

The Epistemic Erosion Spiral: Why Social Work Struggles to Change the Systems It Claims to Serve

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Introduction: The Epistemic Erosion Spiral

Social work has always carried a dual mandate: providing direct support to individuals in crisis while taking structural action against the conditions that produce harm. For decades, the profession has understood that individual suffering often reflects policy choices, institutional power, and unequal social conditions. Direct service was never meant to replace systems reform. It was meant to inform it.

More than thirty years ago, social work scholars Harry Specht and Mark Courtney warned that the profession faced institutional collapse as it drifted away from its roots in social

justice and community advocacy toward an increasingly clinical identity, a pattern they described as clinical drift in [Unfaithful Angels](#). Their warning has proven prophetic. Since then, clinical drift has become a widely recognized pattern shaping social work education, licensure, labor markets, and public perception, even as its structural consequences have intensified rather than diminished.

The result is not merely an internal imbalance between micro and macro practice. It is a legitimacy crisis. When the public primarily encounters social workers through surveillance-adjacent institutions, and when macro work becomes less visible inside the profession itself, mistrust becomes rational rather than symbolic. This article offers a framework for understanding how clinical drift functions as a legitimacy problem that operates through public perception and the systematic exclusion of lived experience knowledge from positions of epistemic authority.

I recently published [an academic version of this analysis](#) as a working paper that synthesizes interdisciplinary research on this pattern. What follows translates that framework for practitioners, educators, and macro workers who need to understand why social work continues to struggle with systemic reform despite widespread agreement that such reform is necessary. This is not an academic exercise. It is an attempt to build vocabulary and diagnostic tools that can inform how we interrupt a spiral that many recognize but have struggled to name. The argument is not anti-clinical. It is that [professional drift has consequences](#), and those consequences concentrate in the very communities social work claims to serve.

Throughout this article, lived experience refers specifically to coercive system involvement, including child welfare, criminal legal systems, and involuntary treatment, as well as membership in marginalized communities facing structural barriers. It does not refer simply to personal experience of mental health conditions.

The Legitimacy Terrain: Historical Trauma and Cultural Distrust

Social work does not enter vulnerable communities with a blank slate. The profession carries a historical legacy that shapes how communities interpret its contemporary identity.

For decades, social workers played central roles in child welfare systems that inflicted profound trauma on marginalized families. White, middle-class social workers entered Black, Native American, poor, disabled, and culturally distinct communities with moral certainty and institutional authority. They separated families, removed children, and

imposed dominant cultural norms under the guise of protection. These actions were not aberrations. They were structurally embedded functions of the profession as it existed in those eras.

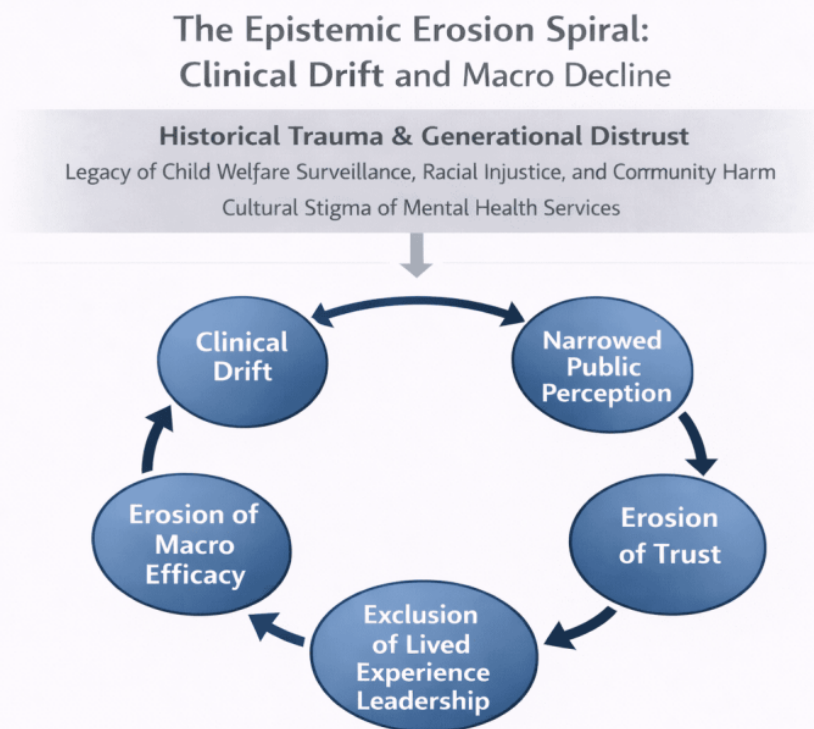
Contemporary research documents the persistence of these patterns. [Child protective services investigations themselves](#) constitute significant interventions that produce widespread surveillance of Black and Native American families and generate lasting harm even when no removal occurs. Approximately [one in two Black and Native American children](#) experience CPS investigation compared with roughly one in four White children, while relatively few investigations result in substantive services. In this context, surveillance becomes the experience rather than a side effect. Even unsubstantiated investigations seed distrust and drive system avoidance. Parents conceal information from social workers, educators, and healthcare providers not because they reject support, but because contact can carry risk.

Alongside this history sits deep cultural skepticism toward mental health services. This stigma is not a cultural deficiency. It is a socially and historically produced response to marginalization, misdiagnosis, coercion, and exclusion from mental health systems. [Research documents](#) how religious and cultural frameworks in many communities interpret distress through spiritual, relational, or collective frameworks rather than individual pathology. When mental health professionals treat these frameworks as obstacles to treatment rather than legitimate epistemologies, they reinforce distrust rather than reduce it.

For many marginalized communities, engagement with mental health services has historically led to diagnosis, medication, institutionalization, or family separation. [Scholars examining service utilization](#) among Indigenous populations note that historical trauma, systemic racism, and cultural disconnection create legitimate reasons for avoiding Western mental health services. When seeking help has historically led to harm, avoidance becomes a rational protective strategy rather than resistance to care.

These two dynamics are distinct but compounding. Historical trauma from child welfare involvement primes distrust of social workers as agents of surveillance, while skepticism toward mental health systems primes distrust of clinical intervention. As social work's public identity narrows toward clinical practice, these histories converge, collapsing social work's image into domains already associated with harm. This legitimacy terrain shapes how all subsequent professional actions are interpreted.

How the Epistemic Erosion Spiral Operates



The epistemic erosion spiral operates as a self-reinforcing system of reciprocal causation.

The epistemic erosion spiral describes a self-reinforcing system of reciprocal causation rather than a linear pipeline. Each stage reinforces the others, often operating simultaneously and intensifying over time. The spiral can be entered at any point, and interventions that address only one stage will be undermined by dynamics operating at the others.

Here, epistemic refers to whose knowledge is treated as authoritative in defining social problems and determining legitimate solutions. This is not about representation or inclusion in the abstract. It is about which forms of knowledge are granted decision-making power in shaping systems.

Stage One: Clinical Drift Narrows Public Perception

Over recent decades, social work has increasingly organized itself around clinical infrastructure. Clinical licensure pathways dominate credentialing systems. Insurance reimbursement privileges therapy services. Employment pipelines funnel graduates toward clinical roles. Educational programs emphasize clinical preparation because that is where stable employment and income exist.

Visibility compounds this drift. Students observe where jobs are concentrated and orient accordingly. The public encounters social workers primarily in therapeutic or child welfare settings and understands the profession through that lens. Media portrayals emphasize individual casework and crisis intervention, while policy advocacy and systems reform remain largely invisible.

A [2023 national survey](#) found that 71% of Americans view social workers favorably, yet public understanding of what social workers actually do concentrates heavily on therapy and child protective services. Social work's macro identity exists primarily within academic and professional spaces, not in public consciousness. This narrowed perception positions the profession squarely within domains that many vulnerable communities have learned to distrust.

Stage Two: Narrowed Perception Accelerates Distrust

For families shaped by experiences of surveillance, removal, or coercive intervention, encountering social workers primarily as clinicians often does not build confidence. For many, it confirms long-standing suspicion. As social work becomes publicly legible primarily as therapy and surveillance-adjacent service delivery, it inherits the layered distrust already attached to those systems.

This distrust is not abstract. It alters behavior. Families disengage from services, withhold information, delay help-seeking, and warn others to avoid contact. This produces a devastating paradox. Those most in need of support are often those most likely to avoid it because social work has become associated with monitoring and pathologization rather than structural advocacy.

Practitioners see this dynamic daily in schools, hospitals, child welfare agencies, and community settings. It is not a failure of individual rapport. It is a structural consequence of professional identity. When a school social worker tries to connect a family to services, past CPS involvement may make that family wary of any professional offering help. When a hospital social worker assesses discharge needs, the clinical framing itself can trigger defensive responses rooted in historical experience.

Stage Three: Distrust Filters Out Lived Experience Knowledge

This is where the spiral cuts deepest.

When social work loses legitimacy in communities most impacted by coercive systems, people from those communities stop seeing macro social work as a viable pathway for change. The profession begins filtering out precisely the knowledge it needs most for effective systems reform. Critically, this is not just about losing diverse voices. It is about

systematically excluding the forms of knowledge most capable of identifying how policies produce unintended harms, how systems function from the perspective of those subjected to them, and which interventions might actually build rather than erode trust.

This epistemic filtering operates through several reinforcing mechanisms. First, there is professional identity conflict. Why pursue a profession primarily associated with those who separated your family, criminalized your community, or subjected you to involuntary treatment? The cognitive dissonance is substantial. Macro educators see this when talented community organizers express interest in policy work but recoil when the pathway requires joining a profession they associate with surveillance.

Second, there are educational barriers. MSW programs require substantial financial investment with limited funding for non-traditional students. Admission criteria privilege academic credentials over community leadership. The socialization process emphasizes professionalization, boundary maintenance, and expertise hierarchies. Students with lived experience of the systems they want to change often encounter messaging that their knowledge is subjective or less rigorous than academic theory. This epistemic invalidation communicates that experiential knowledge is something to overcome through professionalization rather than a form of expertise to be centered in how problems are defined and solutions designed.

Third, labor market dynamics reinforce this exclusion. Macro roles are fewer, often less stable, and frequently pay less than clinical positions. Even when organizations claim to value lived experience, hiring practices privilege traditional credentials and years of professional experience over community-grounded expertise. Administrators justify these decisions by pointing to funder expectations or organizational credentialing standards, rarely examining how those standards themselves function as epistemic filters.

The cumulative effect is predictable. Many system-impacted leaders pursue other pathways, including peer support, grassroots organizing, advocacy outside social work, or entirely different fields where their knowledge is treated as authoritative rather than supplemental. Social work loses access to the forms of knowledge essential for designing, legitimizing, and sustaining systems change.

This loss is not merely a diversity failure. It is an epistemic one. [Research documents](#) distinct contributions that lived experience professionals bring to social services: survivor-centered perspectives that challenge deficit-based approaches, cultural competence grounded in community membership rather than academic study, innovative practice approaches developed through necessity rather than theory, and trust-building capacity that credentialed professionals often cannot achieve. [Studies of peer support](#)

[workers](#) in criminal legal systems show they provide unique value in engagement, retention, and outcomes. [Research on youth mental health interventions](#) finds that peer support from people with lived experience produces meaningful benefits.

When macro social work operates without robust participation from people who carry lived experience knowledge, it loses access to how systems actually function from the inside. It loses insight into unintended consequences of well-intentioned policies. It loses credibility with communities that have learned to distrust professional helpers. It loses the innovation that emerges from necessity rather than abstraction.

Stage Four: Weakened Macro Practice Reinforces Clinical Dominance

The final stage completes the spiral.

As macro practice weakens due to diminished legitimacy and the exclusion of lived experience knowledge, its reduced effectiveness becomes evidence for further clinical investment. Policy advocacy appears slow and unproductive. Community organizing struggles to gain traction. Individual therapy, by contrast, produces immediate and measurable outcomes.

This logic appears reasonable in resource-constrained environments, but it misidentifies the cause of macro underperformance. Structural change work is not inherently less effective. It is operating without the epistemic resources and community trust required to succeed.

[Research on macro social work education](#) shows that students often find macro curriculum disconnected from practice realities. They report learning theoretical frameworks that do not translate to actual policy work, community organizing, or advocacy. Faculty acknowledge challenges in recruiting field placements that provide meaningful macro experience. Graduates struggle to find employment in macro roles that match their training. Faculty themselves often observe this pattern but frame it as a curricular or resource problem rather than recognizing it as symptomatic of the profession's broader legitimacy crisis in the communities where systems change work must be grounded.

These problems are not merely curricular or logistical. They are legitimacy problems. When communities do not trust social work as a vehicle for systems change, organizations do not hire social workers for policy roles. When advocates with lived experience pursue other professional pathways, the macro labor pool loses the knowledge authority needed for credible community partnership. When the public understands social work as primarily clinical, funding predictably flows toward therapy services rather than structural intervention.

The spiral tightens. Clinical drift narrows public perception, which accelerates distrust on historically traumatized terrain, which filters out lived experience knowledge authority, which weakens macro practice effectiveness, which justifies further clinical investment. Each turn reinforces the next, and the cycle can sustain itself across decades.

Why This Is a Legitimacy Problem, Not Just a Resource Problem

The micro-macro imbalance is often framed as a resource allocation issue. Clinical practice generates revenue through insurance reimbursement. Macro practice depends on grant funding, government contracts, and nonprofit budgets. In a market-driven system, resources flow toward what pays.

This description is accurate but incomplete. It treats the problem as economic when it is fundamentally about legitimacy and epistemic authority.

Resource problems can be addressed through funding, staffing, and efficiency improvements. Legitimacy problems cannot. Trust cannot be purchased. Epistemic exclusion cannot be corrected with better grant writing. Relationships fractured by surveillance and coercion cannot be repaired by expanding headcount. Knowledge authority cannot be redistributed through hiring diversity targets that maintain traditional credentialing as the arbiter of expertise.

When social work treats clinical drift as a resource problem, it pursues solutions that cannot resolve the underlying crisis. Advocacy for macro funding helps, but it does not rebuild trust with communities that have learned to avoid social workers. Curriculum expansion for macro content matters, but it does not create pathways for lived experience leadership or restructure who gets to define what counts as valid knowledge. Job creation in policy roles is valuable, but it does not address the filtering mechanisms that exclude the knowledge most needed for those roles.

Interrupting the Spiral: Restoring Epistemic Authority to Lived Experience

Breaking the epistemic erosion spiral requires interventions that directly address knowledge authority, not just resource distribution or symbolic inclusion. The following structural changes challenge existing professional boundaries and power distributions. They are unified by a single principle: restoring lived experience as a legitimate basis for epistemic authority in defining problems and designing solutions.

Redesign educational pathways to recognize lived experience as authoritative knowledge. Social work education must create explicit tracks for people with lived experience of coercive systems who want to pursue macro practice. This means dedicated funding structures that provide living stipends, not just tuition coverage. Admission criteria must explicitly recognize community leadership and systems navigation as forms of expertise equivalent to academic credentials in authority and rigor. Curriculum must position lived experience knowledge as foundational to policy analysis, program evaluation, and community organizing, not as perspective to be supplemented by professional theory. Field education must prioritize placements in grassroots organizations and community-led initiatives where experiential knowledge already holds epistemic authority. Faculty with lived experience should be hired into tenure-track positions with full authority over curriculum design and knowledge production standards.

Transform hiring practices to recognize multiple forms of epistemic authority. Every macro position that requires an MSW degree makes a choice about which forms of knowledge count as authoritative for defining and solving problems. Organizations must critically examine these credential requirements and ask whether the role actually requires formal social work education or whether it requires knowledge that can be demonstrated through community organizing experience, policy advocacy work, or systems navigation. Hiring processes must involve community members with lived experience not merely in advisory roles but as decision-makers with authority to evaluate candidates. Compensation structures must reflect that lived experience expertise holds equivalent value to credentialed professional knowledge, not token recognition.

Build accountable partnerships that redistribute epistemic authority. Genuine partnership requires structural authority over knowledge production and decision-making, not symbolic consultation. This means boards of directors include system-impacted members with full voting rights and compensation. It means community members participate in budget decisions with actual authority to redirect resources based on their knowledge of what works and what causes harm. It means program design begins with community-defined problems rather than professionally identified needs. It means evaluation metrics are determined by those most affected by the work, recognizing their knowledge as authoritative in defining success and failure. Organizations must accept that authentic partnership requires professionals to relinquish monopoly control over which knowledge counts as valid in shaping systems.

Make macro practice visible as knowledge work, not just service delivery. Social work's public invisibility in systems change work reflects choices about what the profession emphasizes in public communications, media engagement, and professional

development. [Analysis of media portrayals](#) shows heavy concentration on child welfare casework and therapy, with policy advocacy and community organizing largely absent. Professional organizations must feature macro work prominently in public messaging, framing it as rigorous knowledge production about how systems function and how they can be changed. Educational programs must showcase macro career pathways as intellectually demanding knowledge work, not niche specializations for the idealistic. Social workers in macro roles must be visible and vocal about how lived experience knowledge informs their analysis and advocacy.

Invest in macro infrastructure as epistemic infrastructure. The economic logic that favors clinical investment is self-fulfilling. Clinical practice generates immediate, billable revenue. Macro practice requires infrastructure investment with diffuse, long-term returns. Breaking this cycle requires funders and organizations to invest in policy positions, organizing capacity, and advocacy infrastructure even when those investments do not produce immediate measurable outcomes. Critically, this investment must explicitly support the development of lived experience knowledge authority, including peer consultation structures, community-led evaluation frameworks, and knowledge-sharing networks that recognize experiential expertise. It means subsidizing macro field placements when agencies cannot afford dedicated supervision. It means creating professional development opportunities, practice associations, and career pathways that support macro workers in building and exercising epistemic authority over time.

None of this is comfortable. Comfort with existing arrangements of knowledge authority is one of the forces sustaining the spiral. These interventions require credentialed professionals to relinquish epistemic monopoly, organizations to redistribute decision-making power, and educational institutions to fundamentally rethink whose knowledge counts as rigorous and authoritative.

What This Framework Makes Possible

The epistemic erosion spiral is not a complete theory of social work's challenges. It is a diagnostic framework that makes visible a pattern many practitioners recognize but struggle to name. It explains why systems change remains elusive despite widespread agreement that it matters. It clarifies why legitimacy and epistemic authority, rather than funding alone, constitute the binding constraints. It shows how the systematic exclusion of lived experience knowledge actively undermines macro effectiveness in ways that then justify further clinical investment and epistemic marginalization.

If this pattern remains unaddressed, social work will continue reproducing the very legitimacy crisis that prevents it from fulfilling its mission. Communities already harmed by helping professionals will remain excluded from exercising epistemic authority over the systems that shape their lives. The profession will continue asking why systems change feels perpetually out of reach despite shared commitment to justice.

That is not a resource problem. It is a crisis of legitimacy, knowledge authority, and power. And it requires solutions that address those dimensions directly.