



Data-Driven Decision-Making in Macro Practice Social Work

Video Title:

Data-Driven Decision-Making in Macro Practice Social Work

Originally Published: 2019

Publication Date: May. 28, 2019

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd

City: London, United Kingdom

ISBN: 9781529705010

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781529705010>

SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019

[MUSIC PLAYING]

RACHAEL LEBLOND: Hi, I'm Rachael LeBlond with SAGE Publishing. And we're talking about data-driven for macro practice social work with Jacquelyn McCroskey who is a professor at the University of Southern California and also a commissioner for the LA County Commission for Children and Families. Jacquelyn, welcome.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: Thank you.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: Could you tell us a little bit about what led you to social work and maybe specifically macro practice?

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: Yes, so when I graduated with my BA degree, which was in drama, I looked around for a job. And somebody suggested to me for some reason that I might like to be a probation officer I actually went to work as a probation officer at one of the juvenile halls here in LA County and learned through working with the kids

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: that there were lots of things that had led them to that place and lots of systems that hadn't worked for them. And so I got the bug very early on to become a social worker in order to work in macro practice in order to try to improve some of the systems that serve children and families.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: So we're talking about data-driven decision-making for macro practice social work. Why is it important to understand this?

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: Well, in direct practice, we have lots of skills and knowledge and techniques we can rely on. There's been a lot of emphasis on evidence-based practice and evidence-informed practice. And we've been drawing much, much more on the background science, what we know about child development and family development over time and the research.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: And that helps us a lot as direct practitioners to know what might work in what situations. But when you move into macro practice, it's a little bit harder. There hasn't been as much research on macro practice and what's most effective. And there aren't as many guideposts in terms of how do you do the work at the macro level. And so this idea of drawing on what

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: we've got in order to inform practice at every level has become much more popular. And we call it data-driven decision-making.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: So how do you assess what works in macro practice?

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: Well, first you have to think about the fact that macro practice occurs in so many different settings in so many different jurisdictions, including so many different kinds of people. So macro practice could be within a single large organization, or it could be across organizations, or it could be collaborative efforts where groups

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: are put together to try to solve social problems or come up with better programs and new ways to do things, or it could be at the legislative or the policy level. So just defining what macro practice is gives you an idea there's probably not one way to assess practice. And then you also have almost every kind of macro practice

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: is done by groups. And so helping people stay on the same wavelength and pursue the same path is particularly important.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: It seems that's where data then comes in.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: Exactly, data is one of the tools that can help the macro practitioner make sure that we know what the best evidence is in place that we're thinking about. How do we become more effective? And how do we keep decision makers together in terms of the process of discovering new ways to do things?

RACHAEL LEBLOND: You've mentioned there's all these players in macro practice who are decision makers. And it's quite complex in relation to direct service. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: If you think about the child welfare system for example, it not only includes social workers who play a really important role, it includes attorneys. It includes judges. It includes doctors. It includes mental health therapists and counselors. It includes school teachers. I haven't exhausted the list. But that gives you a sense that each of those people

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: come with a different set of expectations and a different set of experiences. And they have a different professional lens or disciplinary lens. So if you're a teacher, your primary goal you're trying to achieve is proficiency in reading and writing. If you're a judge, you've got to make a decision in court. And so that shapes how people see the whole thing.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: We usually don't look at the whole system. We look at a piece of it. So in macro practice, when you're trying to pull people together to say, we want to create new programs to improve what's going on here, you have to be very mindful of the fact that people come with these different assumptions. And one of the few things that can really draw people together

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: to look at the same problem in the same way is data. Now we don't always have the data that we need but any data that can be used to help people assess the problem and then come up with new directions based on a similar understanding is going to be really helpful. In addition to all the people that I mentioned

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: who are directly in contact with children and families, we also have policymakers. And it's policymakers at different levels who basically set the rules for how the system will work. And so you have elected officials at the federal level, at the state level, at the county level, at the municipal or city level, all of whom

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: have a part of the puzzle. And they have to be aware of even other factors than the direct service professionals do. So data can be a way also to translate across the different roles--

RACHAEL LEBLOND: How interesting.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: --so that people in the direct service fields can say to policymakers, here's why we need the change that we're looking for here because our data shows that if children have this kind of service or support, they're more likely to not need more intensive services down the line or whatever the argument is you're trying to make.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: It serves almost as a translation between people with different roles in the system and creates a common language.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: Can you back up a little and explain how, without data, how are policies informed? Was there a different-- has there been a kind of a shift in how evidence-based practices have come about?

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: Well, I think realistically, there are always a lot of factors involved in policymaking. There is what your budget is, how much money you have available. There is what degrees of freedom you have. Is there already existing legislation that says you have to do certain things? There are who can actually do this.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: Who are you going to suggest is going to be in charge of something new? And there's just plain old politics, either politics between players or politics in the sense of different parties and different ideas about what should happen. All of that is still in play. But in the past, when you were trying

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: to advocate for a new solution, a new direction, a better idea about what should be done, even if it's going to cost money, it's going to be much more effective to be able to say to people, but here's the data we have about how it works now. Here's data from a study that's already been done in another jurisdiction showing

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: how it could work better. Or here's data that we're going to track as we continue to follow this over time to make sure that we're spending our resources as effectively as possible.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: What tools are available to capture this data, to analyze it, to distribute it to all of these players who are involved?

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: So there are a lot of tools because there are a lot of different kinds of situations. One is research, in particular research that reviews existing literature. So sometimes, you're looking for a study that says the exact kind of program we want to institute here has already been tried someplace else,

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: and let's build on what they've done. But other times, what you're looking for is, even better, if it's been tried three or four different ways in three or four different places, and so you can build on the pieces that make most sense to you. So for example, one of the things I'm working on with a lot of partners here is new ideas about how do we prevent child abuse or neglect.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: That's a hard thing for a lot of people to imagine. And so there's a particular article review of research that I use with my students and other players to say, there's some wonderful researchers who've gathered all the literature about what we know about how early intervention or prevention can

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: stop or decrease child maltreatment that will give us some ideas for what we could do here in LA.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: Wow.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: Another approach is if you can't find research or if you can't find studies, oftentimes on various websites or in historical records, there's really good information about why the program works the way it does now and what we're trying to change. So in something complicated like the child welfare system,

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: there have been numerous efforts to reform and change things. And it's really helpful to know which ones of those have worked and which ones haven't. And so if you can find that, it's wonderful. If you can't, sometimes the first step in the change process is to bring people together and to develop a document about where you're trying to go because then that builds consensus.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: It builds trust. It also greatly increases your ability to inform

other people. So just one example of that, something we've been working on here in LA is a plan for how do we want in LA to try to decrease child maltreatment. So the plan was published by county government

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: but with the input of lots and lots of people. And so it provides a wonderful platform for saying, and here's how we're going to move forward from here.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: Wow. That was all because of a need because it hadn't happened yet so--

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: Actually, what happened here in LA was there was a tragic child fatality. There was a blue ribbon commission that was put together to say, how can the county do a better job of preventing these tragic occurrences. And one of the things that the ribbon commission said is the county should pay a lot more attention to preventing

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: child maltreatment. And there actually were-- it's a big place, right? So there were some wonderful programs where things were going on. And there was some evidence about how you could approach it. But it hadn't been tried on a large-scale basis. And it hadn't been really the focus of attention of county departments.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: And so we said, all right, let's bring people together from these departments. Let's talk about what they already know, what they already do, what we know about what works in other places that that might work here, and see if we can reach agreement on some of the key things we need to do next. It was very effective in terms of the players in the room,

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: but also very effective in terms of getting our elected officials and other people who weren't in the room together on a plan for what are our next steps.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: That's incredible.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: Yeah, it's wonderful actually.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: Yeah.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: It's wonderful. Very exciting. Sometimes, what's really effective is to look at performance measures that are already in place. So in child welfare, for example, we have federal outcome measures that we're looking at that each state looks at. In California, we look at the same measures across counties.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: And so it's very, very helpful to see, because we're here in Los Angeles, to see how San Diego is doing on the same thing for example or how Santa Clara or San Francisco is doing the same thing. And we have a wonderful project here in California called the Child Welfare Indicators Project, which is a public website that displays child welfare

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: data from all of the counties. So it's open. It's publicly accessible. That also is a way to draw people together. Let's look at how LA is doing on that in comparison to how other counties are doing because that may say to us we should get in touch with the people in San Diego and figure out how'd they turn that around or we should find out more about what's happening

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: in these other places.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: It takes a village, almost.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: It absolutely does because these systems are very complicated. I deal mostly with child welfare and juvenile justice. I also work in the early childhood education world. All of

those are really complicated with a lot of players, a lot of different interests, a lot of different questions coming up from different people.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: Oh, I bet. Are there other tools?

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: Another thing that we found useful is, or a lot of people are using now, are dashboards or scorecards. They're a way to simplify existing data and say, how are our children doing? So we used to have a children's scorecard like that in Los Angeles County.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: The signature effort across the country is the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT reports, which use the same indicators and compare states. So you can do the same thing I was just talking about in terms of our state. You can look, well, Illinois seems to be doing well on that. What should we learn from them?

RACHAEL LEBLOND: So I have to ask, is there an international aspect of that too so you can compare counties, you can compare states, can you compare countries? Is that a thing?

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: There are a number of efforts to do that. In fact, one of the things that we've just completed here is something called A Portrait of LA County, which looks at the same indicators in the Human Development Index that are being applied internationally. So it gives us a chance to say which countries are ahead

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: on this and where is it that the United States and LA in particular falls. The portrait of LA is particularly interesting because it takes-- you can compare to an international audience, but you can also look within LA County at particular regions

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: of LA County and see how widely things vary within a jurisdiction and across jurisdictions.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: Seems so important to be able to make those comparisons and find those bridges.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: It gets everybody grounded. Oh, I had no idea we were falling behind what's happening in Spain or wherever. What haven't we been doing? What do we need to do? But it also pulls people together around, wow, we're making great progress in that. Remember, it was only five years ago that we were at this level. And we decided to really focus on it.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY [continued]: And this is what happens. One of the sayings that I use at any rate, but a lot of other people do too, is what gets measured get noticed. And that's one of the reasons why this idea of using data to drive macro practice is particularly important.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: It's an excellent quote. And I love that that's something that you're saying and spreading the word on because I think that's so powerful. All this data and decision-making because of the data is so important. So thank you so much for sharing your insights with us.

JACQUELYN MCCROSKEY: I'm so happy to have this opportunity. As you can tell, I'm pretty passionate about this topic. And I've actually seen it work over my multiple years of practice here in LA. So I'm really happy to share with you.

RACHAEL LEBLOND: Thank you.