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POLICY–PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK: MODELS AND ISSUES

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The emergence of policy–practice is a recent development in social work. In this article, policy–practice is defined as a direct social work practice mode with the potential to strengthen the social work profession's abilities to meet its century-long commitments of providing policy-informed services to those in need of them. At the same time, policy–practice advocates for and participates in policy implementation and change. This article examines policy–practice and places it within the context of the profession's historic cause–function debate and identifies several barriers that have complicated development. Most important, the article reviews five policy–practice models found in the literature: (1) social worker as policy expert, (2) social worker as change agent in external work environments, (3) social worker as change agent in internal work environments, (4) social worker as policy conduit, and (5) social worker as policy itself.

ONE contention that has continually challenged the social work profession is cause–function. The cause–function debate involves the issue of whether social workers should help their clients accept (or adapt to) the social situations in which they find themselves or whether they should challenge (or attempt to change) the social situations of their clients, thereby participating in the alteration of society itself (Rein, 1970).

Porter Lee (1937) highlighted the distinctions between social work as cause and as function at the 1929 National Conference of Social Work. One of Lee's major purposes in examining the issue was to inform social workers about the divisiveness of the issue so that they could resolve the problem. Since Lee's time, other scholars also have implored social workers to relieve the tensions surrounding the issue (Chambers, 1962; Schwartz, 1969).

However, in the face of theoretical and ideological differences that have made it extremely difficult to merge the most divergent aspects of the issue, it is clear that the dilemmas posed by cause–function continue to be problematic for the profession.

Only infrequently has social work engaged extensively in cause activities, the last time being the 1960s. During that decade, many social workers abandoned traditional social work roles and engaged in attempts to change society. Called community organizing by some and political or social action by others, these cause activities were controversial. As the turmoil of the decade subsided and financial support for community organization and other roles was withdrawn, most of social work resumed a more conservative posture and withdrew from social activism.

EMERGENCE OF POLICY–PRACTICE

A variant of the cause-function debate

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has surfaced in the past decade: The focus is the juxtaposition of social policy and social work practice; the outcome has been conceptualized as policy–practice. This article identifies several of the barriers associated with the advancement of policy–practice in social work, reviews a range of policy–practice models that others have already described, and proposes a working definition of policy–practice. Because policy–practice is a nebulous concept at this stage of its development, the explication of issues and models should assist both in consciousness-raising about the policy–practice movement and in clarifying the different perspectives about policy–practice. Meeting these objectives could provide the impetus for the social work profession to develop practice technologies more closely linked to its historic change mission as it continues into the 1990s. In addition, meeting these objectives could stimulate the profession to confront the challenges posed by the clinicalization of social work during the 1980s, including its movement toward private practice.

The recent momentum for what is currently called policy–practice began in the late 1970s. It came from policy-oriented social work educators who were concerned about the lack of policy content in social work curricula, the lack of integration of policy content with social work practice curricula, or the tendency of clinical social workers to see policy issues only as the context for the intrapersonal or interpersonal dilemmas of clients, thereby defining those policy issues as outside their professional responsibility. As early as 1959, Kahn identified a policy role for direct practice social workers. Two decades later, he (1978–1979) advocated for policy-conscious direct social work practice. The merging of practice and policy was reconceptualized as "policy–practice" in the early 1980s by Jansson (1984) and addressed by several others (Dear, Briar, & Van Ry, 1986; Pierce, 1984; Schorr, 1985) during that decade as well. Policy–practice is not analogous to grassroots community organizing or other forms of direct social action because it

attempts to integrate direct social work practice with social policy (both theory and outcome), not large-scale political reform. Thus, policy–practice seeks to integrate direct social work practice with a more technical, policy-oriented theory base than that of community organization or social action.

POLICY–PRACTICE ISSUES

One of the most difficult dilemmas impeding the development of policy–practice is its lack of a commonly accepted definition. Is policy–practice different from other modes of social work practice? If it is different, what are its unique characteristics? Is all social work practice policy-related? Answers to these questions are not clearly addressed in the few suggested definitions. For example, Frey (1988) viewed policy–practice as

a problem solving framework whose purpose is to enable practitioners to systematically and concurrently address both the personal issues of their clients as well as the policies and practices that shape the provision of services and resources so that appropriate action, or policy intervention strategies, can be developed to utilize policy to support effective client services. (p. 2)

This definition is helpful in identifying certain functions of policy–practice. However, it fails to distinguish between policy–practice and other modes of social work practice. Further, it does not define how policy–practitioners behave, nor does it identify them. Jansson (1990) has stated that policy–practice is "the use of conceptual work, intervention, and value clarification to develop, enact, implement, and assess policies" (p. 24). This definition also fails to identify who performs policy–practice, and it does not address the level at which policies are developed, enacted, implemented, and assessed.

This failure to clarify who actually is engaging in policy–practice is another problem area retarding the development of policy–practice. Are policy experts performing policy–practice or conducting policy analysis when they analyze policy to

predict its effects? Are direct practitioners who try to change policy on behalf of clients conducting policy–practice? Are administrators and planners policy–practitioners by definition because they design or implement policy? How might policy-related activities differ by roles, education or training, and functions of those who conduct them?

Another dilemma concerns where policy–practice is conducted. Is it done at the social worker-to-client level, the social worker-to-organization level, the community level, the legislative level, or at each of these levels? Does the form of policy–practice depend on the level at which it is practiced? Until the questions about level and foci of intervention are answered, the education and training of policy–practitioners will remain diffuse.

One issue relates to the lack of certainty about whether policy–practice is integral to or separate from core social worker job specifications. Is policy–practice conducted "on the job" and "in load"? Or, is it done as a part of a different set of social work commitments and responsibilities during off-duty hours or in sites other than the organizations where social workers are employed?

Another question is, is policy–practice a component of the repertoires of all social workers or a part of what only certain social workers do? This unanswered question reopens the prickly generalist–specialist debate in social work, but that cannot be avoided. In many ways, it is as difficult to address this problem as it is to define policy–practice.

These areas of uncertainty illustrate the complexities associated with the development of policy–practice in professional social work. Because they have not been resolved, much faulty communication has already occurred. Hence, it is time for serious discussion and debate about how to ameliorate these and other dilemmas that social workers have encountered.

POLICY–PRACTICE MODELS

The following policy–practice models, although not mutually exclusive, depict different perspectives on how policy–practice has been conceptualized to date. At this point, they are, for the most part, based on practice experience and nonsystematic observation only. The models do not resolve the issues discussed previously. However, they do introduce a range of social work roles and activities that must be considered before greater clarity about policy–practice can be achieved.

Social Worker as Policy Expert

In this model, the social worker conducts policy analyses, assists with the formulation of social policy, or provides expert knowledge and skills pertaining to the policy process. These activities generally are done at the community and legislative levels. They are integral to the social worker's job and explicated in the job description.

This model of policy–practice is exemplified by Jansson (1984):

Social workers require a series of practical skills if they are to participate in the making of policy. At no prior time have staff in the social or human delivery systems encountered more controversy than in the 1980s. Not to participate in social welfare policy is tantamount to acceding to drastic cuts in social programs in the federal government's role as well as to the narrowing of program eligibility to the point that only restricted groups, such as the very poor, can receive assistance. (p. 53)

Jansson has maintained that the practice of social welfare policy is recognized by a series of roles and skills used in the various phases of policy development. The policy roles he has identified are congruent with the various phases of policy development, including recognizer and definer of social problems, program designer, trouble-shooter, error detector, and change agent. A series of policy skills are required to operationalize these policy roles—value clarification skills, conceptual skills, interactional skills, political or conflict management skills, and position-taking skills (Jansson, 1984).

The conclusion can be drawn that policy–practitioners who fit the specifications of the Jansson model are policy

specialists; that their formal training occurs in social policy (or related) sequences or tracks; and that their domain is the macro or indirect rather than the micro or direct practice sphere. For the most part, they do not interact directly with individual clients or their families. Their function is either to mold and shape or to analyze social policies so that the best services possible are available for those individuals and families when they are needed.

In a later work, Jansson (1990) acknowledged that policy–practice is not the exclusive domain of policy experts. He stated that direct service practitioners can become proficient policy–practitioners but that the two kinds of practice are "markedly different" (p. 27). Direct service practitioners who perform "policy-sensitive practice" or "policy-related practice" cannot be called policy–practitioners because policy–practice seeks "policy reforms that benefit a range of persons" (pp. 30–31), not merely an individual client or a family.

Social Worker as Change Agent in External Work Environments

This model does not assume specialized training in social policy, nor would a practitioner necessarily exclusively use indirect practice methodologies. Rather, the policy–practitioner who operates as a change agent in external environments could be either a provider of direct services or an administrator who also is involved in advocating for or engaging in change activities that are separate from his or her primary social work role and outside the organization in which he or she is employed. Policy–practice, according to this model, requires many of the same skills used by the policy expert. However, these skills are neither operationalized within the host agency nor are the policy–practitioner's work-related clientele the system targeted for change.

This model rests on empirical evidence (Dear et al., 1986). In the Dear et al. study, 8 full-time policy–practitioners, 8 managers, and 14 direct service practitioners, all of whom were involved in policy change

outside their agencies of employment, were interviewed. Findings revealed that job titles and functions among macro and direct service practitioners are similar to those of other social workers. However,

policy practitioners are deliberately involved in an array of other systems changes which are *not* necessarily explicit components of their job descriptions. Among managerial and planning respondents these change roles include policy development within state agencies regarding client eligibility for services, testifying, legislative development work, and educating other service providers about the needs of special populations. . . . Direct service practitioners not only carry caseloads but are advocates for groups such as the homeless, or others whose needs are not being addressed. Some of them are identified as leaders of emergent social movements developed on behalf of a special client group. (Dear et al., 1986, p. 15)

The researchers concluded that clinicians as well as administrators and planners carry out policy–practice (as the researchers define it) but do so largely in addition to the functions for which they are paid. Dear et al. further assert that, with some important exceptions, social work education is not preparing its students for this type of policy–practice activity.

Social Worker as Change Agent in Internal Work Environments

In many respects, this model resembles the change agent in external work environments model. However, there is one important difference: The social worker's policy change focus is within his or her agency of employment. Furthermore, this model implies that the policy–practitioner is a direct service provider who assumes a policy change role because he or she is aware that agency policy is not conducive to the effective delivery of services or that policy deficiency is inhibiting the meeting of identified client needs for which there is no extant policy.

Brager and Specht (1973) have typified the agency as an ecology of competing interests, with at least three constituencies (board of directors, administration, and staff) vying for ascendancy. According to

this analysis, staff may press for organizational changes in pursuit of their own or their clients' interests. Although not all organizational or policy change instigated by staff fits the policy–practice model, much of it does.

The basic tasks in changing organizations from within by lower- or middle-echelon staff have been described by Resnick (1980). Resnick has asserted such change activities are legitimized by professional purpose as well as by organizational norms. According to him, the requisites for changing the organization from within include a change agent (the policy–practitioner) who assembles a group of colleagues (an action system) that has an interest in changing a selected aspect of their organization. Two categories of tasks are required by these policy–practitioners: (1) analytical and (2) interactional. The analytical tasks are goal selection, prediction of resistance, and selection of primary strategies. The interactional tasks are the development of the action system and the presentation of change proposals to agency administrators or decision makers.

The focus of this model is on organizational change. It is based on the need for the policy–practitioner to understand the policy formulation process within the host agency, to interest others in the need for change and to transform that interest into an action system, to be able to assess organizational processes and set clear goals, and to be willing to take career or other risks in the pursuit of organizational change.

Social Worker as Policy Conduit

As policy conduit, the policy–practitioner is both the implementer of organizational or legislative change and the sounding board for the effects of policy on clients. The policy–practitioner in this model is the connection through which enacted policy is translated into practice. He or she also is the point at which the implications or effects of policy implementation are experienced and transmitted back to the policymakers. According to Kahn (1978–1979), socially potent direct

practice must be policy-informed because policy is enacted through practice. Policy consciousness is the foundation of such practice. The policy–practitioner converts policy to practice and provides antennae for policymakers to verify the impact of policy or the need to change and create policy.

Briar and Briar (1983) have stressed that policy-conscious clinical social workers are in a uniquely advantageous position to study the effects of social policies, to quantify them, and to report their observations back to policymakers:

One of the best ways of determining the impact of a social policy is to conduct an experiment in which the policy is implemented and its effects described and measured. Obviously, when such experiments are carried out on a large scale, they are extremely costly. However, when a policy is implemented, its effects on the life of any one person are specific, every bit as specific as the effects of a direct service practitioner's intervention. This comparison works both ways—that is, the social worker's intervention at the case level, especially when they involve intervention in the environment, may be thought of as mini policy experiments. Incorporated into a program for thousands of people, these same interventions become a social policy. This suggests the opportunity the clinical practitioner has to collect invaluable information about the effects of current policies, policy deficits, and potential policies. Moreover, precisely because the practitioner's information is tied to specific people and situations, it sometimes has a more dramatic impact on policymakers than an array of abstract information. (pp. 53–54)

Thus, the policy–practitioner who practices according to the specifications of this model is "in a position to be the eyes and ears of policymakers, whose decisions typically are made in places remote from their impact" (p. 54).

Social Worker as Policy

This model of policy–practice is of a different order. The policy–practitioner, who by definition is a provider of direct services to clients, becomes the embodiment or personification of policy. The policy–practitioner is the artery through

which policy flows in its implementation. Additionally, his or her values, principles, and theoretical assumptions become the actual policies that inform the nature and quality of service provided. In this situation, social work practice cannot be distinguished from the personalized policies of the practitioner. How practice is conducted by the social worker is, in effect, policy.

Pierce (1984) has referred to these policies as "personal policies":

The *social worker* is one primary resource available to the client. The resources that workers can provide are based in the professional knowledge, values, and skills they possess. Some of the available resources include support for self-determination by and social justice for all clients; problem solving skill, including communication, problem identification, involving and . . . planning with others, assessment, carrying out plans, and evaluating results; knowledge of resources, policies, and human behavior; access to other needed resources; and collaboration with members of related helping professional groups.

Ideally, the professional would make all these resources available to clients. The worker's personal policy regarding the allocation of these resources modifies their availability and usefulness to the client. The worker's individual limitations and interests, including level of competency, interact to affect the client's full receipt of resources from social workers. The significance of such worker policy and its impact on professional practice, either as a positive or negative influence, has received scant attention in the literature. (pp. 43–45)

Schorr (1985) has asserted that a practitioner's involvement in policy can be viewed in at least three ways:

First, the very nature of professional practice may be an expression of policy that is stated implicitly, or indeed hidden. Second, the all but unnoticed structure of agency practices (where the office is located, whether one visits or offers office appointments, intake arrangements, and so forth), pursued without thought by the practitioner, may determine clientele and the nature of interaction. Third, whether the practitioner listens to the client as though in a stable social environment where conditions and values are relatively unchanging and the client is properly framed against former clients

reflects a deafness to a dynamic society, which is itself a policy assertion. (p. 179)

It is Schorr's contention that practitioners may respond to the policy dimensions of their work in at least three ways. They may decide differently about matters that lie within their own control, attempt to change agency policies and procedures, or try to bring about more fundamental conflict-ridden change. These are the choices they must make as professionals (Schorr, 1985).

It is clear that these perspectives differ widely, which makes discussion about policy–practice difficult. What seems to be needed at this time to guide discussion is a working definition of policy–practice. The author of the current study offers the following:

Policy–practice in social work is an approach in which social policy and direct social work practice are combined. It is practiced by frontline social workers or supervisors in either public or private settings. Requisite to policy–practice behavior is the requirement that direct service practitioners (including supervisors) understand and analyze the effects of extant social policy on clients *and* participate in the modification of social policy that is harmful to clients and in the elimination of policy deficits by working for new policy. These behaviors are operationalized at several policy levels: the personal, the organizational, the community, and the legislative.

This definition excludes the social worker as policy expert. The reason for this exclusion is that policy experts generally are not direct service practitioners and are not trained to provide direct services. Most aspects of the other four models described previously are included, as are Jansson's (1990) policy-sensitive and policy-related practice forms. Key concepts in the definition are: the identification of who the policy–practitioner is (direct service worker or supervisor); the reciprocal relationship between policy and practice; the multiple levels at which the effects of social policy must be both understood and analyzed; and the mandate for a proactive stance on the part of policy–practitioners to change or modify policy.

RECONCILING THE DIFFERENCES IN THE 1990s

One indication of the momentum of the policy–practice movement was the formation in 1989 of the Social Welfare Policy and Policy Practice Group (SWPPPG). The group was formed to address the lack of a national forum for social welfare policy and policy–practice faculty. To accomplish this purpose, it obtained recognition from the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and issued calls for policy–practice papers to be presented at the 36th annual program meeting (APM) of CSWE in 1990 (SWPPPG, n.d.). Several papers on policy–practice (Appleby, 1990; Hagen & Davis, 1990; Haskett, 1990; Koroloff & Mason, 1990; Wintersteen, 1990; Wyers, 1990) were presented at that APM. Subsequently, a call for papers on policy–practice was made for the 1991 APM.

The next steps toward the realization of policy–practice as legitimate social work involve debate about the various concepts of policy–practice and experimentation with them in both educational and practice environments. The review of policy–practice models demonstrates the rather serious differences that exist among policy experts insofar as the relationship between social policy and social work practice is concerned. At one extreme is the position that policy–practice is a function of specialized policy analysis and conducted far from the arena of agency practice. The other extreme is the position that all direct practice or clinical social workers are policy–practitioners and that many of them are unaware that their practice cannot be separated from policies, especially their own personal policies. It is hoped that the definition offered in this article will prompt further discussion about these differences so that progress toward reconciliation can be facilitated.

POLICY–PRACTICE AND SOCIAL WORK CURRICULA

The models presented in the current review can be loosely defined as a contin-
uum of policy–practice. One aspect of the diversity among the models is the range of social work practice skills required of the policy–practitioners. Policy–practice at the policy expert level requires knowledge of the legislative process and of inter-organizational behavior and change, the ability to analyze proposed social policy, skills in advocating and taking positions, research and needs assessment skills, and the ability to conduct policy evaluation and implementation analyses. At the other end of the spectrum, policy–practice at the personal policy level calls for, among others, the skills to operationalize social and psychological theory; to select appropriate theory and to link it to the real needs of the client; to translate a high level of self-awareness and self-consciousness into thoughtful interventions; to choose interventions appropriate to the needs of the client; to manifest the awareness that intervention selection is a policy choice; and to make a commitment to change organizational policies and practices, which includes the willingness to develop the expertise to accomplish that objective. This repertoire of skills is extremely broad; it is not easily acquired and calls for an integration of policy and intervention theory not yet achieved in most schools of social work. One insightful example of how one school has integrated social policy and clinical social work practice has been provided by Hart (1988).

Another aspect of the diversity is reflected in the various curricula required to teach the skills called for in the various models. These curricula range from macro to micro and from legislative action to direct practice with clients and their families. Most US graduate schools of social work offer concentrations or specializations in planning, administration, and management (or some combination thereof) and indirect service practice. Because they are specialized curricula, there is usually little opportunity for students to master content in more than one of them. Thus, integration of both macro and micro theory and practice content is difficult for students to achieve. Integration may be more possible in

generalist models, which typically are not central foci in graduate social work programs. Furthermore, each of the models calls for a different (if overlapping) set of policy skills and strategies as well as different approaches to integration with social work practice skills.

Currently, the policy curricula in the various schools of social work may be insufficient to meet the requirements of the policy–practice concept. According to a recent study done by Haskett (1989),

Nearly two-thirds of the schools require two courses in social policy for MSW [master of social work] candidates who do not have advanced standing status. However, 27 of 28 schools responding to the question of advanced standing policies reported advanced standing for [bachelor of social work students] and others who can pass a place-out exam, and for most of these students, only 1 course in social policy is required. (p. 4)

Only 25% of the schools in the Haskett study require more than two policy courses. Furthermore,

many schools offer a general course in social policy followed by a second (or third) substantive course in which the student can choose from options such as family policy, health care, women's issues, the elderly, mental health, child welfare, professional issues and the future of social work, and adult and juvenile justice. A number of schools have a general course on the social welfare system or social welfare policy and services and a second course in policy analysis. At other schools, the second course in social policy offers the option of concentrating on social treatment or policy, planning and administration. Some schools do a combination of all the above. (p. 5)

The policy curricula in the graduate schools are extremely varied. In only a few does there seem to be an opportunity to integrate social policy with social work practice content. The models reviewed in this article and the proposed working definition of policy–practice suggest that several modifications be made in social work curricula.

Adherence to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics

The NASW (1987) code specifies the ethical responsibilities of professional social workers to change or modify social work organizations when necessary and to promote the general welfare of society. Operationalized, these responsibilities provide an ethical legitimacy for policy–practice that must be understood by faculty and students.

Expansion of Social Policy Content

The Haskett (1989) study showed that policy content is usually restricted to one or two courses. This underrepresentation of policy content is insufficient to meet the demands of a stronger policy–practice focus. Serious attention to social policy, both amount and nature of content, is indicated.

Integration of Social Policy and Direct Practice Content

Because policy–practice is based on the reciprocal relationship of policy and direct practice, real efforts to integrate content about each must be made. This is an area in which discussion and agreement must happen before integration can be achieved. The links are not easily discerned in all instances, and much work is required here.

Greater Attention Given to Generalist Practice

Specialization by practice method (e.g., direct practice versus administration) mitigates against integration of the methods available to be learned. Generalism, especially if it were based on core knowledge from both direct practice and social policy, would enhance the development of policy–practice.

Inclusion of the Policy Process in Policy Sequences

Before policy can be formulated or modified, the tasks and phases of the policy formulation process (Jansson, 1984; 1990) must be understood. This process must be known and integrated with

practice behaviors at the level of personal policy as well as organizational and legislative policy.

Inclusion of Content on Organizational Change

Without this content, students remain ignorant of organizational theory and dynamics and unaware of the potential to change the organizations where social work is practiced. This content should include both intraorganizational and interorganizational theory.

Inclusion of Radical or Critical Theory

A thorough examination of the theory base taught in social work curricula might determine that radical or critical theory (Longres, 1990) and organizational theory are lacking. If this is the case, these theories must be included in the appropriate content areas and assigned the same relative importance as psychodynamic or other psychological theories. Radical or critical theory is a foundation element for the teaching of proactiveness and the validity of social change.

ADAPT OR CHALLENGE: A RESOLUTION

The policy–practice models and the proposed working definition highlight differences between traditional and proactive definitions of social policy and their manifestations in social work. At the legislative and organizational levels, the definition of policy–practice and the skills and roles required to meet its specifications are not new to social work. Even though little is known about the effectiveness with which graduates of schools of social work are able to meet the social policy curriculum objectives of CSWE (Haskett, 1989), schools of social work do have some familiarity with those objectives and have attempted to prepare some social work students to meet them. At the direct practice level, however, policy–practice calls for an integration of social

policy and social work practice that has not yet been attempted in many social work curricula. To consider social work practice as integrally linked with social policy, especially at the personal level, is to challenge the conventional configurations of both social policy and social work practice. Policy–practice may have emerged because it represents one mechanism through which more attention can be given to the sociopolitical dimensions of social work. Many of those who advocate for additional sociopolitical activity on the part of direct practice social workers are concerned that social work has lost some of its important historical characteristics and strayed from its original purposes.

The models and definitions of policy–practice introduced in this article offer a contemporary manifestation of the nagging quarrel about the purposes of social work itself, as analyzed by Schwartz (1969). Is social work one job or two? None of the policy–practice models is oriented necessarily to either cause or function; each is neutral in that regard. Even though the models that pertain to legislative and organizational activities are generally perceived to be more applicable to social activists and the models more closely linked to direct practice are believed to be more germane to function, such is not actually the case. Any of the models can be used to maintain the status quo or to challenge and change the institutions of society, or to do both. This potential affords social work the opportunity to transform itself into one job rather than two, permitting it to use its scarce resources and limited energy on the meeting of goals and objectives and to ameliorate the cause–function family fight. If social policy and social work practice were integrated, in ways they have never been before, a stronger social work would result. In the next decade, the task is to work toward such integration through the systematic examination and refinement of policy–practice as a prototype of future social work practice.

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