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INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITY-BASED POLICY PRACTICE

RATIONALE AND DESCRIPTION OF POLICY PRACTICE

Although there is not complete agreement on what constitutes policy practice, there is general agreement that social workers must assume policy roles and learn to perceive policy practice as among the skills of a practicing social worker, not the purview of a policy expert. Bruce Jansson first developed the concept of policy practice for social workers in the mid-1980s as a specific intervention designed to make changes in the political arena (Jansson, 2003). Wyers (1991) and Figueira-McDonough (1993) began calling for an increased recognition of policy practice interventions as a necessary continuum of skills for social workers to help clients at larger systems levels. There is now a clearer understanding that social workers may be called on to utilize policy practice skills, regardless of their specialized areas of interest. For the purpose of this book, policy practice is defined as a change approach that uses advocacy and community practice techniques to change programs and policies at multiple systems levels, targeting communities, local, state, and federal governments, agencies, bureaucracies, and the courts.

Conceptualizing Policy Practice

There are many ways that authors have conceptualized the various components of policy practice; as political social work, class advocacy, political advocacy, community practice, social action, and legislative advocacy, to

name a few. In 1991, Wyers attempted to integrate some of the micro- and macro-approaches to policy practice by defining a model that included a continuum of policy practice skills, including (a) a policy expert—one who conducts policy analysis and provides expert knowledge and skills pertaining to the policy arena, (b) the social worker as a change agent working in an external environment, meaning that she or he works outside of her or his organization advocating for legislative initiatives, working in policy development, or working for change in services, (c) working for change in his or her own agency, or (d) being a policy conduit for change, meaning being an expert in an area and providing education on needed changes to policymakers. Wyers concluded by stating that "all social workers need to participate in the modification of social policy that is harmful to clients and the elimination of policy deficits by working for new policy" (Wyers, 1991, p. 246). McInnis-Dittrich (1994) agreed that the meaning of professional social work, by definition, means integrating social welfare policy and social work practice.

However, most definitions of policy practice are largely defined by interventions designed to change policies in legislative, agency, or community settings from a largely macro practice perspective. Figueira-McDonough (1993) defines policy practice as the formal process of influencing both legislative and judicial decision making, as well as constituency-based patterns of influence in communities and organizations. She outlines four methods of policy practice in these arenas: legislative advocacy, reform through litigation, social action, and policy analysis. Jansson (2003) defines policy practice as efforts to change policies in legislative, agency, and community settings. He further differentiates policy advocacy from policy practice by stating that policy advocacy focuses on performing policy practice methods with powerless groups, to improve their resources and opportunities. However, he admits that he uses the terms interchangeably throughout much of his discussion.

A related term, which has been used repeatedly in the literature is, *political social work*. Political social work has been defined differently depending on the author. In a discussion of these differing definitions, Fisher (1995)

suggested that "policy implementation, electoral activity, community organizing—macro methods—were what most people in the profession understood as political social work" (p. 198). This approach to political social work focuses largely on a more traditional sense of politics, such as "legislation, the executive branch, interest groups, lobbying, working with the media, and running for office" (Hoefer, 1999, p. 75). Contrary to this approach is a more integrated approach that sees all social work as political social work, regardless of what level of practice, micro or macro, one focuses her or his interventions. For this integrated approach, political social work is seen as social work based on a politicized understanding of social welfare, and methods of practice are integrated. Thus, the goal is to train politicized social workers who see issues of power and justice as central to understanding and addressing social problems, as well as confronting client needs.

Many authors have used the term *advocacy* in their definition of what I consider policy practice skills. Let me first emphasize that advocacy related to policy practice must be distinguished from case advocacy because of the systemic nature of the change. For example, if a social worker has a client who experiences a problem maneuvering through the maze of social programs and we assist her or him in gaining resources, then we are performing case advocacy. But if we see client after client having the same problem, then it becomes a waste of valuable time and resources to individually advocate for each client. That is when policy practice comes into play. We want to advocate making a policy change so that all of the clients can receive these services, and we do not have the time to advocate for each one of them individually. It is time to perform policy practice.

But even within the description of class advocacy, there is a rather complex array of definitions of various attributes of advocacy. For example, Schneider and Lester (2001) differentiate in great detail their definition of advocacy as the "mutual representation of a client or clients or a cause in a forum, attempting to systematically influence decision making in an unjust or unresponsive system[s]" (p. 65) from other forms of social work practice. For example, they suggest that advocacy is a form of social ac-

tion, incorporating many of the concepts of system level change and influence, but it is specifically responsible to a client or client system in a forum within an exclusive and mutual relationship. Distinguishing their definition from community organizing (CO), they state that CO is primarily an organizing and capacity-building function with emphasis on collective support through education and participation to address common concerns.

Ezell (2001) created a typology of different forms of advocacy, indicating that there was actually little variation in their meaning, although scholars have seemed to have a preference for one or the other on a theoretical level. He includes class advocacy, an intervention on behalf of a group of clients who share the same problem; systems advocacy, changing policies and practices affecting all persons in a certain group; policy advocacy, efforts to influence those who work with laws, public programs, or court decisions; political advocacy, which appears the same as class, policy, and systems advocacy; legislative advocacy, promoting and influencing legislation; and community advocacy, organizing and educating on behalf of communities who have similar problems or needs but may not be known to each other.

It is academically important to build theories and methods around various policy practice and advocacy definitions. Rapid Reference 1.1 summarizes the various concepts of what we have included under the larger

≡ *Rapid Reference 1.1*

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Concepts Used to Describe Policy-Related Social Work

Policy practice	Legislative advocacy
Policy advocacy	Reform through litigation
Political advocacy	Policy analysis
Political social work	Social action
Class advocacy	Community organizing
System advocacy	Community development

rubric of political social work. Much of this work targets advocacy at the legislative, judicial, community, and agency settings. It also largely differentiates itself from community techniques of community organizing, community development, and social action (with the exception of Figueira-McDonough). For the purposes of skill building, it is important to use whatever techniques work for a given problem with a given population. And while I think the theory building that has occurred at the academic level of policy practice and advocacy is important, I am more interested in pursuing the next level of how to reach the goals to change a system that needs to be changed, and learning to use whatever skills are necessary and appropriate to make those changes occur. The goal of this book, therefore, is to move away from theoretical and conceptual discussions of policy practice and focus on the skill sets necessary to put it into practice. In some instances, methods and skills of community work are necessarily integrated into more traditional views of policy practice, because mobilizing the community is part of how to reach people, and people are needed in order to work in policy practice at a grassroots level.

WHY COMMUNITY-BASED POLICY PRACTICE?

In this book, policy practice encompasses all of the work that social workers do to try to change systems for the betterment of their clients, neighborhoods, and communities. The focus in this book, however, is on the specific skills needed to change policy from a community-based, grassroots perspective. While most policy practice is discussed in the realm of the larger political system, there is a need to look at policy practice from the ground up. Policy at all levels affects people, their neighborhoods, and their local communities. Regardless of where the policy originates, be it local government, a school system, an agency, the county, the state, or in the courts, it ultimately affects individual people. Oftentimes we believe that policy is too large, too complex, and too removed from the people for us to be able to have an influence. But the fact is that most policy that affects our day-to-day lives is very much within the realm of our influence.

After 12 years of working with various task groups on specific local, state, and federal policies, it has become abundantly clear that with the proper planning and skills, a small group of motivated people can make major changes that can positively impact entire communities. There are generic skills that can be used to target any system of change, including mobilizing the community around an issue, using the media to inform both the public and decision makers of problems or policy solutions, and using technology to get the word out to as many people as possible about issues that need to be addressed. Other skills are more particular to a certain target system, such as testifying before local and state committees or participating in grassroots campaign movements. The point is that individuals and members of local communities are very powerful in influencing the decisions that affect our daily lives, regardless of the level of government or bureaucracy from which they stem. But we need a skill set, a way to plan the changes to make them effective, and an understanding of who to target to make the change, and that is the primary focus of this book.

POLICY PRACTICE IN THE COMMUNITY AS A RESPONSE TO DEVOLUTION

This book emphasizes the community as a good beginning point to do many different types of policy practice. It is important to understand how the political climate has changed over the last 20 years that makes it more important to target local levels of government and to use grassroots approaches to target higher and more distant public officials. Linhorst (2002) recounts the history of federalism, which has given way to the decentralization of decision making to the local and state levels of government. Federalism is a system of government that divides responsibilities of governing among various levels of government. In the United States, responsibilities have traditionally been divided horizontally across the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, but also vertically among the federal, state, and local levels of government. In his historical account of federalism in this country, Linhorst explains that prior to the Great

Depression U.S. federalism was characterized by dual federalism, where clear roles were assigned to the federal and state governments, with states holding considerable power. Cooperative federalism developed after the Depression, however, because state governments needed assistance in response to adverse economic conditions. Federal power and control over programs increased drastically during this time.

Throughout the 1960s cooperative dualism existed in this country, until the current state of federalism was initiated by President Nixon. Believing that the federal government had grown too large, he provided block grants and general revenue-sharing dollars to local governments, increased uniformity in the food stamp program across states, and initiated supplemental security income. This state of federalism was dubbed "New" federalism. It did not decrease revenues to the state, but gave them more flexibility to create programs that were locally appropriate. But President Reagan took the concept of new federalism to another level, by supporting less government at all levels, devolving federal power to the states, and at the same time cutting federal social programs and reducing funds originally targeted to state and local governments. The 104th Congress (mid-1990s) took devolution even further by seeking to eliminate federal entitlement programs, reducing overall federal spending even further, and cutting taxes at the same time. Although most of the responsibility for implementing social programs has now shifted to the states, the federal government continues to be the primary funder. Much of the decision-making authority now rests with state and local governments, making it easier for agencies to create their own rules and regulations based on local mandates. Thus, the decision-making authority is much closer to home.

The social work literature is replete with research on how the way devolution has been handled has hurt the poor, decreased protection of oppressed populations, and increased the inequities in social protection between the states. However, devolution also had the consequence of bringing much of the power base and decision making back to state and local governments. Whereas in the past, policy practitioners spent much of their time working at the federal level of government, the changing na-

ture of federalism requires social workers to adapt their policy practice to the state and local levels. One of the consequences of the new federalism is that although few initiatives have been enacted by the federal government that have helped our constituents, considerable gains have been made at the state level. Unfortunately, the research does not indicate that the new federalism has helped promote social equity or justice at the local levels, yet federal oversight is still needed to ensure that local communities meet the needs of their citizens.

With the state of new federalism, it is unlikely that the federal government is willing to provide much oversight for citizen protection. However, because many problems are community based, meaning that the problems—and often the solutions—can be found in our own communities, social workers are in a unique position to hold local communities responsible as well. As Linhorst (2002) points out, "the current phase of new federalism has devolved increased responsibility to the states, and social workers, as we have done historically, need to adapt our approach to promoting social justice" (p. 205). What social workers need is the knowledge and skills to be able to identify problems, seek out alternative solutions, and make changes that can assist as many community members as possible. Although interventions at the federal level are still important, it is an opportune time to turn our attention to state and local policies because they now have much of the decision-making authority. They are closer to home, are easier to communicate with, have a better understanding of the local problems that we encounter, and have an increased likelihood of successful policy interventions at a more local level.

POLICY PRACTICE AND THE ETHICS OF THE PROFESSION

The code of ethics is quite clear on our responsibility as a profession to perform policy practice activities. The ethical responsibility of social workers to engage in social and political change efforts is clearly set out

in section 6.04a of the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (1999):

> Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully. Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice.

There are six principles in the code of ethics from which the standards derive. Rapid Reference 1.2 delineates the six principles in the code. Once we realize the importance of advocating on the part of our clients, neighbors, and communities, it becomes clear that each of these six principles has something to do with policy practice. For example, principle 1 states that the primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems. But how can we really address social problems if we do not practice

≡ *Rapid Reference 1.2*
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Ethical Principles in the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (1999)

1. Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.
2. Social workers challenge social injustice.
3. Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.
4. Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships.
5. Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.
6. Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.

policy? A personal problem becomes a social problem when it affects a large number of people. If a problem is affecting a large number of people, then something is amiss. Either a community is having economic problems of some sort that are affecting a large number of people, a policy that is supposed to support families is not working properly, or an agency that is supposed to supply a certain service is not functioning effectively. All of these issues point to a target system that needs an intervention of some sort. This is policy practice.

The goal of social justice as part of both the social work code of ethics and our profession's person-in-environment perspective has been a challenge for social workers. Although social work as a profession has made a commitment to social justice for the families we work with, social workers are often challenged because they lack skills in the strategies and techniques of policy practice needed to realize policy change. As Gordon (1994) points out, by not taking a leadership role in the formulation and implementation of the policies that affect our clients, the profession's person-in-environment perspective is largely missing from programs and services. Learning policy practice methods and skills is seen as a "necessary means to the implementation of the neglected goal of social justice" (Figueira-McDonough, 1993, p. 180). The integration of policy practice methods emphasizing social and organizational change with direct practice content is a challenge. But this integration is essential to broaden the influence that social service workers have to promote positive impacts in our clients' lives.

DOES POLICY PRACTICE REALLY WORK?

Many people, and social workers are no exception, feel helpless to try to make changes in the systems we work with, whether it is in our own agency or in a legislative body. But this book provides evidence that, with good planning and the right skill sets, changes can and do occur. The methods outlined in this book have been utilized since 1992 with social work students, and the results have been impressive (Rocha & Johnson, 1997).

Throughout this book, examples of projects that have both prevailed and failed are given, with tips on why they did or did not work.

This book is an outgrowth of not only years of teaching, but also evaluating whether the planning model works. In 2000, graduates who had taken the course and had formed task groups and used the skills in this book to try to make changes in their communities were surveyed 6 months after graduation. These graduates were compared with graduates who had taken other advanced policy practice courses, but did not have the experience of going into the community and using the planned change method (Rocha, 2000). The study assessed three dimensions of policy-related activities: (a) whether policy practice activities were valued as important tasks, (b) whether graduates felt competent in doing policy practice activities, and (c) how active the graduates were in actually performing policy practice activities since they graduated. All graduates reported valuing policy practice equally. Those with policy practice experience were significantly more likely to feel competent using the media to communicate ideas to the public, plan and implement a planned change effort, use the Internet to find policy-related information, and create computer-generated information (e.g., brochures, newsletters). Students who had policy practice experience were also significantly more likely to have worked on a specific change effort since graduation, become a member of a committee or coalition, and were more likely to organize policy activities. Thus, whether a student or practitioner, I urge the reader to put the ideas in this book to use. Activities at the end of each chapter provide added opportunities for practice.

This book provides a policy practice planning process that is familiar to both community social workers and clinicians alike because it uses similar steps as the problem-solving models that are often used with individual clients. It provides step-by-step instructions on how to put a plan into action. Each chapter describes detailed skills that can be used to bring awareness to problems, utilize resources to deal with problems, and put into action a plan to solve the problems. Many skills can be used at several levels, from local community issues, such as transportation and child care, to larger issues,

such as changing laws to create more equitable distribution of resources. Each chapter presents new skill sets, depending on the system requiring change. There are many examples and illustrations, in the hope that the more we practice these skills, the more competent we feel to utilize them.

The next chapter outlines the planning stage in great detail. The following four chapters detail specific skill sets that can be used across targeted systems for change (e.g., utilizing the media, organizing coalitions). The last four chapters look at different potential target systems and provide in-depth information on particular strategies needed to intervene within these systems (e.g., local agencies, legislature). Thus, some skills are specific to a particular target system, but many of the skills from the previous chapters can be used across targeted systems. The important thing to remember is that each problem and each strategy should be analyzed carefully to assess what will likely lead to the best outcome for your clients.

SUMMARY

In an age of devolution of both resources and decision making down to the local level, social workers have greater opportunities to effect change, but also increased challenges, due to decreased resources. Policy practice skills are necessary to address these challenges and seize opportunities to make substantial differences in the lives of our clients. The skills and target systems discussed in the next chapters will provide easy-to-follow instructions on how to strategize changes in many different systems.

🐦 TEST YOURSELF 🐦

1. Provide one example of how the ethical principle of "respecting the inherent dignity and worth of the person" could be linked to policy practice.

2. Identify a social problem of interest to you. Trace backward the assistance that people are given. Where does the funding come from?

3. Identify a policy that an agency you are affiliated with has. Where does the policy originate? Is it formal or informal?

4. **Think about a specific client group that you work with. What are some of the problems they face? Do several clients face the same problems?**

5. **Remember the discussion on the difference between case and class advocacy. How different would it be to try to solve a problem for an entire group of clients, rather than one at a time?**

6. **Why has the goal of social justice in the profession's "person-in-environment perspective" been such a challenge for social workers?**

7. **Discuss the opportunities and challenges of devolution.**

8. **How has devolution impacted the way social workers must work in the policy practice arena?**

9. **Policy practice methods can be used at the local level as well as the federal level.** True or False?

10. **Policy practice methods should only be used in the legislative arena and are inappropriate for use in judicial decision making.** True or False?

Answers: 9. True; 10. False