

Strengths Perspective in Critical Macro Practice: Tentative Guidance for Transformative Strengths-Based Policy, Organizational, and Community Practice

Jason M. Sawyer & D. Crystal Coles

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to expand both theorizing and application of strengths perspective in policy, organizational, and community contexts across inter-professional settings in human services. It begins with a brief overview of the history of strengths perspective and its pivotal influence on social work, human services, community psychology, community development, and other disciplines. It goes on to bring to light traditionally dominant policy, organization, and community practice foundations within interdisciplinary human service practice. By highlighting these historically situated and presently reinforced rational, bureaucratic, and linear approaches; it argues for intentional integration of strengths perspective into macro practice environments. Aligned with early scholars and practitioners that use critical perspectives as a foundation for the development of strengths perspective, and who assert its practical efficacy in numerous direct practice settings, it affirms broadening strengths perspective to policy, organizational, and community settings.

In the interest of clarity, throughout the chapter, we use the term macro practice to describe human service activities within policy, organizational, and community settings (Reisch, 2017). Additionally, following the lead of other scholars in establishing critical community practice (Butcher, Banks, Henderson, & Robertson, 2007; Evans, 2015), many terms we conceive, such as *critical strengths-based practice*, *critical macro practice*, *critical policy practice*, and *critical organizational practice*. These

terms, defined in further sections, differentiate these approaches from their more traditional, rational, and incremental counterparts.

Beginning with a brief historical overview of strengths perspective, authors define *critical strengths perspective*, detail essential elements of *critical macro practice*, and provide examples of these distinct approaches in practice. The piece offers a critical lens to frame strengths perspective in macro contexts and demonstrates ways in which it can be applied in multiple policies, community, and organizational settings. Concluding with a set of tentative guides and considerations for *critical strengths-based practice*, such as prefigurative practices, humanization, intersectionality, democratic practice, and critical consciousness; we hope it offers tools, opens dialogue among practitioners and scholars, encourages active scholarship in this area, and spurs the necessary flourishing of truly transformative *critical strengths-based practice*.

STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Strengths perspective originated thirty years ago as a response to the increased labeling, deficit and pathology have driven approaches to social work practice. Established as a fundamental departure from the conventional practice perspectives dominating contemporary social work history, it called for a shift from a focus on problems, disease, and pathology to capacities, resiliency, resources, and potentials (Blundo, 2009; Saleebey, 1992). Strengths perspective sought to place focus on equal partnership, agency, and resiliency of individuals and communities in which social workers serve to privilege human development over pathology (Blundo, 2009). It ushered in hosts of applied approaches across various closely aligned disciplines, such as social work, clinical psychology, community psychology, community development, and mental health (Willets, Asker, Carrard, & Winterford, 2014; McKammon, 2012; Maton, 2008; Oko, 2006). Depending upon context, each of these approaches emerged based on their own disciplinary needs and challenges. Even within social work, strengths-based practices differed based on typology, mode, or area of practice, but numerous scholars and practitioners continue to develop strengths-based approaches across disciplines (Saleebey, 2013).

Given its emphasis, the strengths perspective's most vital advances fell within direct, clinical, and individual practice. Pivotal contributions have been made over time in the areas of mental health, case management, criminal justice, gerontology, and family practice (Anderson, Cowger, & Snively, 2009; Weik, Kreider, & Chamberlain, 2009). Using narrative and constructionist approaches, practitioners developed ways to honor people's inherent capabilities through their unique storied experiences promoting social justice, liberation, and empowerment (Walsh, 2013; Epston, & White, 1990). Systems-level change undergirded by a strengths perspective, although emphasized and theorized over time, proved a more elusive challenge (Gray, 2018; Willets, Asker, Carrard, & Winterford, 2014).

Many of the same economic, political, and social factors affecting individual and group level work influence practice in policy, organizational, and community contexts. At this pivotal point in contemporary history, more concrete guidelines are needed at the macro level that collectively empower, liberate, transform, and de-pathologize. Further theorizing through the lens of strengths perspective across macro practice contexts in policy, organizational, and community practice settings can serve multiple functions.

Dominant Policy, Organizational, and Community Practice Approaches

Policy Practice: Reformative Approaches

Policy practice combines policy development, policy implementation, and policy advocacy in organizations, legislative bodies, and social institutions (Jansson, 2019). Historically, dominant policy development, planning, and advocacy centers on rational approaches to change based on a set of predetermined outcomes (Netting, Kettner, McMurtry, & Thomas, 2017). Pyles (2009) reinforces this notion in her definition of policy planning as “technical processes for addressing social welfare issues through public policies and programs” (p. 59). Scholars generally defined it as set data-based analytic strategies to achieve prearranged goals (O’Connor, & Netting, 2011).

In our current historical moment, policy practice within organizations, legislative bodies, and institutions continues to reinforce existing social structures and hierarchical institutional arrangements. Linear reasoning, pragmatism, and incremental reform dominate practice settings devoted to policy design, development, implementation, and advocacy. Change based on expert-driven problem formulation and paternal problem solving govern reformative policy practice approaches emphasizing slow changes that slightly adapt already existing systems often assumed to be socially just (Karger, & Stoescz, 2018; Netting, & O’Connor, 2011).

Organizational Practice: Rational Bureaucracy, Neo-liberalism, and Privatization

Traditional organizational practice, along with a rapidly increasing litany of businesses, professions, and institutions from the pharmaceutical industry to the human service industry, produce very large profits by presenting the public with problems related to the human condition. This assures the public that we are in the clutches of any number of possible emotional, physical, or behavioral ailments (Saleebey, 2013). Privatization refers to shifting the burden of social welfare, human services, and human development to private, for-profit entities (Karger, & Stoescz, 2018). Rapid organizational transitions to privatization fundamentally affect organizational practice (Freundlich & Gerstenzang, 2003; Meezan & McBeath, 2003). These often problematically impact organizational structure and practice of non-governmental organizations (both non-profit and for-profit types) that interface with government policy at federal, state, and local levels. Community development, mental health, foster care, therapy, and various other human service industries are a thriving busi-

ness, due to the recent decades-long privatization wave driven by managerialism, neoliberalism, and a shrinking social safety net (Block, & McKnight, 2012; Mosely & Ros, 2011).

Multiple scholars discuss the neo-liberal, administrative, and rational bureaucratic dynamics dominating our current helping systems (Reisch, 2013). From this perspective, privatization allows for the facilitation of management in a large, complex system in order to increase productivity (O'Connor & Netting, 2009; Paulson, et al., 2002). Rational bureaucracy, driven by business practices of early 20th-century modernity, based on predictive management, administrative control, linearity, hierarchy, and worker alienation, perpetuates the notion of the individual as deficient and the source of social problems. These practices dominate and pervade our social systems via accrediting bodies, universities, social welfare institutions, and the broader political economy (Preston, & Aslett, 2014; O'Connor, & Netting, 2009; Weber, 1922).

Community Practice: The Business of Community Development

Community practice encapsulates community development, community planning, and community action (Weil, Reisch, & Ohmer, 2013). Neoliberalism applies capitalist logics, free-market principles, and consumerism to community and organizational practice in social work, education, community development, and various other human service professions (Casey, 2016; Reisch, 2013). Due to the neoliberal drift, the interdisciplinary nature of the field, and a host of other social and economic factors, dominant community practice approaches emphasize the accumulation of community wealth, target community capital, fuel public and private partnerships, and privilege the use of rational economic principles (Chapple, 2015). These historic currents run throughout the field and remain the dominant ideological institutional practices that combine instrumental rationality, market-driven principles, hierarchy, accountability, political neutrality, and bureaucratic management principles to address problematized community conditions (Weber, 2015; Gamble, & Weil, 2010; Weil, & Gamble, 1995; Udy, 1959). Fursova (2018) conceptualizes this phenomenon as, “the business of community development” (p. 119).

Community development professionals responded by applying strengths perspective to work in neighborhoods with the influence of Asset Based Community Development (ABCD). The ABCD model primarily centered on mobilizing the gifts, talents, and resources of community residents to address community held concerns and aligned with the core principles of strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2013; Kretzman, & McKnight, 1993). Methods within this strengths-based practice model included collaboratively developing comprehensive asset inventories of residents' gifts, resources, and talents, asset mapping of community strengths, and deep level relationship building (Block, & McKnight, 2012). Appreciative inquiry also emerged as a practice method within communities around this time. It emphasized community participation; community-based knowledge as expertise and affirmed resourcefulness of community members (Bellinger, & Elliot, 2011).

Community practitioners in the fields of social work, community development, and community psychology became influenced by these practices, and began utilizing, evaluating, and adapting them over the past few decades with mixed results (Che, 2018; Guo, & Tsui, 2010; Maton, 2008). Originally conceptualized, designed, and developed as a practice model grounded in a critical perspective, ABCD in particular, rapidly became coopted over the last twenty years by market-driven community development corporations, bureaucracy, and social entrepreneurship discourse and practices (Block, 2018). As a result, many community development and community practice scholars offered scathing critiques of ABCD, due to its drift towards neo-liberal orientation, reformative bent, its current spotlight on incremental neighborhood maintenance, and strengths perspective's "uncritical adoption" of community development theory (Gray, 2018 p. 8; McCleod, & Emejulu, 2014).

CRITICAL STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE

Given the emancipatory nature and intent of the strengths perspective, how can existing strengths-based approaches inform transformational systems level change? How might current strengths-based approaches be adapted to address macro-level practice in policy, organizational, and community settings? Is a strengths-based perspective truly critical in its orientation? Up until this point, strengths-based approaches predominantly emphasize transformative change at the personal or direct level (Saleebey, 2013; Anderson, et al, 2009); however, critical perspectives offer insight into these challenges and serve as scaffolding from which to move toward much-needed guiding practices for critical strengths-based macro practice. The strengths perspective utilizes critical perspectives in facilitating transformational change at the individual, direct, micro-level (Saleebey, 2009), but how can critical perspectives influence the expansion of applied strengths perspective in macro practice? Authors hope to offer guides to how the strengths perspective combined with critical perspectives may spur structural change.

Critical Perspective

Cited repeatedly throughout the strengths perspective literature, the critical perspective incorporates both radical structural and transformative individual change (Saleebey, 2013; Anderson, et al, 2009; Blundo, 2009; Saleebey, 2009; Saleebey, 1996). We use the term critical perspective to describe the numerous theories, standpoints, and world-views that derive from the mid-20th century to early 21st-century social thought emphasizing oppression, power, hegemony, and dominance embedded within knowledge and social systems. Critical theorists generally view social change as systemic, radical, and transformational as opposed to incremental (Mulally, & Dupre, 2018). Critical perspectives root in classical Marxism, neo-Marxism, conflict theory, and promote the elimination of oppressive structures (Marx, & Engels, 1967). The myriad theories within the critical perspective encompass critical theory, critical race theory, intersectionality, radical feminism, black feminism, democratic socialism, and others (Kaufman, 2016; Harrington, 2011; Bell, 1995; Crenshaw, 1989). What authors propose as *critical macro practice* integrates

those critical theories above that accentuate transformational social systems change to apply them across the dimensions of policy, organizations, and communities.

Critical Macro Practice: Policy, Organization, and Community

Aligned with the holistic definition of the special commission to advance macro practice in social work, macro practice integrates structural dimensions of policy, organizations, and communities within human service systems (Reisch, 2017). *Critical macro practice's* foundation rests on the tenants of critical perspectives through its orientation toward transformative structural change of systems and use of critical theories and approaches as guides. It eschews the conventional administrative traditions currently dominating organizational practice within human service systems (Brady, Sawyer, & Perkins, 2019). As an instrument, it integrates policy, community, and organizational practices within its applied theorizing in order move toward more socially just helping systems that challenge oppressive patterns, promote agency, ensure democratic practices, apply intersectional approaches, underscore a commitment to human rights, value relationships, and prefigure practice structures grounded in relationship (Smucker, 2017; Casey, 2016).

Echoing earlier themes, policy, community, and organizational practice settings are dominated by rational administrative managerial perspectives that value incremental change, and maintenance of a status quo oriented social order (Brady, Schoeneman, & Sawyer, 2014; O'Connor, & Netting, 2011; O'Connor, & Netting, 2009). Privatization, welfare reform, deregulation in various sectors of the political economy, and the rise of neo-liberalism in the last twenty-five years pervade organizations and institutions across multiple human service disciplines. This gives rise to contract services, social entrepreneurship, and the use of capitalist oriented, free market-based principles driving community development, social work, and human services as the dominant ideological institutional practice (Karger, & Stoescz, 2018). Services derived from these frames include financial literacy, community wealth building, and various workforce development programs (Kenny, 2019; Fursova, 2018). These dynamics reinforce people as clients, consumers, deficient sources of profit, in need of services to thrive (Day, & Scheile, 2013). Block and McKnight (2012) analyze this phenomenon as the market creating needs to maximize profit, and caution against the non-profit industrial complex of professionals ever providing communities with services to solve their problems. *Critical policy practice* serves as a mechanism for change that can build agency among people and partnerships among citizens and policymakers.

Critical Policy Practice

Policy practice encapsulates policy analysis, policy advocacy, and policy development within organizations, institutions, and legislative bodies (Jansson, 2018). Policy practice activities target specific goals related to the formal consistent ordering of human affairs (Karger, & Stoescz, 2018). Due to the paradoxical use of policy as a mechanism to perpetuate both oppression and human rights, policy practice can complicate the relationship between transformative liberation and oppression.

Examples include numerous human rights conventions and civil rights laws implemented alongside historically repressive segregationist policies across various social sectors (Day, & Scheile, 2013). These prevalent contradictions complexly shape institutional and organizational behavior within helping systems in the United States context.

Using critical perspective as a standpoint, *critical policy practice* involves moving from a reformative, incremental change orientation to a focus on power, oppression, economics, and human rights. Although it emphasizes the components of policy development, policy analysis, and policy advocacy, it centers on social policy as a tool for collective transformation, liberation, and empowerment. Whereas mainstream, bureaucratically dominated policy practice focuses on linear, rational, reformative change, *critical policy practice* centers systems-level change in policy advocacy, policy analysis, and policy development. Activities within *critical policy practice* are guided by the question, how specifically can policy be used as a tool to liberate people from oppressive hegemonic social structures (Spade, 2015; O'Connor, & Netting, 2011)?

Critical policy practice embraces intersectionality, critical race theories and approaches, black feminist thought, critical feminisms, queer theories, Afrocentrism, critical pedagogy, and other anti-oppressive frames to inform policy development, policy implementation, and policy advocacy (Danson, 2015; Hill Collins, 2009; Butler, 2006; Freire, 1970). These theories and approaches directly underscore the knowledge base, development, and application of *critical policy practice*. Examples span the work of Scheile (2011; 2000) in integrating Afrocentrism into policy analysis and advocacy; the works of Spade (2015), Beam (2018), and Adler (2018) incorporating queer theory into *critical policy practice*; and Bell (1995), Crenshaw (1989), and Hooks (2003) stressing intersectional black feminism and critical race informed policy development and advocacy.

Applied critical strengths perspective in policy practice. *Critical policy practice* within a strengths perspective is applied at three levels: policy development, policy analysis, and policy advocacy. *Critical policy development* involves actively engaging people directly in formulating solutions to issues that directly affect them. *Critical policy analysis* orients itself toward what formalized order needs to change in order to create a more equitable, socially just, and fair society with attention to power, oppression, and liberation from oppressive structures. *Critical policy advocacy* moves beyond incremental, reformative change strategies, and pushes for policy solutions that demand liberating, empowering, and equitable institutional arrangements that equalize power.

Various approaches to *critical strengths-based policy practice* presently involve citizen collaboration as a mechanism to demonstrate innovative and inclusive ways of shifting power from politicians typically situated at a distance from the social problems of constituents. Also grounded in critical consciousness, dialogue, and

people as agents in shaping their own world (Casey, 2016; Freire, 1998). At the *critical policy development stage*, two prevalent approaches, participatory budgeting and legislative theatre demonstrate how citizens can be involved directly in the issues affecting them and how policy practitioners can build power among people to propose and enact emancipatory policy development and decision making. Both derived within the global south, provide guides to equalize democratic power within localities (Boal, 1998; Ganuza, & Biacocchi, 2012; Shah, 2007).

Exemplifying *critical policy practice*, participatory budgeting applies democratic practices to public budgets allowing community members decision making power. Its practical stages encompass an inclusive partnership among community members and policymakers. Stage one involves a partnership of representative community members and local government officials who design an inclusive process that meets the needs of the community. The second and third stages center on brainstorming ideas and developing proposals based on existing community conditions through numerous gatherings. Once budget proposals are formally developed, the community votes (Ganuza, & Biacocchi, 2012; Shah, 2007).

Similar to participatory budgeting, legislative theatre works in partnership with communities, legislators, and officials to shape policy directly affecting communities. Although much more emergent than participatory budgeting, it involves a community or set of communities using applied popular theatre techniques to create images, facilitate interactive dialogue, and build extensive summaries of social problems to develop local policy. These techniques breakdown the traditional performer-audience power dynamic, and lessen the distance between legislators and community members. Community members gain a voice and legislators gain new insight into local problems from those directly affected as they experience community problems enacted (Boal, 1979; Boal 1998).

Democratizing practices that view citizens as people with agency runs as a prominent theme throughout *critical policy practice*. Both of these methods blend aspects of all three dimensions of *critical policy practice* and build agency in people typically marginalized by hierarchical bureaucratic systems masquerading as democracy. With an emphasis on active collaborative engagement, empowerment and liberation, and critical consciousness, these three levels of policy practice demonstrate the applicability of the critical strengths perspective in policy practice.

Critical Organization Practice

Critical organization practice contests the rationally dominated orientation of traditional organizations grounded in bureaucracy, linear structure, predictive outcomes, managerialism, and control. *Critical organization practice* generally takes place within social change organizations, yet takes on various organizational structures. The many activities, values, and assumptions undergirding *critical organization practice* stress how to change power dynamics, upset traditional hierarchical organizational structures, and call attention to systemic patterns of oppression both within the

organization and towards the targets of change (Netting, & O'Connor, 2009).

Furman and Gibelman (2013) use the term *feminist organizations* to describe human service organizations based on relational values, less hierarchical structures, inclusion, and value process over outcomes. O'Connor and Netting (2009) use the term *social change organizations* as those with missions, "grounded in advocacy, social action, empowerment, and change" (p.183). Social change organizations also assume that organizations remain imbued with the same influential oppressive tendencies as the systems in which they target to change. Critical organizational structure pays close attention to the need to move away from domination, labeling, control, and hierarchies that open the door to oppression within organizational practice and organizational functioning. Using influences from social movements, *critical organizational practice* seeks to mobilize people for structural change moving from false consciousness to more critical truth consciousness (O'Connor, & Netting, 2009; Freire, 1970) within the organization and facilitated through service delivery.

Applied critical strengths perspective in organizational practice. Within the context of a *critical strengths perspective*, organizational practice can be transitioned to integrating the traditional organizational model with the critical approach. For example, in traditional organizations, bureaucratic organizations are rooted in patterned behaviors clearly defined by hierarchy, spheres of competence, and rule of procedures outlined for rational coordination of activities (Weber, 1922). Within a critical strengths application, those attributes would be shifted to utilizing dialogue and collaboration (Saleebey, 2002) within the organization between workers and administration. This provides opportunities for worker inclusivity which assures that the organizational focus on human service delivery is met through efficiency and effectiveness metrics determined collectively within the organization. In this way, organizations become more than variables to manipulate in order to address human behavior; thus, workers and the organization represent mutual, interactive influences in which people become shaped by the organization and the organization is shaped by the workers in its boundaries. This theoretical integration provides an opportunity for the ability to have an emphasis on social and cultural needs of the workers within an organization, as well as the economic needs of organizational operations. Within this *critical strengths-based approach* to organizational practice, humanness of organizational members, democratic organizational relations, prefigurative practices, and the need to understand organizational decision-making are placed at the forefront of organizational operations.

Critical Community Practice

Critical community practice proposes a political orientation for practitioners across human service disciplines that advocates social justice, equity, and solidarity (Evans, Kivell, Haarlammert, Malhotra, & Rosen, 2014). The role of the critical community practitioner is to be an agent of social change through mobilization. It is, "action based on critical theorizing, reflection, and clear commitment to working for social justice through empowering and transformative practice" (Henderson, 2007 p.

1). Critical community practice “seeks to transform unjust systems that arise from inequalities perpetuated by dominant groups” (Brady, Schoeneman, & Sawyer 2014 p. 36). Critical community practice accepts conflict as a part of the social change process and embraces social justice, social action, and social change through critical praxis (Mullaly, & Dupre, 2018; Butcher, Banks, Henderson, & Robertson, 2007). Critical community practice centers on transforming structural systems of oppression to more liberating socially just arrangements (Brady, Schoeneman, & Sawyer, 2014).

Various theories and perspectives influence critical community practice stemming from Marxism, critical theory, radical feminisms, intersectional feminisms, black feminisms, critical pedagogy, anti-racism, and anti-oppression (Kaufman, 2016; Danso, 2015; Hill Collins, 2001; Freire, 1970). Aligned with a strengths perspective, it envisions new potentials, innovative possibilities, and different systems that emphasize liberation from oppressive structures (Thomas, O’Connor, & Netting 2011; Reisch, 2005). Many of the characteristics of these envisioned social arrangements encompass wholly new ways of conceiving, prefiguring, developing, and actualizing participatory democratic practice within societies and communities (Smucker, 2017; Bronkema, & Butler Flora, 2015; Scully, & Diebel, 2015).

Applied critical strengths perspective in community practice. Influenced by multiple scholars and practitioners that include the seminal work of Horton and colleagues (1990), Saul Alinsky (1971), Freire (1970), and various social movements throughout history, critical community practice mobilizes people for social change using various applied strategies (Tilly, & Wood, 2016). Direct action, social action, popular education, collective empowerment, prefigurative organizing, and social movement building fall within the lexicon of critical community practice models and approaches (Izlar 2019; Chambers, 2018; Pyles, 2013; Graeber, 2009; Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990; Freire, 1970). Direct action uses symbolic, violent, and/or non-violent confrontational tactics intentionally disrupting targets through the practice of mobilized demonstrations of power (Kaufman, 2016; Graeber, 2009). Social Action, closely aligned with direct action integrates advocacy alongside the use of direct action approaches (Gamble, & Weil, 2010). Popular education undergirded by critical pedagogy is based on consciousness-raising and collective knowledge grounded on the experiences of people living under oppressive systems. Applied differently dependent upon context, popular education centers knowledge in the people based on knowledge development, action, and reflection at the intersection of theory and practice (Freire, 1970; Horton, et. al, 1990). Informed by multiple feminist perspectives, popular education, and critical pedagogy, empowerment is a transformative process co-constructed through the practice of dialogue and action (Lee, 2001). Currently and throughout its history, it greatly informs collective work within critical community practice (Bengle, & Sorensen, 2017; Kaufman, 2016; Saleebey, 2013). Its aim is to reduce powerlessness, remove stigma, and eliminate direct and indirect power blocks (Solomon, 1976). It is both an individual and collective phenomenon geared toward the development of critical consciousness and mobilizing for collective action toward an overarching goal of a socially just society (Gutiérrez, & Lewis,

1994; Lee, 2001). Critical feminist community practice also offers ways of organizing an emphasizing process, organizational structure, and methods that mirror social arrangements in which practitioners hope to actualize. Known as prefigurative organizing, these practices hold organizations and community initiatives accountable to begin within themselves in representing these changes internally within organizations and in their activities (Izhar, 2019; Smucker, 2017).

STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE IN CRITICAL MACRO PRACTICE: TENTATIVE GUIDANCE AND CONSIDERATIONS

In offering the tentative guides below, we build on the analysis of *critical macro practice* and strengths perspective above in order to intentionally link the two in ways that can be applied in macro practice settings. Similar practices within each dimension of *critical macro practice* can aid students and practitioners in developing tools within their contexts in order to cultivate *critical strengths perspective* in macro environments. Overriding principles involve humanization and intersectionality; critical consciousness; inclusivity and democratic practice; and prefigurative practices (Casey, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991; Smucker, 2017).

Humanization and Intersectionality

Humanization, respect, and love for people underpin both strengths and critical perspectives (Casey, 2016; Freire, 1970). Vital to the work in which critical macro practitioners engage remains an underlying recognition of human rights, dignity, and the worth of people. Not only do organizations and communities consist of people, but policies also shape people's experiences, behavior, and access. Policy practice organizations, social change organizations, and critical community initiatives, all comprise and impact people. Humanization also closely connects to intersectional literacy in an increasingly diverse world. Rather than viewing differences and identity as unitary, static, and unidimensional, it accounts for the dynamic complexities of race, socio-economic status, gender, and various other identities that shape experience (Crenshaw, 1991). At the root of humanization lies the assumption of agency. People have the power to shape their own destiny. The *critical strengths-based practitioner's* role is to co-create spaces that account for differences, unique backgrounds, and the complexity of identities to actualize potentials and possibilities.

Critical Consciousness and Practicing Democracy

Critical consciousness is a process wherein people apply critical analytical skills to examine social reality, and design, implement and evaluate activities to changes those existing realities (Freire, 1970). Its development contests traditional banking models of knowledge development as oppressive. Based on the experience of the learners, dialogue, and building collective knowledge, developing critical consciousness privileges the inherent knowledge learners (Freire, 1998). It fosters inclusivity and democratizes learning spaces by acknowledging the inherent value, worth, and agency of people. Respecting all learning as partial and incomplete, it contests abso-

lute knowledge and recognizes intrinsic awareness of people as agents to interpret and shape their environment through dialogue and democratic practice (Casey, 2016; Kumashiro, 2009).

Within policy, community, and organizational practice, as highlighted earlier, strengths perspective in *critical macro practice* acknowledges the fundamental worth of people working in macro contexts (Blundo, 2009). Honoring critical consciousness as democratizing knowledge and action through dialogue translates to strengths-based critical macro practice in a variety of ways. Worker inclusivity exemplifies principles valuing critical consciousness, democratic practice, and building collective understanding (Saleebey, 2002). Workers, community members, and those directly affected by the effects of policy design, development, and advocacy can drive practice contexts within critical macro practice upending traditional hierarchies of power. This dynamic must be cultivated, and banking models of organizational practice that assume professional leaders as experts in organizations and institutions cannot create critical consciousness for expediency's sake (Freire, 1998). Organizational structure must support and align with the development of critical consciousness. According to scholars of critical pedagogy, active critical consciousness must be self-appropriated (Casey, 2016); however, through inclusivity, dialogue, and democratic practice, organizational leaders can act as facilitators and co-learners in *critical macro practice* spaces to foster values, structure, activities necessary for developing collective critical consciousness. Organizations and communities can intentionally appropriate environments fostering critical consciousness.

Prefigurative Practice

Critical perspectives are not preparation for revolutionary changes to policy, community, and organizational systems. They are a means to abolish oppressive systems of power within our human service systems. Strengths based *critical macro practice* acknowledges that through mobilizing the talents, gifts, capacities, and resources of people, new systemic realities are possible (Block, & McKnight, 2012; Saleebey, 2002). In this way, *critical macro practice* can move from a way of doing to a way of being. Smucker (2017) discusses prefigurative practice not as a method of prescribing how new just realities may look, but by foreshadowing these values, principles, and activities of newly just realities within policy, community, and organizational settings. Prefigurative practices call upon *critical macro practitioners* to embody the systemic vision of a just society within their change initiatives within their organizations, their structures, and their everyday lives (Izlar, 2019). This fundamentally reshapes practice in new ways by embodying new visions of society that seek to formulate new ways of structuring social life in policy, community, organization, and society (Carey, 2016; Mulally, & Dupre, 2018; Smucker, 2017).

CONCLUSION

If the last 30 years has taught the profession of social work anything, it is that the strengths perspective works and is highly effective. From the standpoint of micro

social work practice, having an emphasis on client strengths and resources through the lens of service provision has promoted client success and resiliency. However, shifting the profession's focus on using the strengths perspective within a micro practice context, de-emphasized the utilization of the perspective within policy, organization, and community practice. The strengths perspective is rooted in empowerment, liberation, dialogue and collaborative elements *alongside* its emphasis on client resiliency and strengths; thus, indicating its foundational grounding in a critical perspective and inherent connection to macro practice.

The strengths perspective has become pervasive in its usage and application in micro practice; however, its ability to remain sustained within the context of societal manifestations of change depends on its interconnection with critical perspectives. The complexities of policy, organization, and community practice as a space within social work increasingly requires a critical lens. Societal circumstances forcefully necessitate social workers' abilities to detangle complexity at levels of micro and macro practice; however, ensuring that this practice capacity is rooted not only in a critical lens, but one that is strengths-based will protect the profession from transitioning into oppressive and deficit focused practices.

Using a *critical strengths perspective* in social work practice provides the opportunity for social workers to assess policy, organizational, and community practice using activities that promote collaborative dialogue, the undergirding of liberation and empowerment, and the foundational belief that every practice sector must originate within the context of strengths perspective. This merging of critical and strengths perspectives challenges traditional understandings of the role of a social worker and offers guidance for addressing power, privilege, orientation, and impacts of social work practice. A *critical strengths perspective* presents a necessary framework to integrate and evaluate policy, organization, and community practice, thereby maximizing the possibility of *truly* socially just systems to help actualize a socially just society.

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