

Chapter 1

Social Welfare Policy as a Form of Social Justice

Ira Colby

How might you engage in activities that will influence values that result in policy choices and outcomes that reflect your values?

Introduction

Social justice is organized on a continuum of philosophies that range from conservative and individualistic in nature to the liberal, communal viewpoint. In other words, just as President Barack Obama subscribes to a particular model of social justice, so too did former President George W. Bush. We must recognize that we may disagree with one particular philosophy, but that does not negate the fact that every person has her or his particular perspective of social justice. A social policy is a direct, public expression of the dominant, accepted model of social justice. For example, the maximum SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, aka “food stamps”) payment was \$526 for a three-person family between October 2011 and September 2012; this translates to approximately \$17 per day. Do you feel this is a fair and just amount? Or, is this too much financial support that only encourages dependency? Or, is this amount too low given the costs to purchase a basic nutritionally sound diet? Can the United States afford to increase funding to SNAP? Some might say “no” because of the growing deficit and national debt. Yet others might say “yes” because we are choosing to fund SNAP at a lower level while funding other programs at higher levels. In other words, policy outcomes involve choices made through political decisions based on the dominant values.

The core mission of the social work profession is the promotion of social, economic, and political justice for all people. Communities built on the principles of justice provide its members with opportunities to fully participate and share benefits in a fair and equitable manner. Although this

is a noble ideal, the reality is very different, as disparities continue to plague people and nations around the world.

In 1978, more than 130 nations met under the leadership of the World Health Organization (WHO) at the International Conference of Alma-Ata, and addressed one global social issue—health care. The group envisioned that by the year 2000 a global effort would result in health care for all people. The conference’s report forthrightly stated, “Inequality in the health status of people, particularly between developed and developing countries, as well as within countries, is politically, socially, and economically unacceptable” (Declaration of Alma-Ata, 1978).

In 2000, the United Nations adopted the Millennium Declaration that resulted in eight development areas with the ultimate purpose to eliminate extreme poverty, hunger, illiteracy, and disease by 2015 (United Nations, 2000 and United Nations, 2011a).

Clearly, there have been—and continue to be—significant global efforts, with laudable goals, to close the gaps between the rich and poor. Even so, the gulf that separates the so-called haves and have-nots remains wide and deep, reported as follows:

- WHO points to progress that has been made in achieving the health-related Millennium Development Goals, yet in 2010, they found that 115 million children under 5 years of age worldwide are underweight (World Health Organization Statistics, 2011a, p. 12).
- UNAIDS writes that “The year 2011 marks 30 years of AIDS. In that time, AIDS has claimed more than 25 million lives and more than 60 million people have become infected with HIV. Still, each day, more than 7,000 people are newly infected with the virus, including 1,000 children” (United Nations, March 2011b, p. 1).
- In 2011, 43 percent of American households, approximately 127.5 million people, are considered to be “liquid-asset poor” (Eichler, 2012).
- The WHO reports that, in 2008, noncommunicable diseases continued to increase to 36 million persons, up from 35 million in 2004 (World Health Organization, p. 9).
- Measles, one of the leading causes of child death, dropped by 78 percent worldwide between 2000 and 2008; yet, in 2008, there were 164,000 measles deaths globally—nearly 450 deaths every day or 18 deaths every hour (World Health Organization, 2011b, p. 1).
- The World Bank reports that extreme poverty—living on \$1.50 or lower per day—dropped worldwide to 22 percent of the developing world’s population or 1.29 billion people, compared to 43 percent in 1990 and 52 percent in 1981 (World Bank, 2012, p. 1).

The human, economic, and societal costs of ill health and poverty are immense. Millions of people unnecessarily die prematurely from preventable and curable diseases, while poverty continues to anchor people in

social ills that are unimaginable. With relatively little costs for simple interventions, people could live longer, more productive lives. But for millions of people worldwide, in the north and south, in the east and west, justice and fairness remain unattainable and are mere abstracts in their world. Data on many indicators, such as poverty, educational attainment, literacy, safe housing, clean water, life expectancy, and violence, lead to a common conclusion: True justice is far from being realized.

Social workers confront horrific problems on a daily basis that reflect the broad range of social issues that plague and threaten the lives of people and weaken our civil structures. Central to the social work profession's mission is its work with and on behalf of the most vulnerable, at-risk, and marginalized persons in our communities. Reamer (1993) writes that social workers confront the most compelling issues of our time by working with clients, and from these individual and collective experiences a unique perspective grows (p. 195). Social workers are able to translate this practice wisdom into a powerful tool to influence public policy. Simply stated, practice informs policy by shaping its form and structure. By including policy practice in one's work, according to Hagen (2000), social workers are able "to serve clients more effectively and to promote justice at all government levels" (p. 555).

Policy creates a community's context of justice in how it approaches the provision of social services. Public and private organizations, nonprofit and voluntary associations implement policies, which in turn are "experienced by individuals and families" (Jansson, 1999, p. 1). Similarly, policy is vital to the social worker by specifying the type and level of service the practitioner is able to provide. Policy is a formal statement articulating rules and regulations that reflect values, beliefs, data, traditions, discussions, debates, and compromises of the body politic. Policy carries out multiple functions, ranging from crafting the broad framework in which a program or service evolves to detailing the available services.

Social welfare policies, which are a subset of the broader social policy arena, focus on issues that are controversial and the epicenter for many debates. Discussions on radio call-in shows and television panel shows are replete with welfare matters, ranging from immigration and border issues to women's health care and reproductive rights. The 2012 presidential primary race was filled with attacks on social issues and policies directed to amend the growing inequalities faced by the young and old and, in particular, women. Sadly, the tenor of the arguments and controversies themselves are not new. Throughout American history, political leaders have staked out their positions relating to welfare, such as the following:

- Benjamin Franklin: "I am for doing good for the poor, but I differ in opinion about the means. . . . The more public provisions were made for the poor, the less they provided for themselves and the poorer they became. . . . On the contrary, the less that was done for them, the more they did for themselves." (*The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*)

- President Franklin Roosevelt: “The Federal Government must and shall quit this business of relief. I am not willing that the vitality of our people be further sapped. . . . We must preserve not only the bodies of the unemployed from destitution but also their self-respect, their self-reliance and courage and determination.” (State of the Union address)
- President John F. Kennedy: “Welfare . . . must be more than a salvage operation, picking up the debris from the wreckage of human lives. Its emphasis must be directed increasingly toward prevention and rehabilitation. . . . Poverty weakens individuals and nations.” (Woolley and Peters)
- President Lyndon B. Johnson: “Unfortunately, many Americans live on the outskirts of hope—some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both. Our task is to help replace their despair with opportunity. This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America. I urge this Congress and all Americans to join with me in that effort.” (public papers)
- President Ronald Reagan: “I have never questioned the need to take care of people who, through no fault of their own, can’t provide for themselves. The rest of us have to do that. But I am against open-ended welfare programs that invite generation after generation of potentially productive people to remain on the dole; they deprive the able-bodied of the incentive to work and require productive people to support others who are physically and mentally able to work while prolonging an endless cycle of dependency that robs men and women of their dignity.” (RonaldReagan.com)

The social work profession, through its professional membership associations, has a long history of engaging in policy development to provide justice-based social welfare policies. As Haynes and Mickelson (2000) write, “although social workers have been influential in the political arena, politics has not consistently been a central arena for social work practice. Consequently, a historic and ongoing dynamic tension exists” (p. 2). A common refrain among social workers is that “I just don’t have the time for policy work.” This is certainly understandable for the individual who is assigned a caseload of 30 clients in a public agency or in a setting that is underfinanced and underresourced.

For some, the primacy of their work is the client’s immediate situation, and time is not available to inform and advocate for justice-based social policies. There are others who feel that policy practice has little to do with their daily work. Policy is viewed as irrelevant and with little connection to the client’s life situation. This unfortunate perspective hinders the social work profession’s efforts to create positive social change, leading to a just society for all people. The growing practice wisdom and accumulating evidence goes untapped and, as a result, creates an

unnecessary barrier for policy practice. For whatever reason, many trees seem to get in the way, but the commonly held belief among social workers that policy work belongs elsewhere is a self-planted tree that must be cut down.

Social Welfare Policy Defined

There is no one overriding definition of social welfare policy that scholars, policy makers, or practitioners refer to on a consistent basis. The lack of one agreed-upon definition results in frustration and a pessimistic perspective, such as Popple and Leighninger (1990), who believe that welfare is a very difficult concept to clearly define as “it is difficult, confusing, and debated” (p. 26). There are numerous sources for definitions, however, the most common reference materials including the *Social Work Dictionary* (Barker, 2003) and various editions of the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (see, for example, Dear, 1995 and Morris, 1986). Textbooks and journal articles also offer a variety of definitions. A sample of the various definitions illustrates the diversity in the definitions, ranging from all-encompassing to narrowly focused descriptors.

- Social welfare policy is anything the government chooses to do, or not to do, that affects the quality of life of its people. (DiNitto & Dye, 1983, p. 2)
- The explicit or implicit standing plan that an organization or government uses as a guide for action (Barker, 2003, p. 330)
- Establishes a specific set of program procedures (Baumheier and Schorr, 1977, p. 1453)
- Includes all public activities (Zimmerman, 1979, p. 487)
- Considers resource distribution and its effect on “peoples’ social well-being” (Dear, 1995, p. 2227)
- Primarily understood as cash and in-kind payments to persons who need support because of physical or mental illness, poverty, age, disability, or other defined circumstances (Chatterjee, 1966, p. 3)
- Pattern of relationships that develop in society to carry out mutual support function (Gilbert & Specht, 1974, p. 5)
- Human concern for the well-being of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (Morales & Sheafor, 1989, p. 100)
- Collective interventions to meet certain needs of the individual and/or to serve the wider interests of society (Titmuss, 1959, p. 42)
- A system of social services and institutions, designed to aid individuals and groups to attain satisfying standards of life and health, and personal social relationships that permit them to develop their full capacities and promote their well-being in harmony with the needs of their families and community (Friedlander, 1955, p. 140)

- A nation's system of programs, benefits, and services that help people meet those social, economic, educational, and health needs that are fundamental to the maintenance of society (Barker, 1995, p. 221)

These definitions reflect a specific philosophy or view of welfare. Close examination reveals three common themes:

1. Social welfare includes a variety of programs and services that result in specific, targeted client benefit.
2. Social welfare, as a system of programs and services, is designed to address the needs of people. The needs are wide-ranging; on the one hand, they may be all-encompassing, including economic and social well-being, health, education, and overall quality of life; conversely, needs may be narrowly targeted, focused on one issue.
3. The primary outcome of social welfare policy is to improve the well-being of individuals, groups, and communities. Helping those people address their specific needs benefits society at large.

The Relationship Between Justice Theory and Social Welfare Policy

All welfare policies are extensions of justice theories and reflect particular principles on the human condition. David Miller (p. 1, 2005) poses the central question related to justice and welfare:

What constitutes a fair distribution of rights, resources and opportunities? Is it an equal distribution, in which case an equal distribution of what? . . . Or is it a distribution that gives each person what they deserve, or what they need? Or a distribution that gives everyone an adequate minimum of whatever it is that matters?

Miller's questions focus on *distributive justice* — that is, how will benefits be allocated to a community? Will they be equal, disproportional, or possibly need-based? The key issues in distributive justice are often framed by moral and legal positions, which can polarize groups to support or oppose a particular policy. The potential answers to Miller's queries rest within specific justice theories.

Reflecting an individual's, group's, or organization's values and beliefs, justice theories create a rationale to support particular policy initiatives. Recognizing and understanding the various, often competing justice theories is central in creating a successful policy change strategy; such understanding requires the social work profession, as Morris writes (1986), "to take into account not only its own beliefs and values, but those held by a large number of other non advocate citizens" (p. 678).

John Rawls' (1971) theory of justice most closely reflects the principles and beliefs of the social work profession, but the core premise regarding

resource distribution and property ownership expressed by Robert Nozick (1974) is counter to the profession's values.

Rawls (1971) believes that birth, status, and family are matters of chance, which should not influence or bias the benefits one accrues; true justice allows a society to rectify its inequities, with the end result yielding fairness to all its members. All social goods—liberty, power, opportunities, income, and wealth—are to be equally distributed only if the unequal distribution of these goods favors the least-advantaged members of a community. Rawls contends that the inequality of opportunity is permissible if it advantages those who have been set aside. For example, a university's admission criteria that benefits one racial or gender group over another is acceptable if that group has been or remains disadvantaged. Rawls' theory proposes a *minmax* approach that essentially maximizes the place of the least advantaged. Using the concept of the "veil of ignorance," Rawls reasons that if a person would not know the impact of a policy on him or herself, then one will not advantage one group over another. For example, two people really like the same piece of cake, and one is asked to cut it so each person may have a slice. Not knowing which slice one may receive, he or she will probably make the slices as even as possible. To do otherwise, the person may end up with the smaller slice. The dual beliefs that a transaction's result is for the greater good while advantages and set-asides for those who have been marginalized are appropriate reflect core social work values.

Nozick (1974) argues a free-market libertarian model that advocates for individuals to be able to keep what they earn. Redistribution of social goods is not acceptable and violates a key premise that a person should be able to retain the "fruits of their labor." Taxation is not tolerable and forces workers to become slaves of the state, with a certain amount of their work-related benefits going to the state for its use. For Nozick (1974), "the less government approach" is the best model and asks, "if the state did not exist would it be necessary to invent it? Would one be needed, and would it have to be invented" (p. 3)? Libertarianism asserts that the state's role should be confined essentially to security and safety issues—police/fire protection, national defense, and the judicial system. Matters related to public education and social welfare, among others, are the responsibility of the private sector. Faith-based organizations, nonprofit social services, nongovernmental organizations, and private for-profit groups should provide welfare services. Services would be structured within a free-market model to encourage efficiency and effectiveness and eliminate redundancy and fiscal waste. The government's role is minimal at best, with individuals left free to do as they wish with their own lives and property. No formal institution can or should interfere with an individual's control of his or her life; the role of the state is to protect from and retaliate against those who use force against an individual (Roth, 1997, pp. 958–959).

Rawls' theory supports the development of a progressive and active welfare state. Policies create a system of redistribution of resources and advantages for those who have been historically and currently set aside.

Nozick's minimalist approach provides only for welfare in the mindset of safety and security for the individual. The government should not be involved in meeting basic human needs or providing any system of support and care; these activities are left to the private, voluntary sectors.

Social Work Values and Policy

The importance of policy is viewed in the profession's organizing documents. From ethical codes for practice to accreditation standards, various national and international bodies clearly spell out the domain of social policy being central in the curricula. For example, the American-based Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the National Association of Social Workers and the major international associations—International Association of Schools of Social Work (IA), International Federation of Social Workers (IF), and International Council on Social Welfare (IC)—each through their respective accreditation and/or practice protocols, direct attention to steadfastly embrace content around policy's central role in the profession's life (Council on Social Work Education, 2008; International Association, 2012; International Council, 2012; International Federation, 2012).

The 2008 Council on Social Work Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), the organizing document for baccalaureate and master's-level social work education, identifies 10 core competencies for social work practice. Although some of the competencies support policy practice through research and critical thinking, Educational Policy 2.1.1 specifically states that social workers "Engage in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being and to deliver effective social work services" (Council on Social Work Education, 2008, p. 6).

The National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (1999) notes in its preamble, "Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living" and specifically directs its members in Standard 6.02 to "facilitate informed participation by the public in shaping social policies and institutions" (NASW).

The joint Code of Ethics for IA and IF states that social workers have a duty to bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians, and the general public situations where resources are inadequate or where distribution of resources, policies, and practices are oppressive, unfair, or harmful (International Federation).

Inclusion of social welfare policy in education and practice extends to social workers and programs around the world. The International Council on Social Welfare, for example, specifically promotes worldwide activities on policy advocacy and research (International Council). In nation-states worldwide, there are numerous examples of policy work advocated by the International Council. Canadian social work education, for example, requires the study of Canadian welfare policy in accredited social work programs (Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work, 2004, p. 9); an

“accredited social worker” in Australia must have knowledge and the ability for analysis of and impact with policy development (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2004, p. 3); in 2004, the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers adopted the “Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession,” which includes social policy as a core area of study (IASSW, 2012, p. 7).

Worldwide, the promotion, development, and cultivation of effective policy in micro and macro arenas cross geographic borders and cultural divides. Social welfare policy is envisioned to be a powerful tool that can realize the aspirations of an entire society as well as the dreams and ideals embraced by a local community group, family, or individual.

Macro social welfare policy provides a framework and means to strengthen larger communities. As an instrument of change, social welfare policy can reduce or eliminate a particular issue that impacts at-risk and marginalized population groups, such as children, families, seniors, and people of color. Conversely, social policy may exacerbate or penalize a particular population group.

Micro social welfare policy directly influences the scope of work provided by the practitioner. Program eligibility, the form of services provided, a program’s delivery structure, and funding mechanisms are outcomes of micro social welfare policy. Ineffective social policy creates frustrating practice obstacles. Typical of the barriers created by policy are eligibility criteria that limit client access to services, regulations that do not allow for case advocacy, and increased caseloads supported with minimal resources and capped time limits.

The Traditional Conceptual Framework of Social Welfare

Social welfare policies are outgrowths of values, beliefs, and principles, and they vary in their commitments and range of services. For example, the primary public assistance program targeting poor families, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), is time-limited and does not include full, comprehensive services. Social Security retirement, however, provides monthly retirement income that is based on the worker’s lifelong financial contributions through payroll deductions. Essentially, TANF reflects the centuries-old belief that the poor are the cause of their life situation, and public assistance only reinforces their dependence on others. Retirees, who worked and contributed to the greater good through their payroll taxes, are able to make a just claim for retirement benefits.

The range of social welfare policies is best conceptualized through the classic work of Wilensky and Lebeaux (1965), *Industrial Society and Social Welfare*, in which they attempt to answer a basic question: Is social welfare a matter of giving assistance only in emergencies, or is it a front-line activity that society must provide? Their analysis included two important concepts that continue to frame and influence social welfare discussions: residual social welfare and institutional welfare.

A cautionary note is in order: Not all programs and services are easily classified as one or the other; some programs have both institutional and residual attributes. The Head Start program, for example, is institutional in nature but is means tested and restricted to a particular segment of the population. One solution is to expand the classic residual–institutional dichotomy to a residual–institutional continuum. A program’s position on the continuum is determined by its eligibility criteria and the breadth and depth of its services.

The dichotomy between residual and institutional welfare imitates the inherent differences found in justice theories expressed by Rawls and Nozick. Effective policy practice requires understanding and assessing the various justice theories that interact with and influence the development of a policy position.

Residual Welfare

Residual welfare views social welfare in narrow terms and typically only includes public assistance or policies related to the poor. Residual services carry a stigma; are time-limited, means-tested, and emergency-based; and are generally provided when all other forms of assistance are unavailable. Welfare services come into play only when all other systems have broken down or proven to be inadequate. Public assistance programs reflect the residual descriptions and include, among others, TANF, Food Stamps, Supplemental Security Income, General Assistance, and Medicaid.

The residual conception of social welfare rests on the individualistic notion that people are responsible for themselves and government intervenes only in times of crisis or emergency. Eligibility requires that people exhaust their own private resources, which may include assistance from the church, family members, friends, and employers, and requires people to prove their inability to provide for themselves and their families.

Social services are delivered only to people who meet certain defined criteria. The assessment procedure, commonly referred to as *means testing*, requires people to demonstrate that they do not have the financial ability to meet their specific needs. A residual program also mandates recertification for program participation every few months, typically three or six months. The recertification process is designed primarily to ensure that clients are still unable to meet their needs through private or personal sources.

People who receive residual services are generally viewed as being different from those who do need public services and are part of the majority group. These recipients are viewed as failures because they do not emulate the ideals of rugged individualism, a cornerstone ideal of American society, which asserts that people take care of their own needs, they are self-reliant, and they work to provide for themselves and their families. Clients in residual programs are often stereotyped by the larger society. They are often accused of making bad decisions, requiring constant monitoring because of their inherent dishonesty, and being lazy. In short, people in residual programs carry a stigma best described as “blaming the victim,” which Ryan

(1976) writes is applied to most social problems and people who are “inferior, genetically defective, or morally unfit; the emphasis is on the intrinsic, even hereditary, defect” (p. 7).

Institutional Welfare

The second conception of social welfare described by Wilensky and Lebeaux (1965) is *institutional* social welfare. This definition of social welfare is much more encompassing than the residual definition and extends to services that support all people. This framework recognizes the community’s obligation to assist individual members because the problems are viewed not as failures, but as part of life in modern society. Services go beyond immediate and basic need responses to emergencies. Assistance is provided well before people exhaust their own resources, and preventive and rehabilitative services are stressed.

Therefore, an institutional program, as opposed to a residual program, is designed to meet the needs of all people. Eligibility is universal, no stigma is attached, and services are regular front-line programs in society. Institutional programs are so widely accepted in society that most are not viewed as social welfare programs at all. Social insurance programs, veterans programs, public education, food and drug regulations, and Medicare are institutional by nature.

Broadening the View of Social Welfare Policy

Richard Titmuss (1965) argued that social welfare was much more than aid to the poor and in fact represented a broad system of support to the middle and upper classes. In his model, social welfare includes three separate but very distinct pieces: *fiscal welfare* — tax benefits and supports for the middle and upper classes; *corporate welfare* — tax benefits and supports for businesses; and *public welfare* — assistance to the poor. Titmuss ostensibly was arguing that social welfare reflects an institutional perspective.

Abramovitz (1983) applied the Titmuss model to American social welfare and identified a “shadow welfare state” for the wealthy that parallels the social service system that is available to the poor. She concluded that the poor and wealthy alike benefit from government programs and tax laws that raise their disposable income. In other words, were it not for direct government support—whether through food stamps or through a childcare tax exemption—people would have fewer dollars to spend and to support themselves and their families. As with Titmuss, Abramovitz extended social welfare well beyond services to the poor to encompass a wide range of programs and services that support the middle and upper classes.

The Titmuss and Abramovitz position requires accepting the premise that corporate and fiscal welfare are the same as public welfare. If this position is accepted, then all activities are considered institutional. The belief is that welfare, no matter its form, provides a direct subsidy that benefits the individual with secondary positive benefits extending to the greater

community. For example, homeowners are able to claim a tax deduction for interest paid on home loans. The deduction encourages home ownership (e.g., by lowering an individual's net taxable income) and supports the home-building industry by encouraging the construction of new housing stock, which in turn requires suppliers to provide goods for the new construction. As more homes are built, more people are hired to build the homes, more supplies are needed, and the cycle continues. Rather than providing a tax deduction, the government could just as easily write a monthly or annual check to the homeowner to subsidize their housing. Titmuss and Abramovitz would argue that the tax deduction is every bit a welfare expenditure, just as a Section 8 housing voucher is for the poor.

One could also argue that corporate and fiscal welfare requires a direct financial and work input from the recipient; that is, the benefit is determined on the amount and degree of effort invested by the individual. The argument continues that public welfare recipients are not required to make a similar contribution. This position reflects an "equity and privilege" model—what one receives is directly related to and proportional to what one contributes or invests. The resulting subsidy is a privilege extended only to those who participate in the program and supports the greater good. This position would argue that a homeowner should receive a tax benefit because purchasing a home supports the greater good; conversely, Section 8 housing does not contribute to the greater good and a community's economic base.

The bottom line with corporate support or welfare, whichever way one frames the subsidy, is that it costs the U.S. government significant revenue. Data suggests that the use of tax deductions and corporate tax breaks costs the United States significant dollars. Dzieza (2012), for example, specifically identifies the General Electric Corporation and Wells Fargo as not paying any federal taxes, while 83 percent of the top 100 publicly traded companies had tax shelters in 2009. All told, the various tax subsidies resulted in an estimated \$100 billion loss in tax revenues.

Crafting Justice-Based Policy

Policy practice, notes Jansson (1999), allows the profession to promote its values and the well-being of clients while countering opposition to proactive social welfare (p. 10). The objective of policy practice is simple and straightforward: to change policy.

Haynes and Mickelson (2000) write that "all social work is political" (p. 23). Although some may disagree with this assertion, policy practice clearly takes place within a political environment. Policies are made at the various levels of government (i.e., local, state, and national), by boards of directors of nonprofit agencies and voluntary associations, and by CEOs of for-profit agencies. No matter the setting in which a policy emerges, it is the end result of a series of political decisions—who is included in and excluded from services, what services are provided, how the services

are provided, and who provides the services reflect some of the political decisions that are addressed by policy. Given that policy is developed within a political environment, no one should be surprised that a policy is more often than not based on a political philosophy or ideology, while disregarding objective information and evidence. It is common for a policy to be organized around ambiguous evidence, even though there has been a systematic review (Boaz and Pawson, 2005, p. 175). Such is the nature of the political process. The nagging question is how can effective policy emerge if the political environment disregards objective evidence?

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the overarching skill set necessary for successful policy work, and as Bok (2006) notes, its development and refinement is one of the central purposes of higher education (p. 67). Critical thinking is a systematic process that allows information to be considered and options to emerge in such a way that result in clear policy. Defined as “reasonable and reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do” (Fisher, 2001, p. 7), *critical thinking* creates and improves a current condition or situation. The use of logic and reasoning are cornerstones in the critical thinking process.

A policy position is the direct application of critical thinking. It requires analyzing and organizing facts, developing opinions based on the facts, arguing the position and considering alternatives, all leading to solving specific problems. Paul and Elder (2007) write that critical thinking is “self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective” (p. 4). A rational and structured thinking process is important in organizing and distilling facts from myth and allows for clear, objective solutions to emerge.

Critical thinking allows and encourages essential questioning while systematically challenging one’s own biases and beliefs. Philosophical and ideological positions are tested with the objective to discover new truths rather than to reinforce existing egocentric thinking. Paul and Elder (2007) illustrate egocentric thinking with the following statements (p. 9):

- *It is true because I believe it.*
- *It is true because we believe it.*
- *It is true because I want to believe it.*
- *It is true because I have always believed it.*
- *It is true because it is in my self-interest to believe it.*

These egocentric statements rely on personal bias and prejudice. Policy that reflects this narrow laissez-faire thinking process only reinforces preconceived notions and hinders proactive change that is able to strengthen a community.

Critical thinking grows from evidence-based practice. The skilled practitioner recognizes that egocentric thinking is a common refrain, but by using practice evidence challenges the predisposed position. Evidence and

reasoning provide pathways to solutions. Injecting political considerations is necessary in the analysis, but it, rather than the collected evidence, can not become the primary reference point and driver in the process. A successful critical thinking process will yield several alternatives, some of which are better, stronger, and certainly more justice oriented than others.

Traditional critical thinking methods are controlled processes that allow little room to react impulsively. Successful critical thinking must be flexible and allow for creative thinking, whose process is dynamic, vibrant, and intuitive. Flexibility, brainstorming, visioning, and metaphorical relationships are central in stimulating curiosity and furthering consideration of differing perspectives. Creative thinking balances the somewhat rigid critical thinking process by enabling a free flow of ideas and recognizing that some biases are impossible to disregard or subordinate.

Critical thinking is fraught with challenges. First and foremost is to recognize when one's personal views influence and color the collection and interpretation of evidence and lead to a series of foregone conclusions. Rawls (1971) proposed a "veil of ignorance," which would shroud the person from all external variables and allow for an objective and fair result. Unfortunately, the human condition does not allow one to completely abdicate one's values and beliefs. Decisions, no matter how systematic, are not made in a valueless vacuum. Recognizing when one is disregarding evidence is paramount in critical thinking. The ability to minimize or set aside one's beliefs is most difficult but required.

A second challenge to critical thinking revolves around the collection of evidence. The advent and accessibility of the World Wide Web has opened the doors to a variety of data, information, and analyses of issues. The advantages, while many, can be overshadowed by the enticement of readily available information, which, if left unattended, will result in faulty policy work. First and foremost, the reliability and validity of Web sources must always be questioned: Just because information is posted on a Web page does not mean it is legitimate. A second issue deals with information overload. The ease of information accessibility can be overwhelming. For example, Googling "social welfare policies in Texas" in March 2012 resulted in 17.5 million sites collected in .21 seconds (Social Welfare in Texas, 2012). Critical thinking requires disciplined analysis of the Web, the ability to discern good information from bad, and ensuring that creativity is applied while seeking accurate useful information.

A third challenge to critical thinking deals with process. Information must be assessed and distilled in a thoughtful and reflective manner in order for alternatives to emerge. First and foremost, the proposed policy must be justice based and provide the maximum benefit for the community while advantaging those who are marginalized and set aside in a community. Achieving this objective requires time and simply cannot be rushed. Unfortunately, in today's world, time is considered a luxury and not valued as a requisite for work. Individuals are connected to their workplace 24/7; the written memo is virtually nonexistent, having been replaced by e-mails that can be sent from anyplace, any time of day or night; turnaround time for



reports has been shortened because of the need for quick information. Successful critical thinking is threatened by absence of process and the need for fast, rapid, and swift decisions.

Conclusion

Today's social problems are complex matters that impact all people, no matter their age, race, gender, ethnicity, or social status. These issues create significant barriers to creating just communities. Although the issues seem overwhelming, social concerns in one form or another will always be part of our landscape. This is not meant to be a pessimistic observation but reflects the unique aspects of the human condition. Roth (1997) writes that

Social issues . . . would not exist if human beings knew everything, understood all the consequences of their actions, never made mistakes, always agreed with one another about what to do, and put exactly the right policies into practice. (vol. 1, p. xii)

Thomas Friedman, in his work *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (2005), argues that the world is now more interconnected than at any time in its history. Lowering of trade and political barriers, coupled with the technical advances of the digital revolution, made it possible to do business instantaneously with people anywhere in the world at any time.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that in Spring 2012, the world's population is projected to be slightly more than 7 billion (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012); according to the *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (Brown, 2006), more than 33,000 languages are spoken around the world. All nations, totaling 242 in 2012, embrace their own defining characteristics, beliefs, and traditions; the number of countries will continue to change and grow in the future. Between 1900 and 1950, approximately 1.2 countries were created each year; from 1950 to 1990, 2.2 nations were organized each year; and in the 1990s, the number of new nations organized jumped to 3.1 countries annually (Enriquez, 2005).

No one can expect to gain even a rudimentary knowledge of the many nations of the world, each with its own language and culture. Nor can we foresee which cultures and languages will be important or exist in the middle of the 21st century. Similarly, no one can predict with steadfast assurance and accuracy future events in local, national, or international arenas.

Today we live in a different, more open world with fewer geographic or social borders to control human interactions. No matter who we are or where we live, all people are touched by distant wars, terrorist threats, hurricanes, typhoons, tsunamis, Middle East oil shortages, bank failures, housing foreclosures, human trafficking, irreversible destruction of our environment coupled with the threats caused by global warming, widespread



and pervasive poverty, new and deadly diseases, trade wars, and the daily threat posed by the world arsenal of nuclear weapons. All of these events draw governments into new collaborative intergovernmental relationships, and all of these new patterns of behavior influence the development of social policy.

We also cannot ignore the power and impact of *social media*, which seemed to catapult itself with full force on the world in 2011. Its use and influence in shaping the 2011 so-called Arab Spring and the way it became a key communication vehicle for the U.S.-based Occupy Wall Street movement clearly showed that people can make significant change in policy and governmental actions. Social media's power contributed to corporations changing their policies, as evidenced when Bank of America cancelled its plans to charge customers an additional fee for debit card purchases (Bernard, 2011).

Stoesz (2000) critically charged that the future is “bleak” for liberals unless they become “more versatile in (their) policy repertoire” (p. 622). The same could be said for conservatives and moderates. Stoesz is correct that the social work profession must incorporate a critical thinking, multidimensional approach that is firmly rooted in justice theory if it is to be a central player in the policy-making process. Social workers, including educators, must tap into the power of social media while becoming well-versed in the data compiled by national and international organizations. If the social work profession continues to rely on political, philosophical, or ideological dogma, then the broad and significant social and economic discrepancies that currently exist will only become further entrenched.

Fair policy is achievable by the melding of practice wisdom with objective, critical thinking guided by justice theory that mandates we promote the interests of the least advantaged.

Key Terms

institutional
residual

social justice
critical thinking

social media

Review Questions for Critical Thinking

1. Are the United Nations Millennium Goals realistic? Identify three barriers for the full and complete implementation of the UN resolution.
2. How is “corporate welfare” the same as and different from “public welfare”?
3. How can *social media* influence a current U.S. social welfare issue?
4. To what extent does the U.S. system of social welfare programs and services reflect John Rawls' position on justice?
5. To what extent should individual social workers be concerned and/or involved with the public policy-making process?

Online Resources

- Online Social Justice: www.onlinesocialjustice.com/sites-on-the-web/
International Association of Schools of Social Work: www.iassw-aiets.org
International Council on Social Welfare: www.icsw.org
International Federation of Social Workers: <http://ifsw.org/>
World Health Organization: www.who.int/en/

References

- Abramovitz, M. (1983). Everyone is on welfare: "The role of redistribution in social policy" revisited. *Social Work, 28* (6), 440–445.
- Australian Association of Social Workers. (2004). *Continuing professional educational policy*. Retrieved on December 2, 2006 from www.aasw.asn.au/adobe/profdev/CPE_policy_2006.pdf
- Barker, R. (1995). *The social work dictionary* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Barker, R. (2003). *The social work dictionary* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Baumheier, E. C., & Schorr, A. L. (1977). Social policy. In J. Turner (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of social work* (17th ed., pp. 1453–1463). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Bernard, T. S. (November 1, 2011). In retreat, Bank of America cancels debit card fee. *New York Times*.
- Boaz, A., & Pawson, R. (2005). The perilous road from evidence to policy: Five journeys compared. *Journal of Social Policy, 34*, 175–194.
- Bok, D. (2006). *Our underachieving colleges: A candid look at how much students learn and why they should be learning more*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Brown, K. (2006). *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* (2nd ed.). Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work. (2004). *CASSW standards for accreditation*. Ottawa, Ontario: Author.
- Chatterjee, P. (1966). *Approaches to the welfare state*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Council on Social Work Education. (2008). *Educational policy and accreditation standards*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Dear, R. B. (1995). Social welfare policy. In R. L. Edwards & J. G. Hobbs, *Encyclopedia of social work* (19th ed., Vol. 3, pp. 2226–2237). Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Declaration of Alma-Ata, International Conference on Primary Health Care, Alma-Ata, USSR, September 6–12, 1978. Retrieved on December 4, 2006 from www.who.int/hpr/NPH/docs/declaration_almaata.pdf
- DiNitto, D., & Dye, T. (1983). *Social welfare politics and public policy* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Dzieza, J. (February 25, 2012). 8 Ridiculous Tax Loopholes: How Companies Are Avoiding the Tax Man. *The Daily Beast*. Retrieved on February 27, 2012, from

- www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/02/25/8-ridiculous-tax-loopholes-how-companies-are-avoiding-the-tax-man.html
- Eichler, A. (January 31, 2012). Working poor: Almost half of U.S. households live one crisis from the bread line. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved on February 5, 2012 from www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/31/working-poor-liquid-asset-poverty_n_1243152.html
- Enriquez, J. (2005). *The untied states of america: Polarization, fracturing, and our future*. New York, NY: Crown.
- Fisher, A. (2001). *Critical thinking: An introduction*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Friedlander, W. (1955). *Introduction to social welfare*. New York, NY: Prentice Hall.
- Friedman, T. (2005). *The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.
- Gilbert, N., & Specht, H. (1974). *Dimensions of social welfare policy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Hagen, J. (2000). Critical perspectives on social welfare: Challenges and controversies. *Families in Society*, 81, 555–556.
- Haynes, K., & Mickelson, J. (2000). *Affecting change: Social workers in the political arena* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- International Association of Schools of Social Work. (2012). Global standards for the education and training of the social work profession. Retrieved on February 2, 2012, from www.iasw-aiets.org
- International Council on Social Welfare. (2012). What we do. Retrieved on February 2, 2012, from www.icsw.org/intro/whatdowedoe.htm#policy
- International Federation of Social Workers. (2012). Code of Ethics. Retrieved on March 5, 2012, from <http://ifsw.org/policies/code-of-ethics/>
- Jansson, B. (1999). *Becoming an effective policy advocate: From policy practice to social justice*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks Cole.
- Miller, D. (2005). Justice and boundaries. Speech presented at the Centre for the Study of Social Justice Conference, November 26, 2005, Nuffield College, Oxford. Retrieved on December 1, 2006, from http://social-justice.politics.ox.ac.uk/materials/launch/dmiller_session1.pdf
- Morales, A., & Sheafor, B. (1989). *Social work: A profession of many faces* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Morris, R. (1986). Social welfare policy: Trends and issues. In A. Minahan (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of social work* (18th ed., Vol. 2, pp. 664–681). Silver Spring, MD: National Association of Social Workers.
- National Association of Social Workers. (1999). *Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, state, and utopia*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2007). *The miniature guide to critical thinking: Concepts and tools* (4th ed.). Dillon Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking.
- Popple, P., & Leighninger, L. (1990). *Social work, social welfare, and American society*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-64* (Volume I, entry 91, pp. 112–118). (1965). Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *Theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Reamer, F. (1993). *The philosophical foundations of social work*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

- RonaldReagan.com, the official site. Retrieved on December 10, 2006, from www.ronaldreagan.com/secondterm.html.
- Roth, J. K. (1997). *Encyclopedia of social issues* (Vol. 4). New York, NY: Marshall Cavendish.
- Ryan, W. (1976). *Blaming the victim* (rev. ed.). New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Social welfare in Texas. (2012). Retrieved on March 2, 2012, from www.google.com.
- State of the Union address, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. This Nation.com. Retrieved on November 5, 2006, from www.thisnation.com/library/sotu/1935fdr.html
- Stoesz, D. (2000). Renaissance. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 81 (6), 621–628.
- The writings of Benjamin Franklin, London: 1757–1775, Volumes 1–5*. Retrieved on November 5, 2006, from www.historycarper.com/resources/twobf3/price.htm
- Titmuss, R. (1959). *Essays on the welfare state*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Titmuss, R. (1965). The role of redistribution in social policy. *Social Security Bulletin*, 28 (6), 34–55.
- United Nations. (2000). Resolution adopted by the General Assembly [without reference to a Main Committee (A/55/L.2)], 55/2, United Nations Millennium Declaration. Retrieved on January 5, 2012, from www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.pdf
- United Nations. (2011a). *Millennium Development Goals Report 2011*. New York, NY: United Nations.
- United Nations. (March 2011b). Uniting for universal access: Towards zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths. *Report of the Secretary-General*. Retrieved on November 5, 2011, from www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/documents/document/2011/A-65-797_English.pdf
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2012). World POPClock projection. Retrieved on March 3, 2012, from www.census.gov/population/popclockworld.html
- Wilensky, H., & Lebeaux, C. (1965). *Industrial society and social welfare*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Woolley, J., & Peters, G. *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database). Available from www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8758
- World Bank. (February 2012). New estimates reveal drop in extreme poverty 2005–2010. Retrieved on February 15, 2012 from <http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/0,,contentMDK:23129612~pagePK:64165401~piPK:64165026~theSitePK:469372,00.html>
- World Health Organization. (2011a). *World health statistics*. Geneva, Switzerland: WHO Press.
- World Health Organization. (2011b). *Measles fact sheet*. Retrieved on November 5, 2011, from www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs286/en/
- Zimmerman, S. L. (1979). Policy, social policy, and family policy. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 41, 467–495.

