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# Policy, Social Policy, and Family Policy: Concepts, Concerns, and Analytic Tools*

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*Although the concept of family policy is ill defined, ambiguous, and emotionally laden, many are advocating efforts to examine the impact of public policies on families. This paper seeks to examine family policy and family impact analysis in relation to concepts such as policy, in general, policy analysis, social policy, social policy analysis, and social impact assessment. It is an attempt to arrive at definitional clarity with respect to each, and thereby contribute to the developing conceptualization of family policy and family impact analysis. The paper concludes by suggesting that family impact analysis may be able to facilitate goal consensus regarding family policy, and thereby contribute to its formulation, if such formulation is indeed desirable.*

The concept of family policy is somewhat ambiguous and ill defined. To some, family policy is synonymous with social policy; while some would argue that family policy is synonymous with *all* policy. Within this broad and confused context, many are advocating that efforts should be undertaken to examine the impact of policies on families, particularly governmental policies. Programs to train people to engage in family impact analysis have been initiated. While the immediate purpose of this thrust seems clear, the confused context in which the effort is taking place raises questions about the larger purposes of its application. This paper seeks to examine family impact analysis in relation to policy, in general, policy analysis, social policy, social policy analysis, social impact assessment, and family policy. This is an effort not only to clarify the latter concepts, but also to consider how thinking within other policy areas might contribute to the developing conceptualization of family policy and family impact analysis. Each concept will be discussed separately to enable the reader to discern the similarities and differences between them.

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## POLICY AND POLICY MODELS

The word "policy" is used to designate the most important choices made in life (Lasswell, 1968:5). Kahn (1969:131) defines policy as "the general guide to action, the cluster of overall decisions relevant to the achievement of the goal, the guiding principles, the standing plan." The basic emphasis of the policy approach is on the problems of the individual in relation to society. Policy spans the entire range of public activity. Using the federal budget as a guide, broad categories of policy include: defense and international affairs; general science, space, and technology; natural resources, environment, and energy; aid to businesses, agriculture, and communities; human resources, such as education, manpower, social services, health, income security, and veteran's benefits; law enforcement, justice, and general government; and revenue sharing and general purpose financial assistance (Blechman *et al.*, 1975). According

to Ramney (1968:7), policy components include: (1) a particular object or set of objects that is intended to be affected; (2) a desired course of events; (3) a selected course of action or sequence of events; (4) a declaration of intent; and (5) implementation of the declared intent. In short, policy may be viewed as the outcome of a stream of activities. These activities flow from authorities within a system who establish the goals toward which the activities are directed. Involved in the policy approach is a clarification of value goals. All political systems are confronted with the tasks of allocating societal values and persuading societal members to accept these allocations as binding most of the time (Easton, 1968:432).

The above definitions of policy incorporate components of different policy models. Three have been identified by Allison (1969) together with their organizing concepts—the rational policy model, the organizational process model, and the bureaucratic policy model. The rational policy model perceives the actor as a rational decision-maker who meets problems by making choices in relation to goals and objectives and in consideration of alternative outcomes and their consequences. Policy in this context is perceived as "steady state choice" rather than a number of partial choices in dynamic action. Dye (1975:27-31) elaborates by suggesting that policy, as viewed by the rational policy model, is the maximization of "net value achievement," meaning that all relevant values are known and that a sacrifice in one or more values is compensated for by the attainment of other values. This definition of rationality, he says, is synonymous with efficiency, which, in this instance, refers to the ratio between valued inputs and valued outputs.

The organizational process model, on the other hand, views policy as organizational output rather than action as rational choice. This framework for viewing policy emphasizes the process and procedures of large organizations. The acts and choices of the rational policy model are regarded as *outputs* of large organizations functioning according to regular patterns of behavior. Organizational processes and behaviors are viewed within the context of organizational structure which pertains to size, complexity and formalization. These are seen as determining the situations within which decisions are made, problems are raised, information is provided and the issues presented to organizational leaders are colored. David Easton (1968:428) accordingly suggests that policy is the output of a complex set of processes involving the conversion of inputs into outputs of decision and implementing actions. The definition is consistent with the systems approach in which policy is perceived as the output of the political system in response to forces from the environment which are viewed as inputs.

The bureaucratic politics paradigm views policy as political outcome, not as choice or outputs. This approach regards policy as the result of various bargaining games played by different actors whose positions within their organizations determine their priorities, perceptions, interests, and stakes, as well as their power to influence policy outcomes. Policy outcomes also are perceived as being influenced by the bargaining will, skill, and advantage of relevant players and the perceptions of others relative to these influences. The bureaucratic politics paradigm is similar to game theory in which policy is regarded as the outcome of a situation in which there is no best choice; choice instead being contingent on the action of all the relevant players.

In addition to the three policy models identified by Allison (1969) which in part have their roots in organizational theory, Dye (1975:17-39) has identified others—elite theory, group theory, incrementalism, and institutionalism. In elite theory, policy is regarded as the preferences and values of the governing elite; as a corollary, the masses are regarded as passive, apathetic, and ill-informed. In group theory, on the other hand, policy is perceived as the equilibrium reached in the struggle between interest groups; the equilibrium being determined by the relative influence of the relevant interest groups at any given time, and group influence being determined by membership size, wealth, access to decision-makers, and internal cohesion. In incrementalism, policy is viewed as a continuation of past governmental activities with only slight step-by-step modifications. And, finally, in the institutional approach, policy is viewed as the outcome of institutional arrangements and structures in government and, hence, it is concerned with the relationship between these structures and policy content. Thus, depending on the model employed, policy may be viewed as rational choice, political outcome, system output,

preference of the governing elite, an equilibrium reached among contending interest groups, institutional outcome, or incremental modification of past policies.

## POLICY ANALYSIS

Although all of the above models have been used in policy analysis to facilitate understanding of policy and policy developments, policy analysis, for the most part, has tended to follow the rational model, sometimes including components of other models as well. Policy analysis involves the application of analytic skills to the solution of public problems, taking into account their political, social, and economic context and underlying individual, group, and organizational dynamics. It employs both quantitive and qualitative analytic tools, and represents an integrated and interdisciplinary approach in dealing with problems in an acknowledgement of their complexity. Policy analysis is decision-oriented and anticipatory; that is, analysis is undertaken with regard to decisions about future events. Since issues change in relation to experience and feedback, the analytic process is iterative. Program evaluation or evaluation research, in its concern with program outcomes, is necessarily concerned with *past* performance which, in turn, may stimulate the search for new directions and approaches. Thus, it is considered to be a part of policy analysis. Policy analysis also includes cost-benefit analysis of feasible policy options in social, economic and psychological terms with a view toward eliminating the worst alternatives. By its very nature, policy analysis is value conscious. Not only does it seek to account for the development of policy by explicating the values and assumptions underlying present and anticipated programs, it also seeks to identify the stakeholders of particular policy options (Beckman, 1977a).

According to Beckman, policy analysis techniques include: (1) the identification of previous policies and their origins; (2) the identification of the historical and environmental context of decision alternatives; (3) the identification of values of groups coalescing for or against a particular problem solution; and (4) the application of cost/benefit and equity/efficiency criteria to policy options (Beckman, 1977b). Mushkin (1977:245) asserts that the key questions of analytic studies are those of equity and incentive structures for efficiency. She notes that the distributional effects of policy—who gets what and who pays—are at the heart of policy analysis. Experience suggests that the initial phase of policy analysis, determining what the problem really is, can lead to clearer statements of intended purposes. These statements not only help to specify the outcomes that are desired, but also help to elicit citizen response and participation—additional criteria sometimes applied in policy analysis.

Another way to approach policy analysis is to couch policy terminology in terms of variables, both dependent and independent. As a dependent variable, policy is something to be explained and predicted on the basis of knowledge about the policy process and the system's resources. The focus of the study in such instances is on political and nonpolitical factors as influences on policy outputs of the political system. Studies of this nature are thus *not* concerned with the possible impact of policies on some object in the environment. As an independent variable, however, policy *is* examined in terms of its effects on a specified object or target. Policy in this situation is not something to be understood or explained as much as it is to be manipulated. The practical problem of policy as an independent variable, according to Eyestone (1969), is the efficient use of resources in pursuit of system goals. He suggests that policy studies include policy both as a dependent and independent variable. He further suggests that, because the process that produces policy is dynamic, observations should be made over time to capture the effects of feedback on subsequent policy outputs.

Research methods identified as appropriate to policy analysis include content analysis of articles in the mass media and of legislative reports and legislation, participant observation of legislative sessions and hearings, and interviews with or mail surveys of legislators and relevant constituent groups (Gil, 1968). The identification of these methods should not preclude consideration of others.

## SOCIAL POLICY

Social policy, a subcategory of policy, has been defined by Schorr and Baumheier (1971:1361-1362) as constituting the principles and procedures guiding any measure or course of action dealing with individuals and

aggregate relationships in society. They conceive of social policy as intervention in and regulation of an otherwise random social system and as representing a temporarily settled course of action with regard to selected social phenomena that govern social relationships and the distribution of resources within a society. Such action includes the regulation of constraints, rewards, and entitlements among individuals and social units in society, thereby defining their social roles and statuses. In its concern with social purposes, many of which may be in conflict, social policy helps to shape the quality of life and determine the level of well-being of members of society. In this regard, it is also concerned with the social consequences of other policies.

Kenneth Boulding (1967) has suggested that social policy is centered in those institutions that create integration and discourage alienation. These institutions deal with those aspects of social life that are characterized, not so much by exchange in which "a quid is got for a quo," as by unilateral transfers which are justified by some kind of appeal to a status of legitimacy, identity or community. Titmuss (1968:188) has suggested that social policy consists of acts of government that are undertaken for a variety of political reasons to provide for a range of needs that the market does not or cannot satisfy for certain segments of the population, such as the poor and elderly. Kahn (1969:17), in reviewing existing definitions, interprets social policy to be "the core of principles or guiding ideology behind the series of separate social welfare measures." Such measures include income maintenance, housing, health, education, recreation, manpower and employment, and the personal social services.

Economic measures are viewed as an important means for realizing social policy objectives. Within this context, concepts such as social costs and opportunity costs are important (Schorr and Baumheier, 1971:1363). Social costs refer to "externalities," that is, costs that were not taken into account in the cost calculations of decisions made by government and industry that affect the lives of people, such as environmental pollution resulting from the production of nuclear energy. Opportunity costs refer to resources foregone because of a decision to employ them in a particular way, or uses that *might* have been made of committed resources.

The main traditions that have determined social policy in the United States are individualism, minimum intervention, and negotiation among interest groups which, to some extent, help to explain the conflicting objectives so frequently observed among different social policies. Issues identified as cross-cutting social policy include: redistribution, locus of control, client self-determination, and rights, as well as issues pertaining to prevention versus treatment, institutionalization versus community care, and universality versus selectivity (Magill, 1975).

As identified by Titmuss (1968:131), benefits derived from social policy serve several functions: (1) as partial compensation for identified disservices caused by society; (2) as partial compensation for *un*identified disservices caused by society; (3) as partial compensation for handicapping conditions, such as mental retardation, blindness or severe motor impairment; (4) as a form of protection for society; (5) as an investment for personal or collective advancement or gain; (6) as an immediate or deferred increment to personal well-being, such as education or enforced savings; and (7) as an element in personal and societal integration.

The above descriptive summary of social policy suggests that its development probably is best described by group theory and the bureaucratic politics model with elements of systems theory brought into play. According to these models, social policy may be viewed as an equilibrium between contending interest groups and as political outcome. In general, social policy appears to be more preoccupied with individuals and social relationships than with issues of efficiency. General policy, on the other hand, seems to be more concerned with the latter. Both policy, in general, and social policy, however, appear to be equally concerned with issues of redistribution and equity.

## SOCIAL POLICY ANALYSIS AND SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Social policy analysis is policy analysis applied to social welfare policies and programs and to the social consequences of other programs. It is an approach which synthesizes available information and specifies policy and program options in keeping with the rational policy model. It has been applied to income maintenance programs, foster care, day care,

educational programs, mental health programs, health care programs and others. Like policy analysis, it differs from social-science research in that its primary objective is to facilitate decision-making with regard to policy choice and selection among program alternatives.

One analytic framework for the study of social policy offered by Titmuss (1968:130) and modified slightly for the present discussion includes: (1) the nature of the benefit; (2) the nature of the entitlement to the benefit (that is, whether or not it is legal, contractual, contributory, financial, discretionary, or professionally determined); (3) the target of the entitlement (individuals, families, groups or territory); (4) the target's social-economic-biological characteristics; and (5) methods or procedures employed to determine access to and the allocation and utilization of benefits. Clearly, these categories could be refined or redesigned to fit a particular analytic problem.

The concept, social impact assessment, appears to be more specific in connotation and approach than does social policy analysis, at least according to the definition offered by Wolf (1976). Social impact assessment is a procedure for anticipating "the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action," in order to forestall or offset their adverse effects. Such effects may be long- or short-term and distributed differentially according to group, jurisdictional level, and geography. Social impacts are defined as those changes in social structures and behaviors which are forecasted to occur as a direct or indirect result of the implementation of a policy or plan. A direct impact is a change in the variables of a given state or system. An indirect impact is a change that occurs as a secondary effect of a direct impact. The intrusion of exogenous variables, random or systematic, however, presents a problem in terms of being able to attribute measured effects to planned intervention. The continuing effect of readjustment and adaptive change represents a "feed forward" process similar in concept to Eyestone's (1969) dynamic model in which feedback becomes input for subsequent policy output. The dynamic systems model takes into account changes in both the dependent and independent variables, allowing for the notion of contingency and the consideration of multiple influences acting on the system.

Wolf (1976) outlined the following steps for conducting social impact assessment:

1. *Develop a profile,* or a set of baseline data as before measures of a policy event—in anticipation of changes resulting from it. In general, the magnitude of the impact can be assumed to be proportional to the magnitude of the benefit, event, or project.
2. *Make a projection* by generating a time series for detecting trends so that deviations from baseline conditions established in the profiling step can be forecast. The planned induced change is the difference between what is anticipated with and without the intervention.
3. *Identify significant impacts,* primarily through mental rather than real life experiments, because, though the problem may be predictable, social impact assessment cannot establish the experimental controls or conditions needed for predictive studies. Prediction is further complicated because of the unknown nature of some phenomena and because the variables important to prediction often are contingent on events that may differ from those that were anticipated. For these reasons, social impact assessment, Wolf says, frequently appears impressionistic.
4. *Display and describe impacts* so that others may review them. This involves the danger of premature quantification when the qualitative treatment of variables, values, and trends may be more appropriate. Although nonquantifiable data may present problems of nonuniform measures across categories, the objective, Wolf advises, is to assess the impact of various effects, whether or not they are quantifiable.
5. *Evaluate impacts with the public,* that is, attach values and assign weights to the assessed impacts in terms of their beneficial or adverse social effects.

Because social impact assessment is at an early stage of historical development, Wolf suggests that inductive approaches, such as case studies, may be more appropriate to it at this time than more rigorous scientific approaches. Such case studies could contribute to the building of a cumulative knowledge base that eventually could make more rigorous scientific studies possible. The cumulative effect, he advises, should be the systematic and comprehensive identification, measurement, and evaluation of all signifi-

cant impacts and their interrelationships.

Unlike other policy analysts, Wolf (1976) disassociates social impact assessment from program evaluation which he asserts elevates social performance to a planning objective. Impact assessment and evaluation research are directed at different analytic problems. Impact analysis treats its subject problematically, as a possible undesirable by-product or spillover effect of an intervention. Evaluation research, on the other hand, primarily seeks to assess program performance or outcomes in relation to specified program objectives. Both evaluation research and social impact assessment may be considered a part of social policy analysis. Both are decision-oriented and aimed at policy choice, program evaluation on the basis of past performance and social impact assessment on the basis of unanticipated future consequences. Conceivably, the baseline data needed for forecasting in social impact assessment could be derived from other sources as well, such as census data, or agency program data, depending on the level of analysis and the appropriateness of the data.

## FAMILY POLICY

Myrdal (1968) suggests that family policy can be nothing less than social policy. Kamerman and Kahn (1976) state that family policy is "everything government does to and for families." Included in their definition are governmental policies and programs designed to achieve *explicitly* agreed-upon goals regarding families, as well as those which are addressed to families *without* the benefit of such agreed-upon goals. Also included in the definition are governmental policies and programs that are *not* specifically or primarily addressed to families but which nonetheless have consequences for families. *Explicit* family policies are those in which consequences for families are deliberately structured, such as adoption, foster care, family planning, and programs for battered women. *Implicit* family policies, those that have nonfamilial objectives but which nevertheless affect families, involve such programs as special education for handicapped children, the retirement test for social insurance beneficiaries, deinstitutionalization programs for the mentally ill and mentally retarded, as well as the development of nuclear energy and construction of nuclear power plants.

The concept of family policy, as presently used, incorporates the criterion of "family well being" which may be used as an objective, goal, or standard for formulating and evaluating policy, as well as the assessment of public actions and decisions in terms of their consequences for families or particular categories of families. Such consequences may be intended, unintended, direct, or indirect. Thus, according to Kamerman and Kahn (1976), family policy may be conceived of both as a field of activity and as a perspective. As a field of activity, it includes such programs as family planning, food stamp programs, income maintenance programs, foster care, adoption, homemaker service, day care, and family therapy. In more recent years, it has also included employment services, manpower programs, housing, health services of various kinds, nutrition programs, child development programs, a range of personal social services, and special programs for women. Thus, it would appear that the domains of family and social policy have considerable overlap. The criterion of family well-being extends the domain of family policy into many more areas, such as taxation, land use, transportation, the environment, and energy, to name only a few. Indeed, as Kamerman and Kahn (1976) note, the family well-being criterion could extend family policy into *all* policy areas.

The purpose, however, that family policy might serve remains unsettled. The family well-being perspective would suggest that the goal of family policy is to ensure the well-being of families, a broad goal subject to many interpretations. Indeed, this goal was suggested by the author in an earlier paper (Zimmerman, 1976). Gronseth (1967:9, 11) states that the goal of family policy is to influence the structure and function of the "nuclear extended family," presumably to facilitate its well-being. Family structure and functions were among the analytic categories used by the present author in a content analysis of existing and proposed federal legislation in relation to day care and foster care (Zimmerman, 1977). Another view suggests that the aim of family policy is to ensure that families with children have a just and reasonable share of the national income (Gronseth, 1967:12), primarily to stimulate economic growth. This is illustrative of *implicit* family policy. Some would include only families with

children as objects of family policy; others would also include families with other economically unproductive members, such as the sick, the disabled or the elderly; still others would exclude the aged and older children as objects of family policy. Gronseth (1976:18), on the other hand, asserts that family policy includes *all* families.

Since policy requires an object or set of objects and a declaration of intent, it is clearly premature to talk about family policy as though it already exists. No equilibrium among contending interest groups has been reached to date concerning its purpose and domain, except in narrowly circumscribed areas, such as child and spouse abuse, AFDC, foster care, and adoption. Curiously, discussions about family policy seldom focus on issues such as equity, efficiency, and redistribution, issues at the center of policy discussions in other areas. The lack of such a focus may help to distinguish a developing family policy from other kinds of policy. Thus, policy, in general, may be distinguished by its concern for efficiency; social policy by its concern for individuals, social relationships, and social purposes; and both by their concern for equity and redistribution. Family policy, if recognized, may come to be distinguished by its concern for family functioning as it affects the well-being of individual family members and society at large.

## FAMILY IMPACT ANALYSIS

Family impact analysis pertains to the analysis of possible outcomes or consequences of specific public actions for families. It is differentiated from social impact assessment by the application of family-related variables to the impact analysis. Family impact, analogous to environmental impact, is defined as the anticipated and unanticipated effects of changes on families that can be attributed to the implementation of a program or policy (Kamerman, 1976:4). Like social impact assessment, family impact analysis involves prediction and forecasting. This means that, given existing trends and actions, certain outcomes are likely to occur. Such outcomes may be direct, indirect, negative or positive, intended or unintended. Evaluation research can provide the baseline data needed for prediction and forecasting. Thus, such research that includes family variables can be considered a part of family impact analysis, particularly if it is conducted on an on-going basis.

The task of family impact analysis varies from situation to situation, although, in all instances, it offers a systematic, structured method for identifying, describing, and measuring the impact of policies and programs on families (Kamerman, 1976:10). In those rare situations in which data are available, knowledge about relationships among variables is relatively certain, and relevant variables are controllable, family impact models may be constructed to determine the effects of the introduction of new variables on the models. In those situations in which there is goal consensus, family impact analysis may be employed to determine the likelihood that policies, programs and laws will achieve such goals. In those situations in which goal consensus *vis-a-vis* families is lacking it can be employed to predict the outcomes of a given course of action in order to avoid agreed-upon negative effects for families, or to predict potentially different consequences of various projected policies for different families. Family impact analysis of pending legislation, policies, regulations, and guidelines, would make explicit their potential negative or positive effects or outcomes and their potential lack of coherence or consistency *vis-a-vis* families.

Models for family impact analysis identified by Kamerman (1976:18) include: (1) simulation models, both with and without the use of computers; (2) a descriptive, analytic model, drawing on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods; (3) a descriptive nonquantitative model based on expert judgment and assessment; and (4) a structured analytic model based on the use of check lists, such as that developed by the Family Impact Analysis Seminar at George Washington University. Such an analytic check list was employed by the present author (Zimmerman, 1977) to analyze the day care and foster provisions of two proposed and two existing pieces of legislation. It included: (1) their target populations; (2) their stated goals and objectives; (3) their service components; (4) their service conditions; (5) their conditions for federal financial participation (FFP); and (6) their assessed impact on families receiving or anticipated to receive such services (in Minnesota). Assessed impact pertained to family functions, family types, family stage of development, needs of individual family

members, family involvement in service design and implementation, family networks and neighborhood environment, and the congruence between stated goals, allocated monies and the number of families affected. The analysis allowed for comparisons to be made between the four pieces of existing and proposed legislation, fostering as a by-product an understanding and appreciation for the historical development of day care and foster care in this country over the last few years.

Mattessich (1977) offers further guidance for engaging in family impact analysis by using a probabilistic model. Suggested steps include: (1) the identification of policies with impact potential for families; (2) the specification of probable family impacts of policies; (3) a determination of the extent of the probable impact; (4) an evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of probable intended and unintended impacts; (5) a determination of the extent to which the intended impacts are likely to be realized; (6) a comparison of alternative policies in terms of their advantages and disadvantages as well as the absence of any policy; and (7) final recommendations. Procedures for carrying out each of these steps require further elaboration. Also, the extent to which all of these steps can be realized in a single impact-analysis effort or are appropriate to all impact-analysis situations has yet to be empirically determined. The lack of data needed for forecasting and the inability to establish experimental controls or conditions needed for prediction suggests that family impact analysis suffers from the same kind of problems as social impact assessment. Thus, it risks the danger of appearing similarly impressionistic, even with the employment of sophisticated models and statistical tools. For this reason, other kinds of research studies that attempt to examine the effects of policies on families should be encouraged. Their cumulative effect, as in the case of social impact assessment, could contribute to the development of the knowledge base needed for predictive family impact analyses.

## CONCLUSION

The fact that the United States has no clearly stated overall family policy is generally recognized. Family policy, at this point, is a conceptual term for loosely related activities, sponsored and funded by the government, that affect families. The goals and objectives of each of these varied activities have yet to be systematically examined for consistency and for their underlying assumptions. To gain a clearer sense of the overall direction of these activities and their long-and short-term consequences for families, such an examination is clearly needed, particularly in an area as controversial and emotion-laden as the relationship between families and government. Perhaps family impact analysis, a relatively value-free, rational policy tool, can help to perform this function and eventually lead to some consensus regarding the goals and objectives of an overall family policy, if such a policy is regarded as desirable. Some of the policy models outlined at the outset of the paper may help to suggest other strategies for achieving goal consensus with respect to an overall family policy in terms of interest groups, elite preferences, necessary compromises, and organizational and institutional processes. Whatever else may be said, the analytic findings derived from the employment of the rational policy model, of which family impact analysis is a part, will need to be incorporated in the actions suggested by other relevant policy models.

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