6.1: Micro, meso, and macro approaches

Learning Objectives

• Describe a micro-level approach to research, and provide an example of a micro-level study
• Describe a meso-level approach to research, and provide an example of a meso-level study
• Describe a macro-level approach to research, and provide an example of a macro-level study

In Chapter 1, we reviewed the micro, meso, and macro framework that social workers use to understand the world. As you’ll recall, micro-level research studies individuals and one-on-one interactions, meso-level research studies groups, and macro-level research studies institutions and policies. Let’s take a closer look at some specific examples of social work research to better understand each of the three levels of inquiry described previously. Some topics are best suited to be examined at one specific level, while other topics can be studied at each of the three different levels. The particular level of inquiry might shape a social worker’s questions about the topic, or a social scientist might view the topic from different angles depending on the level of inquiry being employed.

First, let’s consider some examples of different topics that are best suited to a particular level of inquiry. Work by Stephen Marks offers an excellent example of research at the micro-level. In one study, Marks and Shelley MacDermid (1996) draw from prior micro-level theories to empirically study how people balance their roles and identities. In this study, the researchers found that people who experience balance across their multiple roles and activities report lower levels of depression and higher levels of self-esteem and well-being than their less-balanced counterparts. In another study, Marks and colleagues examined the conditions under which husbands and wives feel the most balance across their many roles. They found that different factors are important for different genders. For women, having more paid work hours and more couple time were among the most important factors. For men, having leisure time with their nuclear families was important, and role balance decreased as work hours increased (Marks, Huston, Johnson, & MacDermid, 2001). Both of these studies fall within the category of micro-level analysis.
At the meso-level, social scientists tend to study the experiences of groups and the interactions between groups. In a recent book based on their research with Somali immigrants, Kim Huisman and colleagues (Huisman, Hough, Langellier, & Toner, 2011) examined the interactions between Somalis and Americans in Maine. These researchers found that stereotypes about refugees being unable or unwilling to assimilate and being overly dependent on local social systems are unsubstantiated. In a much different study of group-level interactions, Michael Messner (2009) conducted research on children’s sports leagues. Messner studied interactions among parent volunteers, among youth participants, and between league organizers and parents and found that gender boundaries and hierarchies are perpetuated by the adults who run such leagues. These two studies, while very different in their specific points of focus, have in common their meso-level focus.

Social workers who conduct macro-level research study interactions at the broadest level, such as interactions between and across nations, states, or cultural systems. One example of macro-level research can be seen in a recent article by David Frank and colleagues (Frank, Camp, & Boucher, 2010). These researchers examined worldwide changes over time in laws regulating sex. By comparing laws across a number of countries over a period of many years (1945–2005), Frank learned that laws regulating rape, adultery, sodomy, and child sexual abuse shifted in focus from protecting larger entities, such as families, to protecting individuals. In another macro-level study, Leah Ruppanner (2010) studied how national levels of gender equality in 25 different countries affect couples’ divisions of housework. Ruppanner found that as women’s parliamentary representation increases, so does men’s participation in housework.

While it is true that some topics lend themselves to a particular level of inquiry, there are many topics that could be studied from any of the three levels. The choice depends on the specific interest of the researcher, the approach she would like to take and the sorts of questions she wants to be able to answer about the topic.

Let’s look at an example. Gang activity has been a topic of interest to social workers for many years and has been studied from each of the levels of inquiry described here. At the micro-level, social workers might study the inner workings of a specific gang, communication styles, and what everyday life is like for gang members. Though not written by a social worker, one example of a micro-level analysis of gang activity can be found in Sanyika Shakur’s 1993 autobiography, Monster. In his book, Shakur describes his former day-to-day life as a member of the Crips in South-Central Los Angeles. Shakur’s recounting of his experiences highlights micro-level interactions between himself, fellow Crips members, and other gangs.

At the meso-level, social workers are likely to examine interactions between gangs or perhaps how different branches of the same gang vary from one area to the next. At the macro-level, we could compare the impact of gang activity across communities or examine the economic impact of gangs on nations. Excellent examples of gang research at all three levels of analysis can be found in the Journal of Gang Research published by the National Gang Crime Research Center (NGCRC). Sudhir Venkatesh’s (2008) study, Gang Leader for a Day, is an example of research on gangs that utilizes all three levels of analysis. Venkatesh conducted participant observation with a gang in Chicago. He learned about the everyday lives of gang members (micro) and how the gang he studied interacted with and fit within the landscape of other gang “franchises” (meso). In addition, Venkatesh described the impact of the gang on the broader community and economy (macro).
Key Takeaways

- Social work research can occur at any of the following three analytical levels: micro, meso, or macro.
- Some topics lend themselves to one particular analytical level, while others could be studied from any, or all, of the three levels of analysis.

8. The *Journal of Gang Research* is the official publication of the National Gang Crime Research Center (NGCRC). You can learn more about the NGCRC and the journal at [1](http://www.ngcrc.com). [Link](http://www.ngcrc.com)