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Heather Kanenberg

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Feminist Policy Analysis: Expanding Traditional Social Work Methods

HEATHER KANENBERG

*Department of Social Work, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown,
Pennsylvania, USA*

In an effort to move the methodology of policy analysis beyond the traditional and artificial position of being objective and value-free, this article is a call to those working and teaching in social work to consider a feminist policy analysis lens. A review of standard policy analysis models is presented alongside feminist models. Such a comparison should help practitioners and educators work and train students to advance understandings of society beyond the androcentric norms. Of significance is how the inclusion of feminist policy analysis in social work curricula can assist with program accreditation.

KEYWORDS *feminist policy analysis, feminist, policy, social work education, policy analysis, policy framework, EPAS, accreditation*

INTRODUCTION

Social policy analysis has been a valued method of inquiry for decades and is now a product of many academic scholars in social work, political science, and economics (Midgley, Tracey, & Livermore, 2000). Inquiry into social policy has many approaches, and dozens of models of analysis are now available for researchers (DiNitto, 2005; Dunn, 1994; Gilbert & Terrell, 2005; Jansson, 2003; Karger & Stoesz, 2006; Marshall, 1999; Midgley et al., 2000). As Dunn asserts (1994), “The aim of policy analysis is to facilitate improved policies by creating, critically assessing, and communicating policy-relevant knowledge, an aim designed to promote individual and collective learning through policy discourse and debate” (p. 27). Of concern, however, is the

Address correspondence to Heather Kanenberg, Department of Social Work, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA 17022, USA. E-mail: kanenberg@etown.edu

relatively infrequent use of feminist models of policy analysis. Despite this fact, the feminist approach is ideal for understanding the implications of social and public policies for society. Additionally, use of feminist policy analysis will encourage those in academic institutions and in direct practice settings to challenge androcentric views that have been normative to date.

An understanding of the methods of policy analysis is requisite. First and foremost, across all disciplines it is clear that a framework must be employed to guide a policy. Karger and Stoesz (2006) identify eight essential elements for a well-designed policy framework:

1. systematically analyzing a social policy or program;
2. reflecting the understanding that policy is context sensitive;
3. employing rational methods of inquiry;
4. utilizing an explicit analytic method;
5. basing the analysis on the commitment to derive the largest possible social benefit at the lowest social cost;
6. taking into account unintended consequences;
7. analyzing the policy within the context of alternatives; and
8. examining the impact of a policy on other social policies and program (p. 27).

A policy analysis framework can produce information and data that, when used by policymakers, will shed light on the ramifications and consequences of public policies. Policy analysis frameworks also can aid in understanding the potential impact on target populations, associated programs, other social policies, and administrative structures working toward policy implementation. Indeed, as Karger and Stoesz (2006, p. 28) observe, “untoward costs and injuries are more likely when the decision-making process is not based on a systematic framework for policy analysis.”

APPROACHES TO POLICY ANALYSIS

One approach to policy analysis is the rational or behavioral approach. This approach is identified as value-neutral and ultimately is in search of solutions that are relevant to the problem identified (van Wormer, 2004). In addition, the emphasis within this model is one of cost/benefit and increasing the benefit per unit cost. The model can be conceptualized through a decision-making matrix that might be used in agency, governmental, or corporate settings (Jansson, 2003). This approach to analysis presumes that analysts will identify objectives they wish to accomplish once the policy has been thoroughly studied. The policy alternatives then are selected based upon which is most likely to accomplish the stated objectives while also requiring

the least in expenditures such as money, time, and human capital (Jansson, 2003). This rational approach to policy analysis also calls for the recognition of the policy's effects on real-world conditions (DiNitto, 2005).

Incremental policy analysis results from researchers and policy makers studying one relatively small component of a policy at a time. This model results in elements of change that are small-scale revisions followed by an evaluation of the results. Once a determination has been made regarding the effectiveness of the implemented change, it is either revised again or a different element of the policy is then addressed (van Wormer, 2004).

Choice analysis involves the task of differentiating among essential components of policy design. The fundamental components of this approach include dimensions of choice among principles. Principles such as what [is offered], to whom [it is offered], and how [it will be offered] all are foundational to the choice model developed by Gilbert and Terrell. They propose questions about policy on dimensions such as social allocation, social provision, strategies for delivery, and financing, thereby serving as an analytic framework with which social workers can "order reality of complex phenomena" (Gilbert & Terrell, 2005, p. 67).

The cause and consequence approach to policy analysis is focused on assessing the full spectrum of a policy, from the identification of the social problem through policy implementation and assessment of the policy's impact (McInnis-Dittrich, 1994). This approach results in an evaluation and critical review of the worth of the social policy and its impact upon the original social problem.

Criteria or value-based analyses are centered on a value orientation that informs the entire process. Here the study of the policy and associated data is all contextualized and understood within the value framing the inquiry (van Wormer, 2004). The solutions and reform assertions are based on political feasibility as well as their propensity for advancing the desired goal. As an example, the work of David Gil is centered on prompting the analyst to consider the connections of social policy to the dehumanizing conditions of oppression and social injustice. The model he provides is focused on a value orientation that seeks to end oppressive policies and develop opportunities for social change to promote justice (Gil, 1998).

While there are many policy analysis models to be found in social work, political science, economics, and other social science disciplines, these represent a select few often used by the social work profession. A common thread among them is the goal of the researcher remaining "outside" the process; even criteria-/value-based analysis is structured such that the value framing the analysis is one asserted from a source beyond the researcher, such as the funding source or sponsoring program. However, we believe that such approaches are woefully inadequate for the discipline of social work; on the most fundamental level, these methods result in an incomplete understanding of their policy subjects.

FEMINIST POLICY ANALYSIS

In the policy arena, the sanctioned, formal, and legitimized actors hold the positions of power and the capacity to decide priorities for social, economic, educational, defense, and health care policies (Marshall, 1998). Policy analysis, therefore, is unable to be value-neutral. It is the position of feminist scholars that policy analysis is often silent, for example, on the issue of gender, resulting in traditional policy analyses with “partial and perverse understandings” (Harding, 1986, p. 49) of the ways in which women’s lives are impacted by policy (Shaw, 2004). Other traditionally oppressed groups as well often have been overlooked when policy researchers and analysts choose to focus on the problems and methods that are preferred by powerful people (Marshall, 1997). Those without power in our current social structure “are silenced, declared irrelevant, postponed and even co-opted” in both the work of analysis and the action that results from said work (Marshall, 1997, p. ix).

Feminist theory, and its “holistic view of the interrelationships between material, social, intellectual, and spiritual facets of human existence” (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006, p. 97), therefore, is useful for examining social policies. It also is a most appropriate method for use when looking at these factors and their impact upon individuals and communities. Feminist policy research brings gender into focus, asking “. . . how gender is constructed in welfare state policies, and how these policies are a force in ordering gender relations, through an examination of a wide range of contexts” (Sainsbury, 1999, p. 9). Perhaps one of the simplest and most salient claims of the feminist approach is that it is impossible to understand the social welfare policies of our world without understanding how they deal with women and other disenfranchised groups (Pascall, 1997).

The notion that “the personal is political” was first articulated in conjunction with consciousness-raising activities during the early years of the second wave of the feminist movement. As a tenet of feminist analysis, this premise establishes an interconnectedness between individual activities and societal structures. Van Den Bergh and Cooper (1994) add that, within the construct of “the personal is political,” social movements can influence a person’s behavior just as individual activities can exert influence on society. In addition, the personal-is-political principle compels an emphasis on reviewing individuals in relation to their social and political roots. As Frazer explains, “. . . it is obviously true to say that state government, and the legislation and administration which is its product, is directly relevant to our so-called ‘private’ lives” (1998, p. 58).

Feminist analysis raises a wide range of questions about policies starting from a concern for the position of women. Those questions are important for commitment to equal opportunities. Those questions are also important for

a broader evaluation of the “welfare state.” They supply social policy with a new armory of critical questions and a new agenda (Wilding, 1992, p. 112).

Feminist analysis then clearly is about explicitly putting women back in where they have always been but were never honored or identified. Proceeding with a feminist analysis means striking out against the models of analysis that call for pure objectivity and value neutrality in the pursuit of knowledge. Karger and Stoesz (2006), for example, assert that policy analysts must acknowledge their own values but base the analysis to be conducted on objective criteria. Other “gender-blind” analysis models presented in social work texts and published scholarship center the researcher’s analytical focus on the issue, the program and the social structures within which the policies function. Women as a population may be identified as a target of the policy or a recipient of the programming or services, but this feature typically is reviewed from an androcentric perspective and is at best a demographic assertion, rather than an area of analytic focus (Hyde, 2000). From the perspective of the majority of models of analysis, the question of gender (and gendered differences) is not asked, and the differential impact of social policies on men and women is not analyzed. Whether it is labor market, caregiving, health care, or safety and security policies being studied, an analysis of the potential positive or negative impact by dint of gender is not called for by models that are not expressly feminist. As Hyde (2000) asserts, “Even the rigorous liberal and progressive accounts of social policy are blind to gendered realities” (p. 423). Both conservative and gender-blind policy approaches fail to portray the historical and contemporary economic, political, and cultural circumstances of women. Instead, models dictate analysis based upon the programs and policies themselves, the impact on a profession, implications upon an organization, or their fiscal and logistic feasibility—not gender.

It is the authors’ submission that the questions asked in policy analysis cannot be value-free. Fundamentally, the analysis of social policies and the tools and methods used by social workers to conduct such analyses must move toward an anti-oppressive stance as the mission of our profession requires. Hence, it is essential that policy analysis methods point toward specific and value-oriented questions. As Hyde (2000) says so well, “Such analyses are necessary correctives to gender-blind and androcentric perspectives, which dominate discussions of social policy” (p. 430). Feminist social policy analysis serves as a solution to the customary patriarchal perceptions of what constitutes policy and what “good” policy should be. Policy analysis in social work is charged with considering whether a policy will empower and promote social equity benefiting the “have nots” as much as it is concerned with efficiency (Karger & Stoesz, 2006). While relatively sparse in the literature, feminist analysis has been used to better understand issues of social justice and current inequities.

Bell and Chase (1993) have revealed a persistent under-representation of women and minorities in educational administration through their use of critical feminist policy analysis. Shaw (2004) has used such analysis to explain the myriad ways that the 1996 welfare reform laws could be considered policy that undermines women's access to higher education. The use of feminist policy analysis also has been used to advance understanding of the ways in which race, gender, and class influence the cultural, social, and political factors that impact the well-being of immigrant women (O'Mahony & Donnelly, 2010). In addition, research using feminist policy analysis has resulted in a critique of current international revenue distribution and points to mechanisms and opportunities for "allocating a greater portion of international tax revenues to low-income countries," ultimately benefiting women and other traditionally oppressed groups (Brooks, 2009, p. 268). The incorporation of feminist theories in the process of social policy analysis opens up a rich democratizing agenda that includes exploring areas of silence, "non-events," and "non-decisions" for policy analysts to embrace (Marshall, 1999).

Models of Feminist Policy Analysis

A feminist approach to policy analysis should be about more than simply inserting women in the schema. It requires that one critique, reconceptualize, and contextualize policies as part of the decision making in a larger social system. It has been within the past two decades that feminist models of analysis have become evident in multiple disciplines (Beale, 1999; Beveridge, Nott, & Stephen, 2000; Burt, 2004; Diamond, 1983; Frazer, 1998; Gordon, 1990; Jackson & Jones, 1998; Marshall, 1999). A review of the most prevalent models is warranted as many may be unfamiliar with such methodological alternatives. However, there is no single feminist social policy analysis mechanism because there is not one fundamental feminist theory (Hyde, 2000; McPhail, 2003; Pascall, 1986).

Hyde (2000) presents a general model for gendered analysis in which she articulates two themes that serve not only to deconstruct gender-neutral assumptions but to indicate how prevailing approaches serve the patriarchal structure of the state. The first theme involves understanding the gendered origins of the policy. This includes understanding the political environment at the time of policy development as well as the historical and current political movements that function as an impetus for policy development. Examples of this theme include the Progressive and New Deal political eras that led to policies that protected women as laborers but also as mothers. The second theme of analysis with a feminist lens involves the analytical focus on how the state regulates gender (Hyde, 2000). Whether through direct legislation, organizational policies, legal proceedings, or program design, myriad techniques are used by those in power to shape the opportunities available for women. An example of this would be the way that current temporary

assistance to needy families programs impact and often control women's lives in terms of work and parenting in the name of "reducing dependency." Using a gendered analysis of social policy that includes the two themes above "aids in revealing how women's lives are regulated in ways that limit their options but uphold patriarchal values" (Hyde, 2000, p. 427).

A second model of feminist policy analysis is one developed by Catherine Marshall used widely when analyzing policies from the educational arena: feminist critical policy analysis. Feminist critical policy analysis, as developed by Marshall (1997), is best explained as neither a new theory nor a methodological approach to the study of policy. Rather, it uses existing theories and methods, namely critical theory and radical feminism, for a new realm of inquiry: policy analysis (Shaw, 2004). "Feminist Critical Policy Analysis is ideological, centers on gender, states a clear value base and identifies the formal and informal processes of power and policy that affect women's and men's advancement and full development" (Marshall, 1997, p. 7). The feminist critical policy analysis outlined by Marshall (1998) requires that the following issues be highlighted and studied during all policy analysis: "'gender,' the public sphere, and master-narratives; counter-public policy issues; state intervention; 'Outing'; symbolic policy and simplistic remedies; historical and comparative perspectives to include political and economic shifts; moving beyond essentializing labels; and critiquing bureaucracy, leadership, power, and community" (p. 7). Master-narratives are considered to be the discourse of debate that requires exploring who speaks and who is denied the power of language in the debate. Counter-publics can be described as those non-dominant persons and populations and their reality and lived experiences that occur outside the sanctioned public sphere. Feminist critical policy analysis assumes that when the policy apparatus creates and maintains male-normed systems, gender issues are considered by those in power to be issues of contest and dispute (Marshall, 1999).

Abramovitz has published several works that help to assert the realities of how economic and social policies in reality are all women's policies (Abramovitz, 2000, 2006, 2009a). Her critical analysis of the economics of care giving, the neo-liberal approach to social and economic policy, current tax policy and the welfare state have all used a feminist lens as the principal mechanism for her policy research (Abramovitz & Morgan, 2006; Abramovitz, 2000, 2006a, 2006b). Her non-traditional approaches to traditional policy issues have helped to increase awareness of the contribution that feminist policy analysis makes to our profession and to the work of line practitioners. The text by Blau and Abramovitz (2010) is a welcome addition to the social work landscape and serves students and practitioners alike. While it does not expressly utilize a feminist approach to policy analysis, the model asserted can be used as a tool to prompt the user to consider how feminist ideology can provide a context for the process of identifying "themes in US social

welfare policy that both impede and facilitate the practice of social work” (Blau & Abramovitz, 2010, p. 13). As Abramovitz (2000) further asserts, “The academy rarely welcomed and only reluctantly acknowledged feminist scholarship. Nonetheless, women scholars fought back, and by bringing women into view, transformed our knowledge . . .” (p. 12).

In her research on the welfare state, Nelson developed a model and methodology for her scholarship. This methodology includes “contrast-oriented and macrocausal comparative historical techniques” (Nelson, 1990, p. 125) and allows the researcher to review differences among and between policies, and their impact. This technique is best used with case histories that allow for contrasting and supporting elements to be viewed. In addition, the comparative historical elements allow for reviewing earlier functions of policy and drawing “causal inferences about macro-level structures and processes” (Nelson, 1990, p. 126). All of this is done with a larger assumption that methods other than Nelson’s tend to result in undifferentiated, decontextualized, overgeneralized views of the welfare state that neglect the role of gender, race, and class.

Glendinning and Millar (1991) review poverty and the invisibility of its impact on women. They assert that a new method of analysis, a challenge to current social policy, must be waged. In their approach to understanding the gendered nature of poverty (and policies creating poverty), the authors assert it is essential that data collection and organizational evaluations include questions of gender and that data be disaggregated by sex. In addition, a study of standards of living, use of time, and distribution of resources is required in the evaluation of policies and their implications as a means for explicating the differential impact upon men and women. Further, these variables should be studied with large samples rather than small case studies. Glendinning and Millar (1991) emphasize that studies conducted in this manner will produce more accurate and sensitive research that can serve as the basis for new policies that will promote equity for women.

There are many volumes of work that review social and economic policy from a feminist perspective (Beale, 1999; Beveridge et al., 2000; Burt, 2004; Diamond, 1983; DiNitto, 2005; Dominelli, 1991; Elman, 2003; Ferber & Nelson, 2003; Figart, 2005; Frazer, 1998; Glendinning & Millar, 1991; Gordon, 1990). However, very few provide a clear model for analysis. The published works generally discuss social and economic policy from a feminist perspective, presenting the findings of their policy analysis, but they do not articulate the methods used in the research. Only Marshall does. Glendinning and Millar (1991), Nelson (1990), and Hyde (2000) discuss general methodological themes and areas for emphasis, but they fall short of presenting the reader with the actual strategies for conducting research. However, Marshall does present a specific framework for policy areas from a critical feminist perspective. Marshall’s is one of two clearly explicated models of feminist analysis available in current literature. The second is the feminist policy

analysis framework presented by McPhail (2003)—social worker, educator, and author.

The Feminist Policy Analysis Framework

The feminist policy analysis framework represents an idyllic method for those new to teaching feminist policy. McPhail presents a social work model of analysis that moves beyond viewing the world in gender-neutral terms. McPhail's model includes a series of questions that she indicates are "not simple, as many inquiries invoke tensions and controversies about underlying debates within feminist thought" (McPhail, 2003, p. 44). Nonetheless, her feminist policy framework serves as a means for making women visible.

The model is grounded in both feminist thought and systematic policy research, thus yielding an ideal tool for the education of social work students as well as for research and study within the profession. McPhail (2003) asserts that the goals underlying the framework include identifying assumptions about and stereotypes of women that are embedded in policy, thereby moving toward the traditional patriarchal oppression of women. The process of analysis is pursued in an effort to address power disparities between women and men with the goal of bringing a more equivalent balance of power and control to women. Proceeding with feminist values of "eliminating false dichotomies, the reconceptualization of power, valuing process equally with product, renaming or redefining reality consistent with women's reality, and acknowledging that the personal is political," her framework upholds many of the six core values asserted in the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 1999). In addition, the feminist policy analysis framework is not entrenched in one feminist theoretical perspective (liberal, radical, social, lesbian, etc.). Instead, it is inclusive of questions and approaches that can be shared by many feminist perspectives in an effort to honor the multiple feminist identities extant in our world. The final value inherent in this framework is the assertion and fundamental understanding that all policy affects women. Women are not affected solely by public assistance and child care policy, as is often assumed; indeed, Social Security, Homeland Security, immigration, mental health, education, unemployment, and health care policies all directly and differentially affect women.

The questions here explore major themes of feminist analysis that are the issues of equality; special treatment and protection; the myth of gender neutrality; multiple identities; context of policy; language; rights and responsibilities; the symbolic versus the material; role equity; and both access to and assignment of power (McPhail, 2003). Such an inclusive and well-defined model will serve as a superb tool for those interested in assisting students with beginning (or advancing) their understanding of feminist policy analysis. However, a word of caution is warranted. The feminist policy framework

does have some limitations. While very thorough in the attempt to develop a structured set of questions to serve as the feminist mechanism for understanding policy, McPhail's model is a cumbersome process. Given the finite resources of the classroom, including time, it could be a challenge for faculty to convey the depth of the model while also covering more traditional methods. While it is clear that painstaking detail was taken to be inclusive as the framework was developed, it requires time and attention to convey such theoretical constructs in the context of an overall social policy or women's studies course.

Appropriateness for Social Work Education

As the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) current Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards assert:

Guided by a person and environment construct, a global perspective, respect for human diversity, and knowledge based on scientific inquiry, social work's purpose is actualized through its quest for social and economic justice, the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty, and the enhancement of the quality of life for all persons. (CSWE, 2010, p. 1)

The teaching of the feminist policy analysis method within BSW and MSW curricula can clearly be aligned with this mission to promote human rights and eliminate the oppressive policies that impact quality of life by identifying the ways in which social and public policy impacts the well-being of women and traditionally oppressed groups. The assertion by CSWE (2010) that social work programs are to "establish thresholds for professional competence" (p. 1) that must include engaging in policy practice calls for accredited programs' inclusion of content and coursework on social policy and policy analysis. The CSWE Educational Policy Statement 2.1.8, creates an expectation that the explicit curriculum will include course content designed to help students develop the capacity to "analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance social well-being; and collaborate with colleagues and clients for effective policy action" (p. 6).

Faculty will find themselves well served by including content on feminist policy analysis in courses (perhaps through additional assigned reading, as it is often missing in traditional policy textbooks). Such use and placement of feminist policy analysis would allow for programs to cite the content in self-studies as documentation of a clear effort to develop practitioners who are both keenly aware of the many ways in which policies affect the delivery of services and conscious of mechanisms for promoting a positive quality of life for clients and communities by addressing economic and social justice issues such as gender. In addition, it clearly grounds the educational content

of analysis within a theoretical framework (feminist theory) that can be articulated as a method for advancing critical thinking and the use of research to inform practice. Teaching students to use explicit feminist policy analysis methods allows for them to place women in the conversations where they exist but frequently are not acknowledged. Herein rests an opportunity to train social work students to utilize a critical and gendered lens to understand the phenomena that they see in the communities around them and to advocate for social change. Students also would gain an understanding and insight into the many ways women's participation is expected and simultaneously penalized by the state with respect to health and welfare programs.

CONCLUSION

As professionals and educators embark on the study of both federal-level and devolved state-level policies, the *method employed* is of critical importance. Policy analysis that poses as "neutral" is inadequate (Shaw, 2004). Instead, social work educators and professionals are encouraged to consider feminist methods of analysis to aid in the assessment of the gendered nature of social policies. The use of feminist policy analysis can result in recommendations for reform that acknowledge women's intersections with such policies while also inserting the values and tenets of the social work profession in the policymaking process.

Rose and Hanssen (2010) have found that

(a) the feminist perspective is wholly compatible with social work education and is about empowerment; (b) it needs to be given more emphasis and revitalization in social work education; (c) it is an essential, crucial, integral, and valuable perspective; (d) it should be taught across the curriculum; (e) it is consistent with the NASW Code of Ethics; and (f) it is difficult to teach to students who have been biased by society, and, therefore, we need ways to help students see that the feminist perspective is consistent with social work values. (p. 10)

Studies using feminist policy analysis ultimately have the capacity to advance our understanding that there are social policies other than welfare that are truly problematic for women and other traditionally oppressed groups. Feminist policy analysis also serves the researcher well since it assists in identifying disparities in power and classifies those who have access to the policymaking process for any policy studied. Finally, the product of the feminist policy analysis of public policies can provide data to serve as the foundation for social work educators and researchers in their pursuit of the amelioration of injustice, both in practice and in the classroom.

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