

EXAMINATION OF MICRO, MEZZO, MACRO LEVELS OF PRACTICE

# The Interrelationship of the Three Levels of Practice

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An examination of Micro, Mezzo, and Macro  
Social Work

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## **Introduction**

Social Work is an all encompassing field. Having such a wide range of applications requires knowledge in the various skills needed, because of this social work is divided into three levels named micro, mezzo, and macro. This paper will discuss the three levels and how at the micro level one would gain insight into how macro/mezzo level change might be required. In addition, discussion concerning the overlap between micro, mezzo, and macro practice regarding minorities and women and the issues this population faces. Lastly, address the potential ethical dilemmas that stem from working with this population and how social work values and ethics provide a guide for solving such dilemmas.

## **Micro Social Work**

As a micro social worker you are working with the individual client and family. This means that your focus is on treating the individual and those systems that relate individually to this particular person. Micro generalist practitioners use two theories to provide a conceptual framework which are Systems Theory and Ecological Perspective. Systems Theory relies on knowledge in “the ways social systems promote or deter people in maintaining or achieving health and well-being” (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012, pp. 9). Through examination of the relationships between the individual and the systems they interact with you are able to determine whether they are having an even exchange of input and output achieving homeostasis and equifinality or if there is an imbalance creating a deficit. When there are deficits or inaccessibility to systems that the individual needs this affects the client’s health and well-being. Through understanding which system(s) are causing an imbalance the social worker is then able to determine the best way to encourage change in focusing on “the individual, family, group,

organization, or community avenues” (Kirst-Ashman & Hull 2012, pp.9). Ecological Perspective is similar in that it examines the relationship of the person and their environments (PIE); however it also focuses on “social environment, transactions, energy, input, output, interface, adaptation, coping, and interdependence” (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012, pp.11) As you can see there is overlap between Systems Theory and Ecological Perspective as they both focus on the individual.

In order to practice as a micro social worker you need specific skills. These skills include interviewing, relationship building, good communication skills through verbal and nonverbal behavior, and the ability to express empathy. These skills are important when working with individuals because your client will not confide in you if you do not show that you care and are competent in your field.

### **Mezzo Social Work**

Mezzo level of social work refers to work that involves groups. There are two main types of groups; task groups and treatment groups. A task group is defined as one that is created to accomplish a task; such as a group of professionals in education that are meeting to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for a student with special needs. This group might consist of a speech therapist, psychologist, special education teacher, and social worker. A treatment group is when the focus is on the “members’ emotional and social needs”; such as the therapy group Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012, pp.97). This group meets to change a habit and offer support through sharing stories of struggle and triumph.

Social workers at a mezzo level would be operating under many roles that include broker, mediator, educator, and facilitator. With these leadership roles there are certain skills that are needed. One skill is the ability to understand group dynamics, group development, and group culture. In understanding what roles are filled within a group, the four stages of group development, and what values and beliefs each group has a social worker is then able to work effectively in their role as a leader or contributing member. Using conceptual framework social workers are then able to gather information to assess, intervene, or evaluate the situation. In addition to knowledge and understanding of groups social workers also need to possess the micro skills of relationship building, attending skills, and interviewing skills.

### **Macro Social Work**

Macro practice is “designed to improve or modify some aspect of society”, whether it is through organizational or societal policy that determines how resources are allocated (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012, pp.125). These improvements include advocating for resources that are not available or for changing the way a resource is provided to ensure efficacy. The work of a macro social worker involves change that affects groups of people rather than just an individual. An example is a social worker that discovers that the agency she works for has a high number of teen mothers who need job training. Her agency or other agencies in the area do not offer job training for young mothers. She decides to recruit other social workers, professionals and the community who also see the need for this resource and together they develop an agency that specializes in job training and education for young mothers.

Skills that are needed at a macro level are policy and planning, capacity development, and advocacy. Policy and planning entails the ability to gather information to identify needs and

use or create policy to provide a solution. Capacity development involves gathering a group or community together to tackle the desired change. Advocacy is the act of supporting a cause or group, being the voice for someone who cannot be their own voice or just need more voices to be heard. Other skills that are needed are ability to work and understand groups, as discussed under the mezzo section above and the ability to build relationships and communicate effectively, as discussed in the micro section above. The skills used in each of the levels build on each other.

### **Macro/Mezzo Change Discovered Through Micro Work**

As stated in the descriptions of the Systems Theory and Ecological Perspective, an individual's well being is intertwined with the environment. Thus working with a client on a micro level you may encounter changes that need to occur at a macro (community or organization) or mezzo (groups) level in order to help your client. The following is an example of this; imagine you are a social worker working in an agency specializing in immigrants. Through working with this population you discover the majority of those you counsel on an individual basis share the same recurrent issue. This issue involves their rights under the current laws in Michigan. You then are able to see where a change in policy would help your clients as individuals and as a group of immigrants achieve their fullest potential. So you contact the people you know who advocate for policy in Lansing and express your concern over your clients' rights under current legislation. As you talk to people you are directed to more people who are interested in changing this policy. You then organize this group of people and devise a plan in how to introduce the changes in policy you would like to see to your representatives along with personal stories from your clients showing how the current policy is creating hardship. You then work with your representatives to create a greater interest to increase your

chances of a positive outcome and offer more information to them to help educate them on the issue.

### **Overlap in the Three Levels**

When you are working with a population that is oppressed or discriminated against such as minorities and/or women it is important to understand how the three levels of social work interact and overlap in order to better serve these groups. For instance when working with minorities they may encounter issues with access to an equal education. If we are viewing this from a micro level our solution might involve tutoring, a mezzo level would be creating a task group of teachers to develop a more effective curriculum in the school, and from a macro level fighting for policy change at a government level for greater funding and resources in the areas affected. The overlap occurs because each of the systems feed into each other. Another overlap in the three levels is the skills required to work at each level. You need to have the skills to build relationships, communicate effectively, show empathy, and use critical thinking to assess, create a plan, and evaluate.

### **Ethical Dilemmas**

Ethical dilemmas can occur at any level of social work. One of the potential ethical dilemmas discussed in class was a mother who has five children and is on food stamps is in your office and is so excited to tell you that her neighbor pays her to babysit and that gives her enough money to make ends meet each month. You know that she did not claim this extra income on the forms when she applied for food stamps. If you report this information it would put her over the income range and cut her food stamps, and you know that she would not be able to feed her

children if she loses the food stamps because the babysitting money isn't enough to cover the loss. If you work in an agency that requires you to report any extra earnings you would be in an ethical dilemma. Your goal as a social worker is to help your client, so being put in a position where information you report will cause them harm creates a difficult situation. This is when the code of ethics can help guide us. As with any ethical dilemma there are reasons for choosing either way; the principals that could offer a solution in the social work code of ethics is the Commitment to Clients which states that you are dedicated to the "clients' well-being and primacy of their interests" (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012, pp.397). The code of ethics also discusses the Commitment to Employers which states that one should "take responsibility to make certain that agency policies and procedures reflect effective service delivery, that employers are aware of their ethical obligations according to the Code of Ethics and that their organizations comply with such standards" (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012, pp.407). With that being said a look into why this mother's income level change would strip her of needed benefits and gathering data on others that are in a similar situation. Through speaking with other professionals you may discover that a change in food stamp policy is needed because clients who need these resources are not given access.

### **Conclusion**

The three levels of social work micro, mezzo, and macro are intertwined in required skills and desired outcomes. The overlapping of these levels needs to be understood to provide the best care for your client since each of these levels can have an impact on the individual's well being and ability to access resources. As a social worker your obligation as stated in the code of ethics is to promote the integrity of the profession. In order to do this you need to have the skills

to prove competency. Whatever level you choose to practice at you will need the skills of each level of social work to fulfill your obligation to not only your client's but to the social work profession and to the broader society. These skills along with the code of ethics will help guide your practice of social work.



### References

Kirst-Ashman, K. K., & Hull, Jr., G. H. (2012). Values, Ethics, and the Resolution of Ethical Dilemmas. In *Understanding Generalist Practice* (6th ed., pp. 9,11,97,125,397,407). Mason, OH: Brooks/Cole.