MICRO AND MACRO TENSIONS IN GENERALIST PRACTICE

By Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

In the summer of 2001 I was preparing to teach a masters-level social work "foundations" course. My previous teaching in this subject area was prior to the profession's widespread adoption of the generalist practice model, although my work for the past two decades, in addition to teaching, has encompassed individual and couples counseling, family therapy, community and congregational organizing, planning, and administration.

In hopes of finding a model that would help me to prepare a syllabus for an up-to-date foundations course, I searched the Internet and located a dozen course outlines developed by faculty members at various schools of social work. As I reviewed them, considering their overall approach and specific bibliographic content, I became aware of what seemed to be common missing ingredients in their recipes for generalist practice. Virtually all of them were ignoring many if not most of the essentials of *macro* practice and the place of spirituality and religion in social work. Both of these streams of practice have been integrated into my work for many years, so their absence was very striking to me.

My intensive summer reading to prepare for my course led me to conclude that the prevalent model of generalist practice is typically understood as the ability to work with systems of every size, with a wide range of social problems, and with persons representing the full diversity of cultural values and practices, economic conditions, educational attainment, political interests, and physical abilities.

It also became clear, however, that over the past several decades, as this generalist model of social work developed, practice has also encompassed several "minority" variations. The principal distinctions between these variations and the "majority" generalist model seemingly are related to:

- Who is to be defined as the *primary beneficiary* of practice, whether micro (i.e., individual, couple, family, or small group) or macro (i.e., organization, neighborhood, community, institution, movement, or nation);
- How empowerment is to be defined, whether the emphasis is primarily on psycho-social or political-economic dimensions, and the accompanying perspective on power and conflict;
- Whether or not an explicit and well-developed spiritual and religious component is to be included; and
- What weight is to be given to the effects of sponsorship (i.e., sources of legitimization and funding) on organizational, class, cultural, and professional biases that influence practice.

Generalist Emphasis On Micro Clients

The prevalent generalist practice model gives primary emphasis to *micro* clients, typically focusing on realizing the full potential of individuals, couples, families, and small groups. The most common methodologies are casework, counseling, therapy, and group work that seek to enable a "better fit" between the client-system and systems in the client's environment, often through the resolution of conflict. Not uncommonly, sponsorship is from the top down by bureaucratic government organizations and well-established nonprofit agencies that are classified as tax-exempt under section 501 (c) (3) of the federal tax code, thus increasing their attractiveness for charitable donations but limiting their options for social and political action.

Most contemporary social work courses reflect this variant of the generalist model. They implicitly define macro intervention as primarily an aid to realize the full potential of micro beneficiaries; macro interventions are

virtually always geared to serve micro objectives. The case commonly offered as an illustration of macro practice is a variation on the theme of a social work professional who convenes and facilitates a group of other agency professionals to improve delivery of their services to their micro clients. Moreover, concrete principles and specific guides to practice are virtually always aimed at casework, counseling, therapy, and group work.

Incidentally, the normative assumption in this generalist practice model is that, of course, spirituality and religiosity are potentially important variables in a client's sense of well-being. The common viewpoint is that if social workers skillfully and sensitively apply the profession's *social work* theories, principles, and methods, we can help our clients reach their full potential, including that which is spiritually and religiously grounded. We may also make referrals to clergy when clients present challenges that are primarily spiritual and religious in character.

There are, however, much richer practice possibilities in this vein, some of which I have already described in an article published in *Social Work Today* (October 29, 2001). My introduction to them came nearly 15 years ago while working as a therapist at a Samaritan Counseling Center. As with scores of similar centers around the country, this center was non-sectarian and used a systems approach to individual, couples, and family therapy, integrating pastoral counseling practices with those of conventional counseling and therapy. The staff members were all "dual-degreed," that is, both ordained and possessing an M.S.W., Ph.D., M.D., or comparable secular professional credential.

Alternative Models of Generalist Practice

There are undoubtedly many variations of the generalist practice model. Two that are of particular interest to me share the recognition that historically our profession has had a wide range of primary beneficiaries—that not just individuals, couples, and families have been our *clients*, but also *members* of organizations, *citizens* in communities, *constituents* of movements, and *colleagues* of allied professions have benefited directly from our work. In effect, given the scope of sponsorship sources for our professional practice, our methods may be targeted to a wide range of objectives that, taken individually, primarily emphasize one or another micro, mezzo, or macro beneficiary.

Imagine a model of generalist practice in which the main objective is to further the potentialities of a *macro beneficiary*, i.e., an organization, neighborhood, community, institution, movement, or even a whole society. In this approach, interventions are geared directly to serve macro objectives in their own right—for example, to change the structure of a city government from at-large to districted representation, to create large numbers of new low- to moderate-income housing units, or to prevent the scheduled demolition of a neighborhood

that has been condemned to make way for a new freeway.

Generalist practice emphasizing *macro* beneficiaries, unlike that which is micro-oriented, typically defines building community, building organization, building mobilization, and building institution as its central tasks. The most common methodology is to *organize bottom-up-sponsored social infrastructure as the means of changing relations of power through ongoing engagement in constructive competition and conflict*. The goal is to effect social change through planning, policy-making, legislation, and institutional reform as driven by a democratically empowered and controlled process. Not uncommonly, sponsorship is by socio-political movements and grassroots organizations that are tax-exempt under section 501 (c) (4) of the federal tax code, which leaves them relatively free to engage in virtually all forms of nonpartisan social and political action, although donations made to them are not tax-deductible.

This model does not eschew micro and mezzo beneficiaries; they simply are not primary. In virtually all of my community organizing and development experience, while the macro side received the most emphasis, especially the planning and organizing dimensions, therapeutic work with individuals and families was always included as an essential adjunct.

This alternative generalist model has a very different definition of empowerment when compared with the micro-oriented model now prevalent in social work education and practice. This model no longer populates the landscape of practice almost exclusively with psychosocial dynamics but instead at least equally incorporates political-economic dynamics. Thus the hallmark of successful practice in this model is the building of effective political and economic power by the powerless.

My experience of this model, particularly in community and congregational organizing, has demonstrated the feasibility of integrating broadly based, non-sectarian religious and spiritual beliefs and practices into macro social work. Examples have included prayers, benedictions, retreats, reflections, convocations, and a host of strategies and tactics inspired by scripture and related literature. These achievements were especially notable because clergy, congregational leaders, and members were clear throughout that their religious and spiritual convictions and commitments were neither compromised nor imposed on others.

Missing Macro Methodologies

It is in the methodological arena that the most significant differences between micro- and macro-oriented models of generalist practice are revealed.

Last summer as I reviewed colleagues' course outlines, I was gratified to see that their required reading included broad conceptual foundations. They assigned introductory readings on social systems theory, social ecology, and social action fields. I found numerous

rhetorical references to the social environment, the impact of political and economic forces, and the need to address poverty, oppression, and injustice at every level of society.

But while their bibliographies and reading assignments included foundation knowledge for all the methodologies appropriate to *micro* beneficiaries—interviewing, assessment, contracting, intervention, termination, and evaluation—the equivalent foundation methodologies for *macro* beneficiaries were absent. There were no references to board development, fundraising, community research and analysis, doorknocking, membership recruiting, housemeetings, action research, actions, campaigns, negotiations, media, and publicity. Equally unsettling was the absence of materials on a number of macro problem-solving processes, such as: mentoring leadership, structuring decision-making, choosing action styles, and developing issues, strategies, and tactics. In effect, the essentials of building community, organization, mobilization, and institution were entirely ignored.

A Futuristic Model

As a student in the UCLA School of Social Welfare masters program many years ago, Professor Warren Haggstrom was my mentor and source of inspiration. As I recently began to think more carefully about generalist practice, his prescient description of it came to mind and gave me a chuckle.

I had entered the UCLA program with some practical work experience, but naively I thought that the social change process was akin to playing with Lincoln Logs. One simply would learn a number of logical steps to construct and reconstruct organizations, communities, and institutions, reforming their policies and practices—like a child building little log cabins.

But Warren presented a different picture. He said that it's more like taking an assignment to conduct an orchestra in the "Twilight Zone." Strangely enough, when you arrive at the concert hall the orchestra is already playing—but an unfamiliar composition and without musical scores. The conductor steps down, takes you by the arm, leads you to the podium, hands you the baton, and leaves the job to you. You carry on as best you can—sometimes seeming to lead, at one moment attending to a soloist and the next focusing on a whole section of musicians; sometimes seeming to follow, often not clear about the direction; and all the while watching players come and go apparently at will—until finally, exhausted, you hand the baton to your replacement and leave the hall, the orchestra still playing as you walk away.

Recalling Warren's explanation and ironic humor brought to mind parallels to my own experience of the last decade and helped me to frame the broad outlines of a "futuristic" model of generalist social work practice.

This model doesn't intimate that my interventions somehow correspond to the beginning, middle, and end of a beneficiary's pressures and challenges. I have come to the unsettling conclusion that those problems and challenges are ongoing; they neither begin with my arrival nor end with my departure. Thus my interventions are simply gauged to passing windows of opportunity that allow me to influence their progress and direction. I count myself as blessed if I may be helpful in such limited ways.

This model doesn't focus on a single beneficiary but instead recognizes and responds to the endless transactions between micro, mezzo, and macro systems. Thus as a community organizer in Compton it was not surprising to me that, while working to build a neighborhood organization to deal with a variety of crime problems in the city, I was also counseling with a member-family whose teenage son was involved in neighborhood break-ins. It was not surprising that, while working as a congregational organizer in Santa Ana, employed by a federation of congregations that was mounting a campaign to deal with a number of drug-related problems, I was also counseling with a member of the organization whose heroin-addicted brother had died while incarcerated in the County Jail.

This model doesn't define success as a value-neutral "better fit" between systems but a more equal, equitable, and accountable *distribution of power* to control contingencies of social learning and social exchange and the social construction of ideological realities.

Finally, this model recognizes and incorporates generic aspects of spirituality and religion, acknowledging them to be indispensable sources of moral vision and internalized definitions of good and evil. It does so because such visions and definitions are significant variables in virtually all of the social transactions of our profession's beneficiaries.

A Hopeful Future

Hopefully, the future of social work education and practice will reflect these and many other generalist models. Hopefully, the tension within the profession between partisans of different variations will lead to productive dialogue and further refinements.

Withal, hopefully, our undergraduate and graduate social work curriculums will offer future students the full range of practice possibilities, along with all the conceptual and methodological materials that may be useful, to ensure they have the most versatile "toolkit" that can be assembled.

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