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# Social Workers Advocating on a Macro Level After Graduate School

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Running Head: SOCIAL WORKERS ADVOCATING ON A MACRO LEVEL AFTER  
GRADUATE SCHOOL

Social Workers Advocating on a Macro Level After Graduate School

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Social Work

St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas

St. Paul, Minnesota

in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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**Abstract**

This paper reports on a survey of MSW social workers regarding their participation of macro advocacy post-graduation. It measures their level of engagement pre-graduate, current engagement and future engagement in macro advocacy and explores barriers to lack of engagement. Data indicates that MSW social workers are engaging in macro practice, however, a growing trend that MSW's are choosing to practice on more of micro level (individual casework) due to lack of time and organization commitments have emerged. Implications for research and education are discussed, including the need to further research the financial burdens that social work students face leaving school.

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## Social Workers Advocating on a Macro Level After Graduate School

### **Introduction**

Social work as a profession was established early in this century to promote social and economic justice (Karger & Stoez, 2014). It was social workers who helped develop most of the welfare policies we have today (Reamer, 1998). As schools and education curriculums began to develop, associations and boards, such as the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) and the National Association for Social Workers (NASW) were also developed to help govern the practice (NASW, 2014). Both clearly state and outline a commitment to macro advocacy and are supported in doing so by the Education and Policy Standards (EPAS, 2012).

Social work as we know it today dates back to the 1800s when Jane Addams established the first shelter for the mentally ill and poor known as the Hull House (Brieland, 1990). In the last century, social workers have been involved somehow in policy making decisions through means of social or macro advocacy. Something has changed however, as social workers pursue higher education in social work, a new theme has emerged, a shift from macro advocacy to a focus on clinical practice (Austin, Coombs, & Barr, 2005, Fisher, 2005, Fisher, 2012, Specht & Courtney, 1994, Rothman, 2012; Hill, Ferguson, & Erickson, 2010).

Acquiring clinical or generalist social work education require roughly the same amount of time spent in the classroom. The base curriculum is similar in both MSW for social work students planning to engage in direct practice or macro advocacy derived from the base curriculum outlined in BSW coursework. This is based on the Code of Ethics outlined in the both the CSWE and NASW. The code clearly states that all social workers are responsible not

only for advocating for individuals, but advocating on a macro level and promoting social justice for all as stated in the preamble of the Code of Ethics (CSWE, 2008).

Social workers are educated and expected to:

“help individuals, families, and groups restore or enhance their capacity for social functioning, and work to create societal conditions that support communities in need.

The practice of social work requires knowledge of human development and behavior, of social, economic and cultural institutions, and of the interaction of all these factors.

Social workers help people of all backgrounds address their own needs through psychosocial services and advocacy. Social workers help people overcome some of life’s most difficult challenges: poverty, discrimination, abuse, addiction, physical illness, divorce, loss, unemployment, educational problems, disability, and mental illness. They help prevent crises and counsel individuals, families, and communities to cope more effectively with the stresses of everyday life.” (NASW, 2014, NP).

Social Workers, therefore, are expected to be invested in macro advocacy even if they are involved with direct practice. However, as some research reveals, social workers are getting away from addressing these needs as a whole, and rather, focusing on individual cases, and unfortunately, favoring working with individuals (D’Aprix, Dunlap, Abel, Edwards, 2004)

Macro advocacy, or social advocacy, is defined as practicing in a person-in-environment perspective, with the environment considered in every decision made. The purpose of macro advocacy is to practice “within and outside organizational, community and policy arenas intended to sustain, change, and advocate for quality of life” (Netting, 2005).

Due to some speculation and concerns that educators have about whether or not social workers are actively engaged in macro advocacy, a number of studies have been conducted to investigate social work student's goals for practice as well as to investigate further barriers as to why the lack of engagement (Hill, et al., 2010, Rothman, 2012, Donaldson, Hill, Ferguson, Fogel, Erickson, 2013, Limb & Organista, 2006, Fisher, Weedman, Alex, Stout, 2001, Woodcock & Dixon, 2005, Swank, 2012, Austin, et al., 2005, Mary, 2001, D'Aprix & et al, 2004; Weiss, 2003, Limb & Organista, 2003, Mizrahi & Dodd, 2013). These authors have done research on multiple levels of education for social workers that focus on attitudes and attributions towards different areas specifically ranging from topics at the micro and macro levels of practice (Mary, 2001). They explore how BSW and MSW students feel about the poor to how they feel about poverty overall and political involvement. Students have been given surveys to measure their commitment to social advocacy and in most, if not all cases, the results reflect a high percentage of students interested in and committed to advocacy on a macro level (Mary, 2001, D'Aprix, et al., 2004, A Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, Tagler, 2001, Austin, Coombs, Barr, 2005).

Other studies have focused on practicing social worker's career motivations and interests working in public or private practices. These results also indicate that more social workers are interested in practicing more on a macro (public) arena than in the private practice (Weiss & Kaufman, 2006). It should also be noted, however, that the percentage of social workers that indicate their desire to work in private practice only, also show a high support and desire to promote social justice on a macro level (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, Tagler, 2001). It appears from the studies, that the overall percentage of social workers in generalist or clinical practice, still hold on to the strong meaning and values that the profession of social work was established behind.



This is an important factor to consider when reading through literature pertaining to social workers career aspirations. Many studies that were conducted throughout the late 1960s through the early part of this century indicate a great deal of macro advocacy and social workers desire to work with poor, however, also show an increasing number of social workers choosing to leave the public arena for more lucrative positions working with middle class individuals (Schwartz & Robinson, 1991).

To gain a better understanding of where social work as a profession is heading, there are a number of studies that have been done that investigate the interests and intentions of social workers (Fisher, et al., 2001, Woodcock, et al., 2005, Swank, 2012, Austin, et al., 2005, Weiss, 2003, Reamer, 2014, Monti, 2002). All these studies reveal that MSW students have high regard for working with communities and those in need, however, more on an individual basis. That means that there may be a population of individuals in need, however, instead of advocating for the population as a whole, social workers have elected to work with each individual on a micro level and act as a case manager to create change for one individual at a time. Up until this current century, there has been limited research explaining why MSW students prefer working with individuals. Additionally, studies examining the attitudes and intentions of social workers have been primarily conducted with social work students prior to graduation or shortly after (Mizrahi, et al, 2013, Limb, et al., 2003, Mary, 2001, Swank, 2012, Fisher, et al., 2001, Limb, et al., 2006, Weiss, 2002, D'Aprix, et al., 2004). Given the expectations stated within the Code of Ethics in combination with social work student's own stated interest in engaging in macro advocacy, it will be important to measure the degree of involvement practicing social workers, current and post-graduation, have in this area.

In 2012, research was conducted to measure the burden student loan debt has had on MSW graduates. This study's goal was to gain insight into how much money students who pursue a degree in social work from undergrad through graduate degrees, borrowed to obtain their education. A web based survey was utilized to collect information from students in 25 states, asking them a question about their student loan debt, their knowledge of student loan forgiveness and other programs to alleviate debt, and the method of obtaining funds for education. The study found that an alarming trend has emerged. MSW graduates leave school with an average of \$30,000 in student loan debt (Yoon, 2012). This does not include undergraduate costs or general education. This is alarming as the average cost for tuition during the time of this study was \$23,066 a year at a 4 year university as compared to \$9,554 a year in 1981 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013)

It is also important to note and study inflation in the United States, cost of education, student loan debt, government assistance towards education historically, and job availability for social workers today. Although minimum wage and income have little to do with the research that has been conducted regarding social workers career motivations, it does provide perspective in what drives social workers in the field of practice that they choose. (Granted MSW graduates do not make minimum wage, the rate at which it has changed reflects wages across the board for most if not all middle income paying occupations.)

In conclusion, social work has made great strides in forming policies, strengthening unions, and fighting for equal rights for all people. The social work field has proven to be the people's best advocates in getting change to occur on a macro level. Literature and research, however, has noted that since the late 70s through today, social workers are abandoning macro advocacy and solidifying roots in micro practice (D'Aprix, et al., 2004, Fisher

& Corciullo, 2011, Healy, 2004, Limb & Organista, 2006, Sprecht & Courtney, 1994). This study attempts to explore why this trend is happening and what barriers exist or have developed that are causing it.

For the purpose of this research, MSW views and engagement in social advocacy were measured during two time periods: post-MSW 0-15 years and 16 to 30 plus years. The primary research questions are as follows: 1. Do MSW's engage in macro advocacy? 2. Does the level of involvement in macro advocacy change across time? 3. What are the barriers for lack of engagement in macro advocacy?

### **Literature Review**

This is a review of the literature that further discusses the history of social work and where the profession is now in regards to macro advocacy. This review attempts to explore the origins of social work by discussing how social work became a profession and how its education came about along with its accreditation. Also, higher education costs and expectations of social work students will be reviewed in more detail as themes have emerged from past literature regarding a shift to micro practice preference over macro practice. This study will explore MSW's views and engagement in macro advocacy and if there is an absence in macro advocacy, why?

### **Brief History of Social Work**

Social work activities can be dated back to the early 1800s in America. Deciding what to do with our poor and insane populations is what ultimately lead up to the profession. In 1889, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr open Hull House in Chicago. This house became influential in the United States and gives birth to the idea of macro practice. (Barker, 1995).

Jane Addams came from wealthy upbringing, however, spent most of her time helping those less fortunate (Barker, 1995). Jane Addams would eventually lead many volunteers to advocate for issues such as, child labor laws, anti-war protests, unionization for women workers, and improving mental health hospitals (Brieland, 1990). Many social work education books reference Jane Addams's contribution to social advocacy.

In 1898 the first school for social workers is established. Friendly visitors help establish a series of summer workshops and training programs for social work education and it eventually becomes the New York School of Philanthropy. This school offered one year training programs (Barker, 1995). Contributions towards the education curriculum were social workers such as Mary Richmond. She wrote several books throughout the course of her career and many are used today in social work education. Some of her books include: *Friendly visiting among the poor. A handbook for charity workers*, 1899; *Social diagnosis*, 1917; and *what is social case work? An introductory description*, 1922.

Many educators and researchers hold Richmond in high regard and view her to be one of the most highly influential social workers of her day (Murdach, 2011). Richmond was a champion at promoting social work by way of her ability to articulate the importance of macro advocacy by the use of her writing. It was thought that Mary Richmond believed that social workers were valuable people, skilled in the area of developing human relationships and being resourceful in the community (Murdach, 2011).

In 1900, educator and economist, Simon N. Patten introduces "social workers" and refers it to the "friendly visitors" that helped work at places such as the Hull House (Barker, 1995). Patten and Richmond, along with Addams, argue over the roles of social workers. Patten believed that the major role of social workers should be advocacy on macro level as a group.

Richmond believed the delivery should be more individualized. Patten believed that “if society as a whole could be educated to make appropriate choices regarding both the consumption and production of material goods, the general level of prosperity would become such that want and poverty could be eliminated ”(Lach, 2000).

For over 30 years, Patten can be credited for contributed to social work by his teaching, articles, and books pointing toward a social work practice directed at adjustment to the new economy of abundance. Several important figures in social work history were influenced on Patten’s teachings. Such people as, Frances Perkins, another pioneer of the social work field, who helped construct the New Deal with Roosevelt. These figures all transported Patten’s ideas into the policies they helped develop. Patten believed that social action and the social work profession should be intertwined to a developing economy of abundance (Patten, 1907 & 1968).

When Patten died in 1922, his ideas died with him. A newer, more popular approach took its place, and earlier writings were overlooked due to the popularity of the Freudian psychoanalytic approach (Lubove, 1965). His ideas were long forgotten until the Vietnam Era and have since been disregarded other than being referenced by other economists.

### **Birth of Social Work Education and Accreditation**

The social work profession is established and its goal is to promote social and economic justice. Social workers were trained to improve human rights by standing against those who were oppressive, fighting to eliminate poverty, and working to enhance the quality of life for all people (CSWE, 2008). Schools were established and curriculums for education were modeled after previous social work pioneers such as Jane Adams, Mary Richmond, and Florence Kelley.

These individuals tailored curriculum to educate students on social advocacy on both micro and macro levels.

In 1898, the Charity Organization Society developed the Summer School of Philanthropy and following this, additional training schools for social workers in Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, and Philadelphia. In 1919, a formal accrediting authority was then formed to govern these schools. It was known as the Association of Training Schools for Professional Social Workers. This organization was responsible for monitoring the content that was taught in higher education. It was later renamed the American Association of Schools of Social Work (AASSW) (CSWE, 1953).

Five years after being renamed in 1932, AASSW made a move to limit its membership to graduate schools. Frustrated by this move, state higher education institutions formed a different association, the National Association of Schools of Social Administration (NASSA). In trying to push each their own agendas, the two systems were stripped of their accreditation authority (Monti, 2002). The ending result led these organizations to merge and form the National Council on Social Work (NCSW) Education in 1946. *Social Work Education in the United States* is published by Hollis & Taylor in 1951 and contains a recommendation to have one accrediting organization develop education criteria (CSWE, 2014). The AASSW and NASSA were dismantled and CSWE was established as the single accrediting association in 1952 with the following statement of purpose: “to promote the development of sound programs of social work education in the United States, its territories and possessions, and Canada” (Kendall, 2002). The CSWE is still the accrediting authority for social work education today.

## **Mission**

The mission of the organization is to:

“Ensure and enhance the quality of social work education for a professional practice that promotes individual, family, and community well-being, and social and economic justice. CSWE pursues this mission in higher education by setting and maintaining national accreditation standards for baccalaureate and master’s degree programs in social work, by promoting faculty development, by engaging in international collaborations, and by advocating for social work education and research” (CSWE, 2014).

Similar to how the CSWE was established, the National Association of Social Workers was developed from multiple organizations blended together (NASW, 2014). This took place in 1955. According to its website, “NASW’s primary functions include promoting the professional development of its members, establishing and maintaining professional standards of practice, advancing sound social policies, and providing services that protect its members and enhance their professional status.” The Association developed and adopted the NASW Code of Ethics and other generalized and specialized practice standards. (NASW, 2014).

The NASW Code of Ethics was developed to serve as an ethical guide for social workers and strictly followed as a way to conduct professionalism. This Code includes four sections.

- The first Section, “Preamble, outlines social work’s mission and core values.
- The second section, Purpose of the NASW Code of Ethics, provides an explanation of the main functions and a guide for how to handle ethical issues or dilemmas when engaged in social work practice.
- The third section, Ethical Principles, explain the ethical principles that correlate with social work's core values that inform social work practice.

- The final section, Ethical Standards, outlines specific ethical standards for social workers to practice by providing a basis for adjudication” (NASW, 2014).

Throughout its existence, the NASW has worked hard at developing a mission for social work professionals to follow. Like all organizations, NASW established core values, and members are expected to embrace them at all times during their practice. They are the foundation of every social worker’s approach. They are: “service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence” (NASW, 2008).

Social workers are expected to know and practice within the core values. Along with that knowledge is the awareness and understanding of Code of Ethics which state, “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” (CSWE, 2014, np). Originally one page long, the Code has evolved with the times and is now twenty-seven pages long (Reamer, 2014).

This Code also calls for all social workers, regardless of private or public practice, to stay dedicated to macro advocacy and practice by core principles. This would mean that no matter where social workers are employed, public or private agency, performing individual direct services or community based services, they are to adhere to the core historical principle, which is to serve those in need to enhance the overall quality of life for all people (Reamer, 1998).

### **Social Work Today**

Like all professional occupations, as mentioned earlier, the social work profession developed a mission and values statement in which all students and active practicing social



workers are expected to practice by (Bent, 2014). Since social work has become a profession, there have been many studies done on various topics exploring social workers' commitment to said core values and ethics such as: quality and satisfaction of higher education, curriculum of social work schools, views and attributions of poverty, career aspirations and goals for social work practice, and political involvement (Fisher, et al., 2001; Woodcock, et al., 2005; Swank, 2012; Austin, et al., 2005; Weiss, 2003; Reamer, 2014; Monti, 2002).

These studies have been done for the goal of understanding why individuals choose social work as a profession and how to improve higher education curriculum (D'Aprix, et al., 2004; Austin, et al., 2005; Woodcock & Dixon, 2005; Fisher, et al., 2001; Limb, et al., 2006). There are limitations however, most of the research that is available has been conducted on social work students before, during, and shortly after school. There is limited data published on social workers who have graduated and have been practicing for some years now.

In the US, students who decide to pursue a career in social work must attend four years of undergraduate (BSW) education at an accredited school. If they decide to move towards a graduate degree (MSW), they have to attend school for an additional one to two years of graduate school. Students who wish to pursue an MSW, are not required to have a BSW, and those who do not have BSWs, miss out on foundational course work that highlights macro practice. When BSW students graduate, the majority of them are employed at public agencies (Karger & Stoesz, 2014; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Students who decide to pursue an MSW can practice on micro levels even employed within the public sector. Some social workers decide to practice independently when they have met licensure and supervision hours (Austin, et al., 2005). The U.S. seems to have a higher number of these social workers than any other country with 18 percent practicing independent and 23 percent practicing in both agency

setting and independently (NASW, 2000). These workers however, must hold an LISW or LICSW licensure.

Students in the BSW track go through a generalist practice approach. That practice is focused on a community based level. BSW students learn about the history of social work and the core principles it encompasses. Social justice and advocacy are highly stressed at this level of social work education. At the MSW level, the curriculum still consists of social work's core values and code of ethics. Students are still educated with macro advocacy in mind, however, more advanced and specific training is implemented.

In most agencies, MSW employees are paid higher than BSW employees because of the type of interventions that can be provided by MSW workers, such as psychotherapy (D'Aprix, Dunlap, Abel, Edwards, 2004). There are many reasons for MSW's to enter the private practice realm, higher income, personal preferences, and state licensing laws to name a few (Hill, Ferguson, Erickson, 2011). The question remains though, why are MSW's choosing to abandon macro practice despite the commitment that the CSWE expect all social workers to uphold.

### **The Shift to Individual Practice**

In 1994, research indicated a rapid growth of private practice social workers in the United States (Sprecht & Courtney, 1994; D'Aprix, et al., 2004). This is a concern for many social work educators, as the trend demonstrates that social workers are choosing to help those who do not need the help as much as those who actually do (D'Aprix, et al, 2004). There is also a concern as the poverty levels during the time of previous studies were near 13 percent (Schwartz & Robinson, 91). Today, poverty levels are around 15 percent which indicate that the problem

with poverty continues to increase (United States Census Bureau, 2014). Reeser and Epstein noticed in 1987 that more social workers were choosing to leave public agencies for private practice, research indicates that poverty levels will only increase as time goes on (Reeser & Epstein, 1987). So far, their assumption that poverty will rise has become a reality today (USCB, 2014).

In response to the previous mentioned, for those reasons, research in the area of poverty have been conducted in the last 30 years in attempt to understand how students, social work professionals, and non-social work professionals view poverty. There is evidence to suggest that age, gender, race, income, and political affiliation affect whether individuals have positive or negative attitudes towards others that are affected by poverty (Weiss, Gal, 2006, Reeser, Epstein, 1987, Hendrickson, Axelson, 1985, Bullock, 2004, Sun, 2001, Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, Tagler, 2001). These studies provide insight into how people perceive the economic imbalance, however, shed little light into why social workers choose not to advocate for the poor.

Other studies have been conducted throughout the past decades to investigate why people choose a career in social work. Some studies indicate that many choose the profession to combat social injustices (Weiss & Gal, 2006). In contrast, the same researchers also found that there are no significant relationship regarding student views of poverty and willingness to engage in policy practice (Weiss, 2003). Further research reveals that clinical social workers are almost oblivious to the commitment that they are to make towards macro advocacy and that a tension exists between the terms clinical and community practice (Austin, et al, 2005).

The method of obtaining this type of information is usually in the form of questions that are geared for ranking student's attitudes or concerns of different populations, such as race, gender equality, poverty, economics, and etc. Some studies have also ventured into questions

such as inquiring about family's income growing up with the assumption that students who come from poverty are likely to want to work with those who are in poverty (Rubin & Peplau, 1973).

The research that has been conducted on poverty is important in several ways and is beneficial in learning what individuals think about poverty and the poor. It also helps identify what professionals, non-social work and social work alike view those affected by poverty. The information that has been gathered has been greatly influential on how institutions construct curriculums for future social work students (Mary, 2001; Limb & Organista, 2006; Rothman, 2012). It is also important to note that attitudes among those in the political arena that are non-social work professionals are equally important as these individuals are responsible for implementing policies for the poor (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, Tagler, 2001).

Attitudes and attributions of poverty have a direct relationship with the probability of working with the poor in the community or macro setting. With the existence of past and current policies and constant changes of said policies, social workers that consider themselves working on a macro level mistakenly overlook working with individuals but in the community setting (Loche & Winship, 2005). With policies constantly changing, social workers need to be creative to better assist those in need that are confused by the system (Healy, 2004). Rather than working to change or modify the policy itself, social workers are spending more time working to help the individual adapt to the ever changing policies.

### **Career Goals of MSW students**

Social work education historically has embodied values and morals related to serving disadvantaged and protecting individuals and families who need help to survive and flourish (CSWE, 2014). As mentioned earlier, there has been a shift among practitioners, as studies are

showing that many MSW's indicate their plan to provide clinical or psychotherapeutic services through private practice (D'Aprix, et al, 2004). There has been speculation for some time now that there is the potential that this shift could emerge a new profession of social work if not addressed (Fisher & Corciullo, 2011; Specht & Courtney, 1994; Mizrahi & Dodd, 2013), a profession of social work that does not include serving those in need or advocacy for the disadvantage.

In response to the above mentioned, further research and surveys have been conducted to investigate lack of macro interest further. Research indicates that there is a lack of support for macro practice in education institutions and lack of educators in that field (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2013). Additionally, the above authors indicate that most higher education institutions that have MSW programs tend to have a clinical focus.

These concerns have also led to studies that examine student views on the traditional mission of social work and motivations individuals have regarding career aspirations over practice preferences. Thus far, they have found conflicting results. Some studies suggest that students have chosen to practice independently or in the private sector favoring psychotherapy (Gordon & Limb, 2006). Other studies suggest that these results were skewed due to the timing of the student entering or leaving MSW programming (Haynes & Mickleson, 1997). Limb and Organista (2006) found that student's views on traditional values actually improved after graduating compared to students that were entering into a MSW program. Again, the limitations with the research are student evaluation and not actual practicing social workers.

### **Social Work and Policy in the Political Arena**

Social workers in politics can be traced back to the progressive era when Roosevelt held office. Roosevelt supported strong corporations in the US, but believed that corporate behavior should be monitored to ensure that greed did not become a problem for the lower classes (Hanson, 2011). Many social welfare programs came about from that era, most notable, the Social Security Act, derived from the New Deal. Frances Perkins, a social worker, is credited for contributions towards drafting the Act (Breiseth, 2013). She would go on to help other politicians develop policies that would protect the working class. She paved the way for other women and social workers to engage in the political arena.

As time progressed, political activism among social workers remained flat and somewhat uninvolved until the 1960s. With the start of the Vietnam War, an emerging theme appeared. Wars spark political interest, especially among social workers. More social workers held political office in the 1970s than ever before in US history (Mahaffey & Hanks, 1982). Today, that number is unknown. NASW offers a list of social workers who held public office, but supply no information regarding their current status (NASW, 2013).

In 2001, a study was conducted to measure political involvement, perceived value conflicts regarding social work and politics, and opinions of future political opportunities for social workers (Mary, 2001). Data collected indicate employees of public organizations have a higher level of involvement in macro advocacy than employees of non-profit organizations. Mary also found that over 66 percent valued putting the needs of a client before a larger reform. Overall, in the study that was done in 1989 and 1999 by Mary, the numbers show an increasing amount of political involvement, but mostly by social workers in the public sector. The study was conducted on social workers and educators, however, location was not identified.

In a study around the same time, researchers evaluated students from a MSW program that was specifically geared for the political arena. This research gathered results over a seven year period regarding Political Social Work. The purpose of the study was to measure students ideologies. Not surprising, the majority of the students held onto a social justice ideology, however, few indicated a political one. An interesting result was students political ideology actually decreases after graduation (Fisher, Weedman, Alex, & Stout, 2001). The limitations for this research is that this was a pilot program and over the course of seven years, there were only 150 participants to the study.

Aside from social work involvement in political arenas and war, another theme emerges for why social workers are involved in social advocacy on a macro level, socioeconomic standing. Brady, Verba, and Scholzman (1995) note that economic standing is a powerful variable that drives political participation for members of every social group in society. There are numerous studies that argue that higher incomes and more financial assets are indicators of more political involvement (Swank, 2012).

### **Race, Gender, Ethnicity, and Life Experience in Social Work**

Race and ethnicity has been identified as a factor in determining social advocacy. Abell and McDonnell (1990) found that people of color tend to have preferences for working with disadvantaged clients and commitment to public services. In a secondary data review, Limb and Organista (2003) note that people of color have different views towards social change than do Caucasians, suggesting that people need to come together and fight injustice as a whole. Other factors include life experience, where individuals who came from troubled or rough upbringing, were motivated to choose entering into the social work field for the purpose of advocating on a macro level (Abell, McDonnell, 90).

## Higher Education

Higher education has been noted to be a factor that influences social workers involvement on a macro level. An argument that could play into the above mentioned socioeconomic status, as the higher the education one achieves, the more income he or she is able to obtain and likely be more involved on a macro level (Cataldi, Siegel, Shepard, Cooney, 2014). Other studies suggest that education has little effect on political involvement. Weiss and Kaufman (2006) noted that BSW students were less willing to engage in social action after they did a placement in organizations that emphasized political change. These results correlate with Fisher's results in 2001 which could birth the potential research regarding the atmosphere involved in the political sphere that cause burn-out at early rates.

Given that higher education achievement and socioeconomic status play a role in the likelihood that a social worker would engage in macro advocacy or politically involved, it is pertinent to the research that income, education costs and student loan debt be evaluated.

Research shows that from about 1947 until 1974, a time when social workers were very prevalent and involved in the macro arena, America's economy was at its best. Unions were strong and people's wages were high enough to buy the products they helped manufacture (Karger & Stoesz, 2014). Since the late 70's and about the time that research has indicated that social workers have opted for more individualistic practices over macro advocacy, only the top 10 percent of wage earners have seen an increase in their income, by over 35 percent, whereas, every other occupation, social work included, has seen a 0.04 percent increase in their income. (Saez, 2013). This information could suggest that as social workers moved away from the macro arena and focused more on individuals through psychodynamic approaches, income inequality,



discrimination, social justice issues, and the weakening of social welfare programs has seen an increase.

Although it is unknown just how much change has actually occurred since the 70s, the median salary for social workers with a graduate degree range between 40 and 50 thousand a year depending on the type of work being done (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). This would seem like a comfortable income for many, however, when cost of living and education are factored in, that figure is substantially dwindled.

### **Student Loan Burden**

As stated earlier in this review, social workers are required to attend up to 6 years in higher education to achieve a MSW. In addition to that, they must spend additional time depending on the type of licensure they seek. The national average for a four year degree at a public institution in 2012 was \$23,202 per year. That includes tuition, books, room and board, and meals (Hamm, 2014). The cost of graduate education is around the same. In a period of 6 years, a student can accumulate education costs of over \$139,212. That is not including interest on student loans. If you add five percent interest and have a plan to repay the loan in 20 years that would come up to \$914 a month (Kantrowitz, 2014). This is compelling information and research has revealed that this type of financial burden affects whether or not a social worker will engage in macro practice (Yoon, 2013).

In 1980, the cost of higher education only cost \$3,489 a year (US Department of Education, 2013). During that time period, government assistance was redefining its role in assisting students pay for education. Pell grants and Stafford loans were the primary source of assistance and covered student education costs so effectively, that students left school with little

to no debt (Fuller, 2014). Today, with the cost of education annually increasing and student's ability to borrow at max capacity, MSW students are leaving school buried in significant debt (Austin, 2012). Considering wages have not increased significantly in that time frame, it can be assumed that it was easier for graduating students to pay for their debt.

### **Conclusion**

Social workers have been a major part of this country's economic and policy making decisions through the method of macro advocacy. They organized within communities, helped strengthen unions, lobbied for changes in congress, championed human rights and discrimination, all for the improvement of quality of life for all persons. Research has indicated that social workers have been straying away from the macro arena and solidifying roots in private practice in more individual base. This trend has and is happening parallel to the rise of college education, income inequality, increased spending on military and decreases in social welfare. Social workers are getting away from the macro arena and this study explores why this trend is happening when this country needs its community organizers back.

### **Method**

To examine the degree to which MSW social workers are involved in macro advocacy during various time periods post MSW, a survey design was used. This survey largely consisted of scaled or multiple-choice questions. Two open-ended questions were also included to allow for exploration and elaboration on quantitative data collected. This design was used in order to anonymously capture data from a large pool of participants currently licensed in the State of Minnesota. Participants were asked to identify any barriers that may have existed that prevented

them from advocating on a macro level by choosing from a list of responses as well as the option of providing a written “other” response (see Appendix A for a list of options given).

### **Participants**

The survey was mailed out to 4,000 participants from a mailing list that was purchased from the BOSW. Of these, 440 participants started the survey with 263 completing it. After cleaning up the data and checking for appropriate degree and licensure, 251 surveys were used.

Of the participants, 214 women and 37 men took part in the survey. The ages of the participants ranged from 24 to 85 with no particular concentration in any one age group. Most of the respondents were Caucasian (235) and only 6.4 percent identified with other ethnic backgrounds. All 251 participants had obtained their MSW degree and at the time of the study most were licensed in the state of Minnesota at the LGSW, LICSW or LISW levels. One hundred and twenty five of the participants also had obtained a BSW degree.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Prior to asking for permission from the BOSW to obtain a mailing list, an application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was submitted asking to obtain a list with the reassurance that no human subject will be harmed in any manner in the collection of data. This survey used an implied consent approach so that participants were assured that their information will be completely confidential. The survey began with consent information and the participant gave consent by taking the survey. The researcher has also participated in CITI (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative) training in order to meet all guidelines for human subjects research.

### **Procedures**

The survey was administered through a Qualtrics online survey so respondents could reply anonymously and the answers they provided did not identify them or the agency they are currently or previously employed at. Participants were recruited through email addresses acquired through the State of Minnesota Board of Social Work's (BOSW) public mailing list. Once the list was received, an email was sent out containing a link to the survey to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. A total of 4,000 participants were sent an email with a link to the survey. The survey sent out took approximately 6 minutes to complete. Please see Appendix A for the list of questions that were included in the survey.

### **Data Cleaning and Analysis**

Once data were collected, multiple choice question 11 "*What have been or are barriers to your participating in macro advocacy?*" (See Appendix A) was reviewed and condensed into 6 categories, "cannot afford to be involved" was combined with "student loan debt". Participants who chose student loan debt were also prompted with an additional question as to how student loan debt has affected their ability to advocate on a macro level. Participants who selected "other" were also provided with an additional text response to list what barriers existed. These responses were then entered into each of the already existing codes when appropriate. For instance, "my family comes first" was coded into category "no time".

The researcher then performed descriptive analysis to examine general trends (means, standard deviations, variances of responses). Bivariate correlations were also conducted to look at the relation between variables.

Finally, two open-ended questions ("*What is your main area of practice?*" and "*Why did you pursue this area of practice?*") were analyzed qualitatively in order to identify emergent

categories. For the question “what is your main area of practice?” One theme emerged, clinical practice. For the question, “why did you pursue this area of practice?” only one main theme emerged (an interest in working with clients in a clinical capacity). These categories were examined quantitatively in order to explore reasons given for engagement or lack of engagement in macro advocacy.

## **Findings**

Three primary research questions were explored in this study: 1. Do MSW’s engage in macro advocacy? 2. Does the level of involvement in macro advocacy change across time? 3. If not, what are the barriers related to lack of engagement in social advocacy?

### **1. Do MSW’s engage in macro advocacy?**

Simple descriptive statistics were used to determine MSW engagement in macro advocacy. Participants were asked to use a sliding scale from 0 to 100 percent to indicate the level of involvement they are currently practicing in, the level that they would like to be practicing in and the level that they anticipated practicing in when they were receiving their MSW training. Eighty nine point four percent of participants indicated some involvement in macro advocacy. The majority of the respondents (47 %) identified themselves as engaging in macro practice between 5% and 25% of the time. 32.3 percent indicated that they were engaging in macro practice between 0 % and 5% of the time. None of the respondents indicated that they were engaging in macro advocacy more than 25% of the time. Of the same respondents, 73.4 percent indicated that they would like to advocate on a macro level at least 50 %. Looking at anticipated macro involvement by this sample, 86.9 percent indicated that during their graduate education, they had expected to engage in macro work at least 50 percent of the time. Figure 1

shows the mean percent macro-advocacy engagement in each of these three areas (anticipated, current, and future).

Figure 1. Results showing the degree of macro advocacy involvement

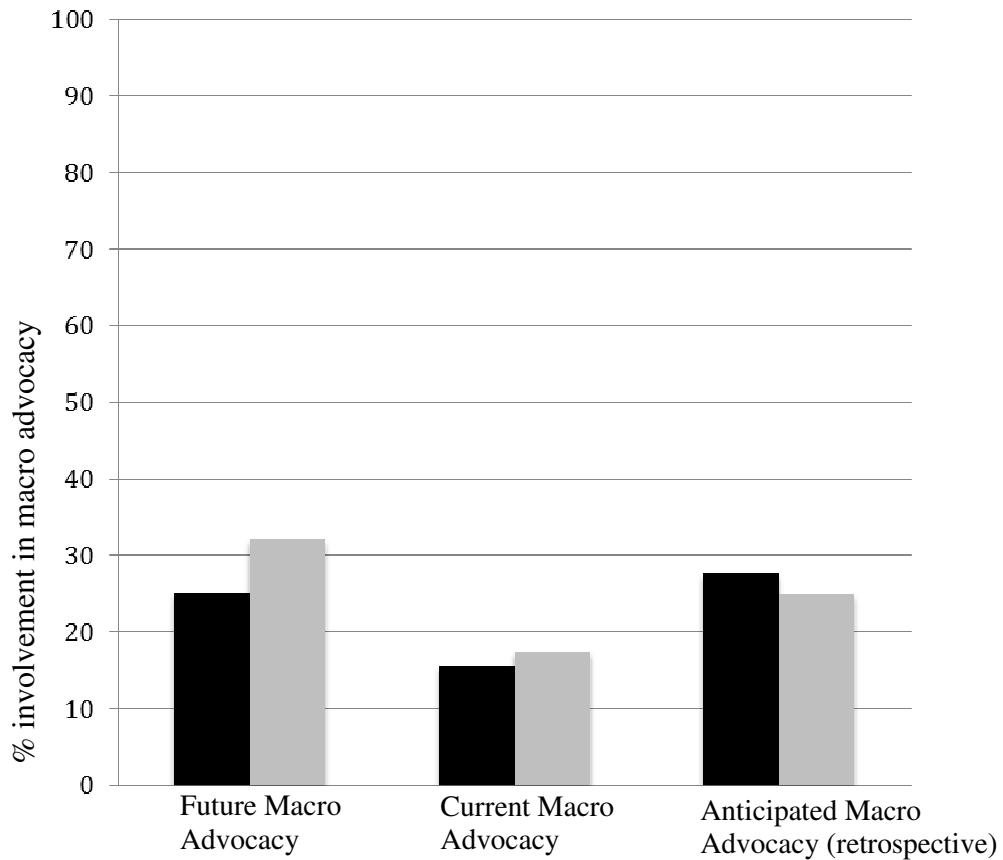


Figure 1. Results showing the degree to which social workers 1) aspirations for future macro advocacy involvement, 2) the degree to which they are currently involved, and 3) anticipated engaging in macro advocacy during graduate school. Participants are shown here in two groups. The black bar represents social workers 0-15 years post MSW and the gray bar represents social workers more than 16 years post MSW.

## 2. Does the level of involvement in macro advocacy change across time?

Simple Bi-variate correlations were run to examine the relation between the number of years post MSW and the level of involvement in macro advocacy. Results show that there was no significant correlation between the two variables  $r = .007$ ,  $p < .919$ . In order to examine the relation between time post MSW and level of macro-advocacy involvement graphically, two groups were created. The first group consisted of social workers who had received their MSW between 0 and 15 years prior (N=93). The second group consisted of social workers who had received their MSW more than 16 years prior (N=157). Figure 1 shows the mean percent involvement for each of the two groups, 0-15 and 16 plus years post MSW at three time points.

## 3. Barriers related to lack of engagement in macro advocacy.

Frequencies were computed for each of the five condensed reasons for lack of engagement in macro advocacy resulting in the following participant responses:

- 66.9 % “no time”,
- 28.7 % “other”
- 24 % “financial reasons”
- 13.9 % “no interest”,
- 13.5 % “do not know how”
- 2.4 % “not my responsibility”

Within the “other” category, participants indicated that the place that they work for does not support their involvement on a macro level. For example, one participant remarked: “*not part of job that I put in over 40 hours a week on*”. Another participant commented: “*Not a major component of my job*”.

In response to the question “why did you pursue this area of practice”, one primary theme emerged. Clinical practice as an area of professional/personal strength and helping people. Two hundred thirty two participants provided answers to this question and 42% indicated an interest in clinical practice due to their individual strengths in that area and helping others. For example, one participant remarked: *“Interested in psychology and sociology”*. Another participant responded: *“Interested in working with individuals and small groups in clinical setting”*

*“[I] was interested in doing group and individual therapy. [I] feel my strengths lie in this level of practice, more so than in macro level practice.”*

Finally, student loan debt was examined as a potential financial barrier and added with the “financial reasons” group to make the total of that category twenty four percent. These participants indicated that they cannot advocate because of their financial obligations to student loans.

*“Until my student loan is paid I will need to work full time. My full time position and the geographic area I live in are barriers.”*

*“Most of my income goes into paying off student loans. I cannot afford to donate my income to any other cause or effort.”*

Although the percentage of participants chose student loan debt, almost 53 percent selected some financial hardships that have prevented them from advocating more.

## **Discussion**

Given the results from above, it is evident that MSW social workers are in fact participating on a macro level. However, the majority of MSW’s are only practicing under 25



percent, it would bring to debate; what is an adequate amount of time to spend per year advocating on a macro level? These results contradict prior research as it shows a significantly high percentage of social work students' desire to advocate on a macro level (Mary, 2001; D'Aprix, et al., 2004, Cozzarelli, et al., 2001, Hill, et al., 2010, Rothman, 2012, Limb, et al., 2006).

When looking at the data in Figure 1, it shows that more MSW's are likely to not advocate as much as they anticipated. Again contradicting prior research that social workers would prefer a public sector job over private (Weiss, et al., 2006) Further research would be useful in determining a more accurate definition of macro advocacy and what it looks like. Also, gaging if MSW's are indicating whether they are practicing what they report they are yearly or overall in their careers.

It was surprising to see that participation by two variable sub groups had little to no significant difference in the amount of time that they spend or anticipating spending in the future advocating on a macro level. It was assumed by this researcher that variable two (16 plus years post MSW) would have had higher results across the board.

In the final question, what are the barriers, it was expected that "no time" was selected. Student loan burden was expected to be selected at a higher rate, however, in the qualitative analysis, the theme of no time is assumed that it is due to financial burdens to attend to. Further research would be beneficial in thoroughly investigating this as the researchers purpose here was to see if MSW's are actually advocating on a macro level.

Also, in analyzing the data that was provided for student loan debt, the theme of clinical practice pays more, may offer insight as to why people chose clinical social work. This is

important to understand because if people are choosing social work for opportunity and pay, macro advocacy is overlooked and the data supports that view.

### **Strengths of the Study**

This research really reveals what social workers are doing in the state of Minnesota. It shows that although they are involved in macro advocacy, it reveals that it could use some improvement. It also provides some telling information about the availability of workers to their respected communities. Although there is no outlined or expected participation minimum, the results seem low. Allowing participants to share what their barriers are is important in understanding what is taking communities advocates' away from them.

### **Limitations of the Study**

In this study, the participants are restricted to one state. Although political affiliation can vary from state to state, it is noted in some articles that Minnesota historically is more of a liberal state, although recent results show that the state is becoming more conservative (Black, 2014). With this in mind, the results may not represent the entire country as a whole, rather would only represent states with similar political interests. Also, almost 94 percent of the participants were Caucasian, this study may not be as representative in an area with a more proportionate ethnic population.

This survey was of simple design and only sought to see if MSW's are advocating on a macro level. As mentioned in the discussion, it was unclear if MSW's are indicating that they practice at the percent they do annually or all together in their career.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Considering since social workers are expected to engage on a macro level per the code of ethics and NASW standards, this research provides insight into a possible trend that could be negative for the social work profession. If social workers are opting out of the macro arena, who is left to advocate for the people? Are education curriculums doing a good enough job of encouraging future professionals to be a voice in the community or are they just touching on the basics of macro advocacy? These are all important questions to ask when evaluating social works education system. In a time when education and health care costs are constantly increasing, we need change.

### **Suggestions for future research**

Based on the findings of the current study, there are a number of suggestions for future research. First, in order to understand the percentages of anticipated, current, and future macro involvement, it would be interesting to see how post graduate social workers actually define what macro advocacy. In the current study, participants were never asked to define macro advocacy. Second, it would also be important to explore whether the option of “no time” correlates with financial burdens that social workers carry, which might explain why social workers are not able to advocate on a macro level. In the current study, there wasn’t enough exploration of the financial burdens and how they relate to the choices that social workers make in the work that they do. Finally, it would be beneficial to examine the two different groups of post graduate social workers, clinical and generalist practices. In this research, there was no way to differentiate between license types. A study designed to examine both practices would be beneficial in understanding if there are barriers to one group in specific or both.

### **Conclusion**

The profession of social work was established for the purpose of helping individuals who are in need. During the course of its birth, several boards and organizations were developed to govern it. Social workers are to adhere to the code of ethics which states, “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” (CSWE, 2014, np).

In order to accomplish the above mentioned, social workers need to think critically on how they can enhance human well-being and meet the needs through macro advocating. Let us not confuse this with community organizing and raising awareness. Macro work at times does not involve working directly with individuals, rather working for individuals on a much larger platform.

Pioneers such as Mary Richmond, Francis Perkins, and Jane Addams did just that. Although they believed in case work and working with individuals, they are credited to accomplishing major feats with poverty, economic disparities, and discrimination by utilizing that macro platform and evoking change within the system. They worked with political leaders on both a mezzo and macro level to influence policies. They helped develop and create health and welfare policies that we have today.

The purpose of this research is to point out that we have forgotten who it was who helped the people. We have forgotten who it was that developed the policies that benefit those in need. It was social workers. Despite career aspirations and interests, we still need to be that voice in the political theatre to influence change. Given the statistics and data, we are failing to do that. It is every social workers duty to speak up and be heard, not just a few. The more that are heard, the more likely change will happen.

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## Appendix A

### List of survey questions

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your Race?
4. What year did you receive your MSW degree?
5. What year did you receive your BSW degree? (An option to check “no BSW degree” will be part of the choices.)
6. What is your main area of practice? Clinical, generalist, macro, other (write in).
7. Why did you pursue this area of practice?
8. On the following scale, please indicate approximately what percent of the time you currently participate in macro advocacy?  
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
9. Approximately how much would you like to be involved on macro advocacy in the future?  
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
10. When you were in school obtaining your MSW, approximately how much did you anticipate that you would be involved in macro advocacy?  
0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
11. What have been or are barriers to your participating in macro advocacy? (Please choose all the apply) Student loan debt, no time, no interest, do not feel it is part of my job, don't know how, cannot afford to be involved, do not feel it is needed and other (write in). If student loan is chosen, an additional question will asked regarding how it has impacted their ability to advocate.