and older adults) struggle to meet everyday needs even during prosperous times. Thus, although a strong economy provides employment to those capable of making the transition to work, “advocacy on behalf of those who cannot work is essential” (Cancian, 2001, p. 312). Additionally, “poor access to education and training, racism and other forms of discrimination, and local job market conditions are among the factors that limit employment opportunities” (Cancian, 2001, p. 312).

The 2000s

The tragedies of September 11, 2001, have most likely changed forever the American way of life and the manner in which Americans view human vulnerability. The deadly use of commercial aircraft by terrorists to destroy the World Trade Center and attack the Pentagon awakened a sleepy nation to the need for modernized security measures at airports and to the realities of twenty-first-century warfare, while the subsequent use of anthrax as a biochemical weapon confirmed that Americans could be attacked in a variety of ways.

Out of these atrocities emerged a unique and unprecedented spirit of patriotism, unity, and rekindled spirit toward giving to others in the United States. In the first two months alone following September 11, over $1 billion was donated to the American Red Cross and other associations for use in disaster relief. From catastrophe emerged an impulse toward charitable giving, born of the belief that terrorism could strike any of us at any given moment. The attacks on America during 2001 exposed the fragile nature of human existence in a graphic and televised manner.

In this way, at the dawn of the new millennium, the United States was abruptly drawn into the international scene. With little warning, Americans were introduced to a relatively new enemy: international terrorists. Economic resources, technological capabilities, and military might were quickly called upon to protect our homeland and preserve the American way of life. President George W. Bush acted promptly to reenergize the military-industrial complex in the United States to mount an unprecedented War on Terrorism.

On both a national and a global scale, the September 11 attacks demonstrate how, particularly in dire circumstances, Republicans and Democrats, allies and unlikely friends, even total strangers can be quickly called upon to bring their powers and capabilities to bear in combating a crisis. Unfortunately, when Americans began providing support and resources to the War on Terrorism or to aid victims of September 11, giving to other charitable efforts predictably suffered. Mobilizing and directing the assets and strengths of Americans, for whatever cause, serves to push other issues aside. The buildup of military forces and homeland defense** accompanied by federal tax cuts and reductions in domestic spending** diverts funding from social issues and causes. From a structural viewpoint, it is a matter of priorities and of selectively tapping into a community or society’s energy and synergy.
WHAT INFLUENCES MACRO SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE?

Several interesting observations emerge when examining the past century in relation to large-scale social change and social welfare. Foremost, the impetus and support for macro-level social work have weathered a somewhat nonlinear, to-and-fro course in U.S. history. There have been bursts of progress, when social workers and consumers of services have successfully moved forward to advance laws, policies, and programs promoting structural change for the needy. Conversely, there have been periods of stagnation, when society and social work practice have been consumed with promoting personal responsibility and individual achievement. And, although many would point to shifts in ideological winds (conservative versus liberal) as a primary influence on such fluctuations, in fact, the destiny of macro social work practice and social reform seems particularly sensitive to specific, less rational, social-economic conditions.

As examples, it is clear that war, catastrophe, economic crisis (depression, unemployment, stock market failure), demographic changes (population shifts, family composition, immigration), and international threat (war and terrorism) have the potential to affect public and professional sentiment concerning the importance of systemic, structural change in developing community and societal assets. If this assertion is accurate, then aspiring social workers would be wise to prepare for stormy seas. Yes, there will be times of smooth sailing for macro-level change. Conversely, social workers will have to endure steadfast waters dedicated to helping consumers cope and survive. Regardless of the socio-historical era, it is important to remember that promoting consumer strengths and resolution of problems cannot be fully addressed “by small-scale solutions no matter how well intentioned our motivations . . . [instead] we must abandon those assumptions that constrict our policy responses so we can think and act boldly” (Reisch & Gorin, 2001, p. 16).

BOX 1.4

As an example of the impact of technological innovation, many social workers are turning to the Internet as a mechanism for promoting social change. Communication via the Internet can be an effective means of educating others about social concerns, promoting people’s strengths, and coordinating social advocacy (Hick & McNutt, 2002). The Internet can be a timely source of information about various social issues and causes. It can also facilitate ongoing dialogue between colleagues and constituent groups. Information and communication are two important sources of power in relation to macro-level social change.
SOCIAL WORK’S COMMITMENT TO MACRO PRACTICE

Commitment can take different forms at different levels. While social workers conscientiously strive each day to include macro activities in their practice, the profession as a whole is dedicated to finding ways to promote human dignity and improve social conditions. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) are two important professional organizations putting forward a macro view, both within the profession and in society as a whole. And, although social work has historically demonstrated a dedication to large-scale change, social-historical context often helps shape the forms this commitment takes. Hence, the doctrines, policies, and publications of the NASW and the CSWE serve as compasses in guiding us and keeping us focused on our professional identity.

One of the most profound documents for describing the mission of and rationale for social work is the NASW Code of Ethics (1996). Here, you can read the first paragraph of the preamble of the Code of Ethics, with key words underscored. These terms highlight the “macro” elements of practice and serve as a reminder that social work is more encompassing than our “do-good” image “of helping individuals and families to persevere.”

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession’s focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living. (p. 1)

First and foremost, social workers are called upon “to enhance human well-being.” This is not limited to the welfare of individuals and single families; it also involves “a social context” and “the well-being of society” in general. Social workers differ from other helping professionals in their focus on environmental forces and their ability to “address problems [and strengths] in living” overall. The “social” in “social work” connotes change for and with larger systems, including groups of people, organizations, communities, and society.

EMPOWERMENT AND MACRO PRACTICE

Special attention should be given to language in the NASW Code of Ethics pointing to “the empowerment of people.” Empowerment is a key term for understanding and directing our efforts in terms of consumer-based “macro” change. In a general way, empowerment refers to the central and direct
involvement of consumers in defining and determining their own struggles, strengths, and future. Social workers empower others by finding ways in which consumers of services can design and implement activities that accentuate their own unique assets in addressing needs (Delgado, 2000, p. 33).

Empowerment involves liberation. When consumers exercise the ability to plan and create social change, they gain control. Frequently, politicians and policymakers make decisions “for the sake of clients.” As well intentioned as this may seem, the net effect of such a paternalistic approach runs counter to self-determination and prevents consumers from using their own capabilities to gain access to power in the social environment.

Practitioners know that when consumers take charge of the change process, a zeal for finding solutions soon follows. Indeed, the entire helping relationship becomes more collaborative: “Empowerment-based practitioners join with clients as partners and rely on clients’ expertise and participation in change processes. They discern the interconnectedness between client empowerment and social change. These changes are not trivial! They redirect every phase of the practice process” (Miley, O’Melia, & DuBois, 2001, p. 88). Using an empowerment approach, consumers advocate for rights, services, and resources with assistance from social workers, rather than social workers acting on behalf of consumers.

**RESPECT FOR CONSUMERS**

You have probably noticed a preference in this book for the term *consumer* over *client*. Although this distinction may seem minor, it embraces the spirit of empowerment and a commitment to finding and supporting ways to advance the status of people being served. By definition, consumers are acknowledged as possessing certain rights and power. As consumers, people expect quality service and feel free to advocate for rights. By contrast, *clients* are seen as people who are being treated by professionals and are in need of professional expertise. The term *consumer* suggests that by virtue of being users of services, people are entitled to exert influence and control over their situation.

Using the term *consumer* in relation to human services has negative connotations, too. Many people, including helping professionals, associate the term *consumer* with a business orientation. In an attempt to sell goods and products, for example, marketing and advertising professionals would like us to believe that “the consumer is always right.” This philosophy is put forward in order to maximize financial gain. Yet, we know that consumers are not always right. Additionally, consumers often struggle to gain control over product delivery and quality. For many people, accentuating consumer rights in the business world is seen as a strategy for boosting sales, not an earnest effort toward empowerment.

Given these limitations, the term *consumer* is given preference in this book. The quest for people to take control over their own lives, individually and collectively, lies at the heart of social work practice. The term *consumer*, at least in
part, captures this spirit. It is important in human services to promote and legitimize the consumer-driven nature of social work practice whenever possible. Toward this end, consumer seems more desirable and more positive than client or patient.

As a social worker, you will probably be surprised to learn how commonly people in power design and implement programs and policies without even the most basic sort of consultation with the consumer. It is a condescending practice—a “we know what is best for you” approach. Control is the salient factor whenever people in positions of power make decisions for others.

**SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE**

The empowerment approach emphasizes promoting social and economic justice. Indeed, a major goal of social work practice involves helping consumers to explore and find ways to secure resources and enrich their lives. Social-economic justice also involves empowering consumers to become stakeholders in decision-making processes. Social-economic justice is an ideal condition, connoting a sense of evenhandedness or fairness where “all members have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits” (Barker, 1999, p. 451).

As social workers, we are particularly skillful in assessing peril, for both individuals and groups of people. In macro practice, there is a special sensitivity to populations-at-risk, groups of people who are vulnerable to (at risk of) oppression, discrimination, and/or exploitation. Traditionally, populations-at-risk have been defined in the United States in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, employability, and age. However, this is far from an exhaustive list. Many factors beyond the typical social-economic and demographic considerations can place people in various forms of jeopardy.

As just one example, are college students a potential “population-at-risk”? By virtue of your status as a college student, are you confronted with obstacles and unique forms of exploitation? Take a moment to see if you can identify a few of these hazards. Have you ever attempted to rent an apartment? Is being a college student a disadvantage or advantage? How? What about those irritating phone calls from credit card companies? Do you think that college students are targeted as inexperienced buyers prone to accumulating large debts at high interest rates?

When a strengths perspective is employed, special attention is given to identifying collective assets, capacities, and the potential for exerting change of various groups of people, particularly people deemed to be “at-risk.” Unfortunately, it is very easy for helping professionals to become overwhelmed by the problems and inadequacies confronting consumers and to ignore the strengths people can bring to bear upon social situations and circumstances.

Indeed, social work’s commitment to enhance well-being and promote social-economic justice reaches far beyond problem-solving strategies focusing on change with individuals and families. In subsequent chapters, a heavy emphasis is placed on the ability of social workers to encourage and advance
collective action with a special eye focused on strengths—the abilities of people to grow, learn, and change—and asset building—the enrichment of resources and capabilities in organizations, communities, and society.

SUMMARY

In this first chapter, a host of concepts and terms (macro practice, consumer, strengths, empowerment, and social-economic justice, among others) have been introduced for your consideration. In subsequent chapters, these notions will be further defined, elaborated upon, and applied to practice.

You have also been given a social-historical overview of macro-level change in the United States. We have made the case that opportunities for larger-scale social change are often contingent on the social-economic-political conditions of any given time period. This is a reality that confronts all social workers in the macro components of their practice.

Finally, the concept of empowerment was briefly introduced. The chapters that follow are dedicated to a more detailed examination of the many realities associated with implementing various orientations and perspectives (e.g., problem solving, strengths orientation, empowerment, and ecological theory) in everyday social work activities.

A FEW KEY TERMS

- macro practice
- community organizing
- locality development
- social planning
- social action
- group work
- social research
- macro view
- environmental forces
- empowerment
- populations-at-risk

USING INFOTRAC®

COLLEGE EDITION AND INFOWRITE

InfoTrac College Edition

This chapter is dedicated to the definition and an analysis of macro social work practice. To gain a better sense of macro practice, it will be helpful to identify and read contemporary examples of macro social work practice. Complete the following exercise:

2. Under Keyword Search, enter “macro social work practice” as a search term.
3. Find one article that describes an example of macro practice.
4. How is this article a good example of change involving larger social systems?
5. Indicate if and how the article embraces the notion of empowerment.
InfoWrite

Develop the habit of regularly questioning and critically analyzing information gleaned from various sources. For example, was the article you found published in a peer-reviewed, credible journal? The type of source is an important consideration, especially with the advent of the Internet, which has drastically increased the possibility of self-publishing. In order to refine your critical-thinking skills, do the following:

1. Go to InfoWrite.
2. Scroll to Critical Thinking.
3. Read the sections focusing on “Distinguishing Between Primary and Secondary Sources.”
4. Summarize in a paragraph the difference between primary and secondary sources.

Attempt to classify the article found in your InfoTrac College Edition exercise as either a primary or a secondary source of information. Be sure to give special attention to the notion of interpretation. Research articles and scholarly works typically follow prescribed formats and emphasize objectivity in the reporting of findings. Determine the merits of your article after critically evaluating its content and source.

CASE EXAMPLE: Inspiration from Consumers

Amy Sutton is a social worker at a regional chapter of a national organization dedicated to serving people diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. For the past ten years, she has practiced social work with people who have multiple sclerosis. For those of you unfamiliar with this disease, multiple sclerosis involves random attacks on a substance called myelin, a fatty material found in the central nervous system—the brain and spinal cord. When myelin is damaged, persons with multiple sclerosis develop scarring and often experience difficulties with balance, strength, fatigue, vision, and muscle control. Multiple sclerosis can also affect mental functioning. The progression of this disease is neither predictable nor uniform. Although people with multiple sclerosis may not be readily identifiable, they are often in pain and may experience odd sensations such as numbness. Those with more advanced forms of the disease may require assistance with walking and may experience a variety of other physical limitations.

Like many social workers, Amy is involved in a multitude of activities at her agency. She counsels consumers and provides information and referral services. Her chapter sponsors a “bike-a-thon” to raise money and broaden awareness about multiple sclerosis. Amy also organizes and facilitates group work. When consumers express an interest in a subject, Amy either serves as group leader or finds a professional leader appropriate for the topic. Group formation centers on a specific theme. In recent months, groups have explored various topics, including cognitive functioning, depression, living single, dating, and issues for the recently diagnosed.

In group work, Amy marvels at the enthusiasm and preparedness (continued)
of participants. She has found that people with multiple sclerosis have a passion to know. In a group exploring cognitive functioning, consumers came to sessions with the most recent research and Internet entries clutched in hand. In addition to sharing information, group members sought ways to educate employers about cognitive issues and discussed the many ramifications of disclosure in the workplace. Group members dictated the agenda and identified each week’s subtopic.

Consumers are clearly in control of the format and direction of group sessions. Amy’s role is analogous to that of a stage manager, as she uses her knowledge and skills to establish the setting and backdrop for group members to pursue collective interests. Meetings are consumer-driven and often focus on environmental change—for example, how can people with multiple sclerosis effectively educate family members, employers, and helping professionals to the specifics of their situation? Because multiple sclerosis can be one of those “invisible diseases,” acquaintances and friends may struggle to understand what it is really like to have the disease. Conversely, once the diagnosis has been revealed, the public is often quick to pass judgment concerning the capabilities of people with multiple sclerosis.

Amy leaves most group sessions inspired and armed with new ideas born from the mouths of participants. Consumers sense empowerment as they exercise control, pursue strategies, and make decisions concerning disease management and how to relate to and educate others. Group members identify and use their capabilities to help themselves and their new comrades.

Amy Sutton also co-facilitates a consumer services committee for her region. She views this as one of her more important roles as a “macro” social worker. The consumer services committee consists of ten chapter members with multiple sclerosis and five professionals dedicated to enhancing services for people with multiple sclerosis. This particular committee meets every two or three months and reviews the various programs being offered at the agency. The primary goals of the committee are to help ensure that programs and services are appropriate and correspond to current needs—from a consumer perspective. This is a good example of how consumers can direct, control, and provide oversight for program development and implementation.

Indeed, nearly three years ago, this chapter’s consumer services committee became embroiled in a delicate situation involving public relations. A national advocacy organization had commissioned a market research group to create public-service advertisements to raise public awareness about multiple sclerosis. Though well intentioned and attention getting, these commercials depicted women being suddenly attacked by barbed wire and placed in a form of physical bondage. People on Amy’s consumer services committee were upset about such a portrayal of multiple sclerosis. What would young children think of it, particularly if their mother had recently been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis? Further, even for a worthy cause, is it wise or appropriate to show women being placed in bondage?

After much discussion, both within the consumer services committee and throughout the regional chapter, concerns were expressed to the national advocacy group about these advertisements. In addition, local and regional television companies were asked not to air these television spots. Once again, Amy worked to facilitate meetings and conversation, but the will of the consumers was the most important factor. Helping consumers of services to use their talents to rally around causes of importance to them can be inspirational at many levels.
THINKING CRITICALLY
ABOUT THE CASE EXAMPLE

1. People often associate group work with therapy. Yet Amy’s groups clearly focus on macro-level, environmental change. Given the limited information provided in this case example, identify and contemplate two potential topics for group discussion (for example, in the areas of employment or delivery of services) that involve changes in larger social systems.

2. Creating a consumer services committee, like the one described in this case example, establishes a mechanism for eliciting input from consumers. Write a one-paragraph mission statement for such a committee, describing the committee’s general purpose and function. How do you believe your document would compare to a statement written by consumers of services? In practice, what would be an optimal approach for drafting, writing, and formalizing a mission statement for a consumer services committee?

3. In this case example, entering into an association with a private market research group to promote public education about multiple sclerosis appeared to be problematic. Often, however, good results can be derived from difficult situations. Cast the reaction of consumers and others to the controversial commercials in a positive light.

REFLECTION EXERCISES

1. Ask a social work practitioner for her or his definition of “macro social work practice.” Encourage this person to give you some examples of activities he or she performs that involve macro practice. Finally, ask what percentage of his or her work week is devoted to macro-practice activities. Discuss your results with classmates and contemplate how many hours per week you hope to be engaged in macro social work practice. How does macro social work practice fit into your idea of a professional social worker?

2. On your next visit to a social service agency, take special notice of the terminology surrounding delivery of services. Are the people participating in services called consumers, clients, patients, or some other name? If the term consumer is not being used, consider introducing it as a part of everyday practice. What is the reaction of others? Does the notion of consumerism have any relevance at the agency? If so, how? Do staff and administrators have any sense of what consumers really want to be called?

3. Attend an agency-based group meeting and focus your attention on consumer participation. How much, if any, of the group’s dialogue is directed toward efforts for larger-scale (social) change in organizations, in the community, or at the societal level? Who seems to be in control of the group’s agenda, and for what reasons? How could the group be more consumer-driven?
4. As a student, you are also a consumer. What kinds of counseling and intervention programs are provided at your university? Investigate how many social workers are employed in these programs? What opportunities exist for student representation on boards, councils, and other governing bodies of university entities, including those at your counseling center(s). Identify the ways in which your university encourages a student (consumer) voice and empowers students in the life of your school.

**SUGGESTED READINGS**


**REFERENCES**


