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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND PRACTICE:
BRIDGING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN 'MICRO' AND 'MACRO'
LEVELS OF SOCIAL WORK**

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**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2009
October, 2009
Indianapolis, IN**

Introduction to Social Work courses teach new social work students to conceptualize social problems and their solutions on a continuum from ‘micro’ practice with individuals to ‘mezzo’ practice with families and groups to ‘macro’ practice, which interacts with institutions, communities, and society at-large. Many of these young social work students quickly latch onto micro concepts out of their desire to help people directly. In many social work programs, this bent toward micro practice is further perpetuated by the opinion and experience of instructors or institutions. Community social work becomes relegated to brief mentions in policy and practice courses.

Some of us within the profession have become increasingly concerned about the absence of macro theory and practice in social work education. One such author states, “social work’s emphasis on therapy has become so substantial, in fact, that many of the activities long associated with the profession (such as system reform work, community organizing, advocacy, social activism, community economic development, and human capital development) are no longer called ‘social work’” (Jacobson, 2001, 52). This great divide which has come to exist between micro and macro is not a new phenomenon, but a theme throughout the history of the social work profession as social, political, and intellectual trends ebb and flow between an emphasis on the community and a focus on the individual. After providing a historical perspective of this trend, this paper offers some insight into the implications of bridging this divide and suggests the framework of Community Development Theory as a legitimate, modern solution.

History of Social Work's Micro-Macro Divide

The field of social work has been polarized by a divide between a focus on the individual versus a focus on the community since the very beginnings of the profession. In the late 1800's, two competing modes of what came to be called 'social work' began vying for recognition: the Charity Organizations Society (COS) and the settlement house movement. These two models of care to the poor exemplify the micro-macro divide, especially as it relates to the role of the social worker in the change process. COS focused attention almost exclusively on individuals and sought to provide charity and services to the poor; the COS model viewed the role of the worker as the 'expert' in the process of aid and change. By contrast, the settlement house movement focused on the environment and communities in which the poor lived by moving into the immigrant and oppressed areas and developing an understanding of the issues leading to an individual's poverty; settlement house workers then sought to work in collaboration with the poor to achieve community change, viewing the role of the worker as a facilitator in the process of change.

The profession experienced another period of conflict between the micro and macro focus in the war era between 1939 and 1945. At that time, community change efforts within the field met with resistance from many who associated community social work efforts with Eurocentrism, colonialism and paternalism, both nationally and internationally. Modernization Theory and Marxist Dependency Theory, both of which focused community development as a process of assimilating oppressed, resource-poor communities into the Western industrialized model of 'success', are seen as largely responsible for this resistance to community social work (Payne, 2005).

Then, in the 1960's and 1970's, American social work saw yet another strong debate between micro and macro interventions, this time specific to the mode and location of therapy. As a result of the Civil Rights movement, Americans experienced an increase in public awareness about oppression and concurrent trend toward engagement with government, advocacy, and social change. Community Mental Health Centers began to emerge in at-risk areas, and the profession refocused on the person-in-environment. Yet, as the anti-war movement grew so did a return to professional conservatism, which resulted in the beginnings of the accreditation of social work programs nationwide and a major shift in focus toward psychodynamic therapy interventions.

The growth in popularity of Liberation Theology in the late 1980's and 1990's directed the social work profession once again toward macro level change. Liberation Theology "focuses on movement from oppression to liberation within concrete issues in family life, rather than accepting oppression. Both personal and 'social' sin (namely structural oppression by social institutions) must be overcome by non-violent social change through personal empathy with other and their social situation" (Payne, 2005, 210-211). This required social workers to operate their clinical practices in the context of the larger society. Liberationists sought to link individual problems directly to "isms" within communities and society, thus addressing societal issues of racism and oppression was essential to addressing the individual needs of a client.

Today, in 2008, many within the field remain focused on individual therapy and clinical practice. However, there is growing consensus about the need to focus more globally and holistically in our work. I believe we are experiencing resurgence, again, of importance of community level social work. As we fight the effects of globalization, we

need new, innovative solutions to the traditional medical model of care; perhaps this is reason to consider again the more eclectic set of theories and practice approaches Fischer (1971) suggested. Mendes (2008) suggests the current trend away from individualistic practice and toward structural, systemic, and person-in-environment practice is a good match for the emphasis of Community Development theory and practice. Progressive and modern social work places less concern on the expertise of the social worker and instead emphasizes the need for the client to be a part of their own change (Mullaly, 2002). The rationale for this type of social work is discussed in the following section of this paper. I will then seek to describe the value Community Development Theory can offer to efforts at bridging the micro-macro divide. Community Development-based social workers can provide a new, innovative face to the social work profession.

Why Community Level Change?

Throughout history, an emphasis on macro level change of communities and societies becomes important for essentially two reasons. First, believing in the importance of community level change creates the opportunity to believe in the power of solidarity in oppressed populations. The Civil Rights movement is perhaps the greatest example of the power solidarity can have to empower individual people and to change society at-large. Such collective action is important because “joining together in solidarity...facilitates community members’ understanding that their individual problems have social causes and collective solutions” (Checkoway, 1997, 15). In his observations of teaching Community Development to undergraduate social work students, Mendes cites this as one of the main reasons his students ultimately conclude that “community-based interventions based on exploring the strengths of communities and individuals are

often more effective than individual casework interventions in addressing social needs” (2008, 4).

The second overarching rationale for emphasis on community level change in social work is the recognition that the problems people face are social, not individual. If the problem is ultimately one of injustice, then the solution is participatory change and revolution, not individual therapy or charity. Many of the founders of community models like that of Community Development strongly believe that we (as a profession and as a nation) deal too often with the symptoms and outcomes of problems in society instead of working to fix the foundation (Perkins, 2008). The quotation below states bluntly the pitfalls of traditional, individual level therapy and a powerful rationale for community level change as the focus of social work:

“There are two key reasons why therapy falls short as a response to the issues at the heart of the social work mission. First, when therapy is used to address the range of difficulties that stem from being poor, the implication is that these problems are related enough to individual conduct as to be resolvable with insight into that conduct. This theory greatly misunderstands the root nature of poverty and, in most instances, how to address it. Second, because therapy is almost always introduced after a specific problem has been identified, it is inherently deficit oriented and not a method of primary prevention” (Jacobson, 2001, 53).

Community Development Theory

While there may be any number of macro level theories with implications for direct practice, it is my belief that the theory of Community Development is perhaps the most practical framework for social workers seeking lasting change for individuals and the communities and societies in which they live. It focuses on the centrality of oppressed people in the process of overcoming externally imposed social problems. Social work, at its foundation, shares much in common with the tenets of Community Development. Mendes offers definitions of both which succinctly point to the similarities

as well as the unique distinction. “Social work is defined as professional intervention to address situations of personal distress and crisis by shaping and changing the social environment in which people live. Community development is defined as *the employment of community structures* to address social needs and empower groups of people” (Mendes, 2008, 3). The unique focus on the employment of community structures in the process of change stems from Community Development Theory’s roots in sociology, as opposed to the psychology-based theories of micro level social work practice. When these structures and the community’s people are appropriately engaged and empowered, the role of the social worker in a Community Development framework lands heavily on the facilitator side of the expert-facilitator continuum.

Community Development Theory is presented in this paper as a framework capable of bridging the micro-macro divide in social work; the tenets of this theory have implications for the ways clinicians view and engage with clients as well as the ways social workers can seek to make large-scale change within a community. Clinicians and other workers trained from the Community Development perspective often cite this anonymous Chinese poem to summarize their work and the goals they have for change:

SERVING THE PEOPLE

*Go to the people
Live among them
Learn from them
Love them
Start with what they know
Build on what they have:
But of the best leaders
When their task is accomplished
Their work is done
The people all remark
“We have done it ourselves.”*

(anonymous, as cited in Gordon, 1995, 87)

A comprehensive text book or manual of Community Development social work does not exist; however, the theory is well-documented in the literature by a number of modern day experts in the field. For the purposes of a more in-depth analysis of the micro implications of Community Development Theory, I find it helpful to focus on one succinct set of tenets that summarize the theory, its values, and priorities. A number of authors offer such tenets. York (1994) summarizes the foci of Community Development Theory as the organization of community agencies, the developing of local competences, and political action for change. Paiva (1997) calls the theories tenets structural change, socioeconomic integration, institutional development, and renewal. Pandey (1981) refers to the strategies of Community Development as distributive, participative, and human development. Schiele (2005) summarizes the work of Community Development as collective problem solving, self-help, and empowerment. Payne (1997) refers to developing social capital, social inclusion and exclusion, and capacity building. Each of these authors may offer their own perspective and language in the description of Community Development Theory; however, the general truths are common in all of their work and descriptions of the theory's tenets.

I have selected the Christian Community Development Association's (CCDA) tenets of Community Development to provide direction to the remaining discussion of the theory's implications for micro and macro level social work practice. I prefer the simplicity of this set of tenets and believe they offer the clearest insight into social work practice at all levels. John Perkins, the founder of CCDA and a leading name in Community Development work nationally, speaks of 'the 3 R's of Community

Development': Relocation, Redistribution, and Reconciliation. These three tenets, combined with a strong underlying emphasis on the building of 'indigenous leadership', summarize the model of Community Development (Perkins, 1982) and serve as the outline for the remainder of this paper.

Relocation

Relocation, from Perkins' original perspective, refers to the physical relocation of the social worker or other change agent into the community he or she seeks to serve. This means a literal move of residence into the neighborhood, which harkens back to the history of the settlement house movement "where staff often lived in the settlement house alongside the poor...serving people in their locales" (Estes, 1997, 8). The concept of relocation illustrates Community Development's model not as one of expertise and outsider impact but of collaboration with the community. In Chicago's Lawndale neighborhood on the city's west side, many have made this commitment to relocation, led by Wayne Gordon who pastors a local church. Gordon is the first to tell honest stories of the challenges associated with relocation but also shares powerfully the value his relocation has made to his work and ministry:

"Everyone told me I was crazy for moving to Lawndale, which was and still is almost exclusively African American. They said the people would not allow me to live there. Christian people advised me not to move there, as did non-Christian people. Black people said it, as well as white folks. The teachers at Farragut [High School] said it too. But in my heart I knew I was supposed to live there. In moving to North Lawndale, I became the only teacher at Farragut—of any race or hue—to reside in the community. And before long it began to feel like home" (Gordon & Frame, 1995, 53).

Specific to micro level social work, relocation allows for the social worker to develop shared experiences with his or her clients. It allows for a more authentic ability to build rapport with clients and, especially in diverse and oppressed

communities, can serve as a tremendous and powerful catalyst in establishing trust. My own experience relocating into the Lawndale neighborhood provides me with numerous examples of how my residence in the community enriched my ability to help clients. “A social worker can only be as helpful as the client is honest, and I have many stories that show a client will be most honest with a social worker who understands his reality” (Pizzi, 1996, 397).

While CCDA’s emphasis on relocation refers to this physical change of residence into the community, the tenet of relocation within the theory of Community Development has additional interpretations as well. Relocation, within a Community Development framework, ultimately refers to the relocation of power back into the community. In contrast to the expertise models of many micro level theories and practice models, relocating power into oppressed communities requires collaboration with community members, an investment and belief in the potential of individual people to solve their own community’s problems, and an understanding that this type of community transformation will also result in improved individual lives. One specific way to relocate power within the community is in the building of what Perkins calls Indigenous Leadership. Indigenous leaders, once empowered, educated, and trained, hold the power to change their neighborhoods and communities.

Redistribution

Of the CCDA’s 3 R’s, redistribution is the tenet most widely accepted and cited by other experts and authors on the subject of Community Development. As Estes writes, “working on behalf of disadvantaged citizens, community development strives to further the acquisition or redistribution of resources” (1997, 2). Almost by definition, oppressed

populations and communities lack resources and power. Redistribution, therefore, is essential for the healthy and independent functioning of these communities. Perkins emphasizes the centrality of redistribution because it addresses “the need for the ‘underclass’ to develop skills and businesses so that they might increase – through hard work and industry – their capacity to enjoy the resources they have been given” (as cited in Gordon & Frame, 1995, 100). Redistribution, from a framework of Community Development, requires first the identification of issues of injustice and gaps in resources and then the collective advocacy of the community to secure those resources.

While this process may initially require the assistance of the social worker and/or other outside ‘experts’, the emphasis remains on the investment of individuals within the community to solve community problems. One of the earliest leaders in the Community Development movement was Maggie Lena Walker, an African American woman committed to reversing the oppression of blacks and their dependence on whites in the early 1900’s. In a speech in 1909 she described her work this way: “We are going to see if we can try and turn the course of that almighty stream of dollar, and see if we can till our own barren lands, feed our own hungry, and clothe our own naked” (as cited in Schiele, 2005, 27). This type of Indigenous Leadership and advocacy for just redistribution of resources can be powerful and transformative in communities. Clinicians and other social workers can be influential in this process if they remain open to their role as facilitator and truly believe in the potential of clients to change their own situations.

Reconciliation

Even as far back as Walker’s work in the early 1900’s, reconciliation was a conscious component of the Community Development strategy. “Her community

development work affirmed the belief in the dignity and worth of all persons and helped to repair the dehumanizing effects of America's appalling past" (Schiele et. al., 2005, 35). Reconciliation, as a CCDA tenet of Community Development, initially focused the Christian definitions of forgiveness and repentance. Yet, the concept and process of reconciliation has tremendous implications for any social worker engaged in any level of social work intervention with diverse and oppressed people. Reconciliation calls into account the past or present hurt and oppression individual clients or entire communities bring into the helping relationship. Perkins saw "reconciliation across racial and class lines as being prerequisite to genuine progress" (as cited in Gordon & Frame, 1995, 100). This type of reconciliation requires equality, otherwise it is simply another patronizing example of imperialism that comes naturally to the dominant White culture (Perkins, 2008).

Reconciliation is especially crucial in Community Development social work with certain oppressed groups including but not limited to racial minorities and the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) population. It sometimes requires honest dialogue between the social worker and the client and the acknowledgement of the social worker for the role he or she may have personally played in the oppression the client is experiencing. Here is a clear connection with Liberation Theology's emphasis on the oppressor's awareness of his or her role. While the overcoming of racial disparities and other forms of societal oppression is a macro level task, Community Development's emphasis on reconciliation also holds obvious implications for individual clinical practice as well. Reconciled helping relationships require careful consideration of counseling concepts like the building of rapport, self-awareness, transparency, consistency, and trust.

The Future of Community Development Social Work

Perhaps the most compelling criticism of Community Development Theory and its relevance to contemporary and future social work practice is the lack of evidence of its effectiveness. In times of governmental accountability, limited funding resources, a continued emphasis on evidence-based practice, some in the field would argue that services operating from a pure Community Development framework will not be likely to secure funding. While there may be truth in this concern, Community Development-focused social service organizations do exist and will remain committed to the theory and framework because of its value to the individuals and communities they serve.

The theory of Community Development is a legitimate theoretical and practice model deserving of the attention of the social work profession. It is an interesting to examine the nature and tenets of Community Development Theory using Joel Fischer's criteria for determining the value of theories in social work practice. These criteria are: the relevance of the theory to the phenomena social work engages with, the theory's value convergence with the social work profession, the plausibility of empirical validation, the presence of teachable principles within social work curriculum, and the theory's specific prescriptions for action (1971). Without argument, Community Development Theory exemplifies most (if not all) of these criteria. Any theory achieving this level of legitimacy deserves consideration from social workers with a belief in the value of eclecticism in social work. Furthermore, Community Development Theory should be viewed as particularly significant because of its applicability with all levels of social work practice: micro, mezzo, and macro.

There is a strong and exciting future for the melding of social work and community development, but this relationship will require two inter-related conceptual shifts in the thoughts and beliefs of the social worker. First, community development social workers must be willing to shift the power and wisdom in achieving change from the worker to the community and client. Ife and Fiske (2006) developed a model to illustrate the dimensions of service provision understood from a Community Development perspective, which incorporates Perkins' emphasis on indigenous leadership and the historically colonial connotations of some Community Development efforts.

	External Colonial	Internal Indigenous
From Above	Traditional Development Models	Community Elites
From Below	Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)	Local Grassroots

(Dimensions of Community Development, Ife & Fiske, 2006)

Describing this model and its implications for community development social work, they state, "Community work has a bottom-up approach built in as a core value and central guiding principle. Community work is explicit in its agenda of giving primacy to the wisdom of the grassroots level ahead of the external expert's" (Ife & Fiske, 2006, 304).

A social workers' willingness to shift the responsibility and wisdom for achieving change to the client and indigenous community is inherently connected to the second conceptual shift required for the successful melding of community development and social work; the worker must be willing to alter his or her own role in the change process.

A Community Development framework places the social worker firmly in the role of facilitator, not expert. “Often, the action [of Community Development] seeks for the provision of change to be managed within the community. Professional work in this area involves stimulating the creation of such groups and assisting and supporting them in engaging with institutions” (Alinsky, 1971). In short, a Community Development framework means the profession would become “more responsive to a role for social work that is about organizing self-help, rather than providing direct care” (Payne, 2005, 212). Through the empowerment, education, and training of indigenous leaders, the role of the social worker is not eliminated but changes shape. A daring and modern Community Development social worker must be willing to take that risk.

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