Social Works Perspective on Policy Making

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Abstract

Social Policy entails the study of the social relations necessary for human wellbeing and the systems by which wellbeing may be promoted. The social policies to which societies give birth may be understood as the way in which any particular society recognizes and gives expression to the interdependency of its members. Today social policies are huge, expanding, fast changing aspects of government. Good social service policy requires special knowledge and expertise. Today most public policy makers have no direct experience in social service /work and as a result they lack firsthand knowledge. Helping professionals, or for that matter clients and consumers, would bring needed knowledge and experience to public policy making. An understanding of social policy is vital for engaging practically with social work values, dealing with political and ethical questions about responsibility, rights, our understanding of 'the good society'.

Another reason for social workers to be politically involved is imbedded in the social change/social reform mission that is at the heart of the social work profession. Politicians can change policy that will either help or hurt clients; therefore social workers are obligated to be among those who are making policy. Keeping the above argument in mind the present paper is a review of existing literature social workers commitment to social policy. This paper focuses on linkages of social policy with other methods of social work. It also aims to through light on the immediate need, challenges and possible advantages of role of social workers in social policy formulation.

Keywords: social work, social welfare, social policy

Social Policy – Concept

Social Policy as an academic subject is in the habit of adopting all kinds of different approaches. That is one of its greatest attractions. It is necessarily interdisciplinary in nature as it brings in ideas and analytical methods from sociology, from political science and from economics; it employs insights from social anthropology, demography, socio-legal studies, social psychology, social history, human geography and development studies; it will frequently draw upon philosophy; in fact it will go pretty much wherever it needs to find the best way to study issues relevant to the achievement of human wellbeing. As an academic discipline, it is

not only drawing content from various fields rather it is also making interconnection for effective policy practice.

Social Policy is self-evidently concerned with the policy-making process, which has always entailed an element of intuition and creativity. Social Policy is concerned with hard evidence, technical theories and logical analysis, but it must also be creative. It often calls for imagination and insight. Social Policy is as much about feelings as about facts. To study Social Policy properly one needs commitment; one needs to be able to empathize with others; one needs to interpret the world around.(titmuss, 1974)

Early sociologists, such as Emile Durkheim (1893), endeavored to understand the complexity of modern societies in terms of the increasingly sophisticated ways in which people collaborate to produce life's necessities. The social policies to which societies give birth may be understood as the way in which any particular society recognizes and gives expression to the interdependency of its members. An academic and founding father of Social Policy, Richard Titmuss, in a later work (Titmuss 1970), drew on social anthropological evidence to suggest that preindustrial societies were based on gift giving. The interdependency of the members of supposedly 'primitive' societies could be sustained through an array of unilateral transactions or gift-relationships. The function of social policies in advanced capitalist societies, according to Titmuss, is to perpetuate such gift-relationships. In an age when societies are more complex, more differentiated and most transactions take the form of bilateral market exchanges, a system of taxes, benefits and public services enables us to give to one another: not just to our immediate neighbours, but also, importantly, to distant and anonymous strangers. Not only is it still possible to sustain the interdependent nature of our human existence, but – in theory at least – it is possible through the development of social policies to compensate for some of the 'person-made' or manufactured dependencies that contemporary society generates.

The goal of social policy is to maximize people's chances of a good life. Its substance, therefore, lies in the theoretical debate and practical definition of what constitutes the good life and the fundamental nature of human need.

Social Work and Social Policy

Social policy developed as an academic complement to social work, and the subjects have traditionally been close. As time has gone on, the interchange between the subject areas has fallen away. In intellectual terms, ironically, the subjects have grown closer in the course of the last 30 or so years. Social work is much less focused on social pathology than it used to be, and the practice of social work has also changed moving away from an indivisualised model of professional social work to an emphasis on care management. With that change, there is a greater emphasis on both the management of social services, an issue once considered to fall squarely in the area of social policy and administration, and the social context

in which policy decisions are made. Social work's practical emphasis on skills and methods of intervention still offers a useful complement to the skills and insights developed in social policy. (Spicker, 2010)

Policy practice is defined as using social work skills to propose and change policies in order to achieve the goal of social and economic justice. Policy practice is an integral element of social work as practiced in all settings—at the local, state, and national levels, as well as within micro, mezzo, and macro levels of intervention. Including policy practice in the daily life of social work practice is an effective and powerful avenue for enhancing the profession's goals and mission of social and economic justice.

When social workers are faced with community challenges, they recognize the need for policy practice—interventions in the larger systems in the client's social environment that will create the conditions conducive to growth, development, and empowerment. This recognition—of the need to effect change in larger systems to help individuals—dates back to the very beginnings of the profession, when people were understood within their environmental context, not as isolated individuals experiencing difficulties.

Similarities in Ideology of Social Work and Social Policy

The philosophy and mission of social work are based on a principle of helping people, both in their individual situations and in their collective circumstances. With the person-in-environment perspective situating individuals in the context of their social environments so thoroughly, social workers' attention is directed at both helping individuals change and at helping them change their environmental circumstances as well. This linkage of the person in the environment is found in the origins of the profession with both the settlement house movement and the charity organization societies.

Social justice, one of the core values of social work, serves as the basis for policy practice. The NASW Code of Ethics is clear in its emphasis on "promoting the general welfare" beyond the help offered for individuals. As the preamble of NASW Code of Ethics says "Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of the client. This statement in itself proves that the ultimate aim of social work is social justice, social welfare and social change which exactly coincides with the bigger objectives of social policy. The approach of moving from "case to cause" focuses beyond the individual client to recognize others in similar situations and identify broad community needs in an effort to build support for policy changes.

Taking this approach, the targets of the change process are not individuals, but that which impedes client development or oppresses clients. Policy practice seeks to remove environmental barriers and to increase opportunities available to individuals and families. Social workers engaging in policy practice are proactively

shaping and evaluating new service paradigms and programmes to meet the emergent needs. They are thoughtfully proposing policy-informed service delivery systems that will be sensitive to the diversity of clients needing services. Though policy practice is identified by some as a recent development in social work education, it is in fact central to the history of social work as a profession and has long been part of what community social workers do when they find unmet needs

Policy practice speaks to the core mission of social work. It is reflected in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics: "To enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty." It reflects the values that the profession holds: "Service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence." Effective policy practice involves learning how to apply the core generalist practice skills to larger social systems where the outcomes are not individual client change but larger system change in both laws and social conditions that will affect the lives of millions of families and individuals.

Social workers could be messengers who keep institutions and politicians informed of the situation in society and offer suggestions for solutions for improvements. Social workers have been given a mandate by society to take decisions that have an impact on the lives of those who need help.

Although the framework set by laws and policies is a strong one, laws and policies still have to be interpreted. Individual social workers, as well as the institutions and organizations they represent, have to take responsibility for their actions. It is the decisions and actions of the practitioners that form the basis of actual practice. It is the practitioners that render the social work accountable, and provide the different ways to solve the problems. The relationship between social work and social policy has been termed a point of integration or tangent by several authors (Reamer 1993; Fjortoft & Skorstad 1998; Kokkinn 1998;Villadsen, Gruber & Bengtsson 1998; Hegland 2000). No social worker can avoid drawing a connection between users' needs and publicly sponsored programs, regulations, or benefits. According to Doel and Shardlow (2005), the organizations in which social work is practiced have a significant impact on the shape of that practice. At present, these organizations are experiencing a rate of change, and fluid and unpredictable contexts of organizations can sap practitioners' and managers' energies. If there is a culture of defensiveness, it follows that policies will be implemented defensively (Thompson 2000).

The IFSW's definition of social work (IFSW 2000) also contains the words social change and social justice that covers policy-changing work. When we compare social work across national borders it is necessary to ask what the common features are and what the differences are. It looks as if the content of the education and the identity of the profession to a large extent is common But there is also a large difference linked to actual social problems, level of resources,

political framework and professional traditions (Huchinson *et. al.,* 2001, Oltedal 2003, Grønningsæter/Kiik 2009). It follows that it is not possible to understand social work without setting the social policy framework.

Social work policy scholars have only recently identified policy practice as an important aspect of social work generalist practice, though as noted above, it has clearly been part of the profession's ethical mandate for a long time. Jansson (2005) was one of the first social policy scholars to conceptualize policy practice as a distinct aspect of social work practice.

Social work's ethical commitment to social and economic justice is seen as the driving force behind the mandate for the profession's involvement in policy practice.

Similarities in Methodologies of Social Work and Social Policy

The term policy practice reflects an understanding of where this social work role fits with other roles within the profession. Policy is not just a topic social workers study and understand in order to help clients access programs and resources. The policy arena is also an arena for social work action, for social work practice, just as social workers practice with individuals, families, organizations, and communities. Social workers are advocates, to be sure, but that is not their only role in policy practice. Social workers are actively engaged in many aspects of policymaking and implementation. The definitions of policy practice, as articulated by other social work scholars, may vary somewhat from the one presented here, but all focus on changing larger systems through internal changes in community organizations' policies, state and federal legislative and rule changes, or through increasing funding levels for social programs. Further exploration of the complexities of policy practice in action requires an understanding of the matrix of opportunities for policy practice within the broad social environment in which both social workers and clients live.

Policy practice is inclusive of a number of different settings in social work practice at local, state, national, and even the international levels. Though there may not be comparable bodies in each level (particularly at the international level), the settings for policy practice include citizens advocacy, grassroots-level community organizations, nonprofit agencies (citizen's groups that shape policy and provide valuable community services), and the three branches of government. These settings across the different levels from local through international are the points of origin for the policies that affect clients and that set the parameters for the services social workers may provide. When social workers understand where the policy originated and where it needs to be changed, then they can plan effective strategies to influence that person or deliberative body. If Juan determines that the gap in services can be resolved in the local community, then he will not need to involve state or federal officials. If, however, he discovers that there are multiple gaps in service delivery due to lack of state and federal funding, then he may need to work at those levels to advocate for increasing funding in this area to meet the needs of vulnerable people.

Models of Social Policy Making

The Rationalistic Approach: Rationalistic models are widely held conceptions about how policy decisions are and ought to be made. An actor becomes aware of a problem, posits a goal, carefully weighs alternative means, and chooses among them according to his estimates of their respective merit, with reference to the state of affairs he prefers.

The Incrementalist Approach: has been outlined in the strategy of "disjointed incrementalism" advanced by Charles E. Lindblom and others. Disjointed incrementalism seeks to adapt decision-making strategies to the limited cognitive capacities of decision-makers and to reduce the scope and cost of information collection and computation. Lindblom summarized the six primary requirements of the model in this way:

1. Rather than attempting a comprehensive survey and evaluation of all alternatives, the decision-maker focuses only on those policies which differ incrementally from existing policies.

2. Only a relatively small number of policy alternatives are considered.

3. For each policy alternative, only a restricted number of "important" consequences are evaluated.

4. The problem confronting the decision maker is continually redefined: Incrementalism allows for countless ends-means and means-ends adjustments which, in effect, make the problem more manageable.

5. Thus, there is no one decision or "right" solution but a "never-ending series of attacks" on the issues at hand through serial analyses and evaluation.

6. As such, incremental decision-making is described as remedial, geared more to the alleviation of present, concrete social imperfections than to the promotion of future social goals.

The Mixed-Scanning Approach: Mixed-scanning provides both a realistic description of the strategy used by actors in a large variety of fields and the strategy for effective actors to follow. From an abstract viewpoint mixed-scanning provides a particular procedure for the collection of information, a strategy about the allocation of resources, and-we shall see-guidelines for the relations between the two. The strategy combines a detailed ("rationalistic") examination of some sectors-which, unlike the exhaustive examination of the entire area, is feasible-with a "truncated" review of other sectors. The relative investment in the two kinds of scanning-full detail and truncated as well as in the very act of scanning depends on how costly it would be to miss, for example, one hurricane; the cost of additional scanning; and the amount of time it would take. (Etzioni, A, 1967)

Generic model: Based on the above models of policy practice I am proposing another model called generic model, named after generalist practice of social

work. It highlights the role of social workers at every step, as policy practice is a secondary method of social work. The model, however, can tentatively be used to analyze the connection between social policy and social work education. Society's integration needs are historically variable. Similarly, social work education has changed historically, both because it has had to respond to different problems and because the state has advanced different objectives, frameworks and resources.

The role of social worker in policy practice comes in cyclical fashion. It starts by doing intensive research right from identifying problem from the list of "felt needs" of the people up to prioritizing them and select the exact and most alarming problem. This will then give a correct picture of existing social realities, which help in preparing a social construct for policy practice. Secondly he needs to orient the policy makers towards a centralized goal which is not porous to polarization and influences. On the basis of factual information, he should present alternatives ways to the group and then be an active participant of the debate and discussion which would follow. Social workers also hold an important role in policy implementation. As social workers are the professionals who are sharing a direct interface with people so, it is expected that they play a catalytic role policy implementation and analysis. Once policy practice is established than it feeds into social work education, where policies are theorized and conclusion are drawn from them, which further opens up avenues for intensive research and again the horizons broadens.
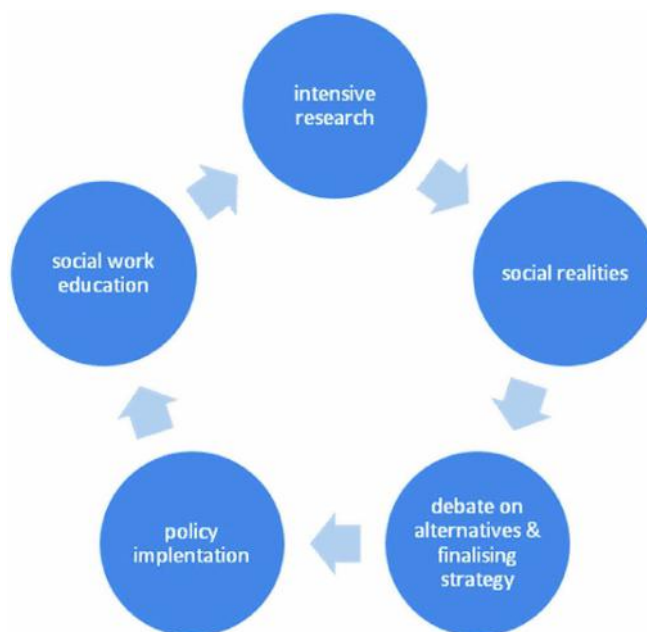

Fig 1. Generic model to policy practice

Debate on Role of Social Worker in Social Policy Making

Policy making has been historically regarded as the domain of the politicians and professional planners but today a variety of professionals are instrumental in it. These include teachers, researchers, medical professional, mental health professional and social workers. Particularly the role of social worker has been recognized over the years because of certain unique characteristics. Firstly because of the Interdisciplinary nature of the text of social work, it is seeing individuals not in bits and pieces but with a gestalt approach. Hence while dealing with macro level intervention it is taking into consideration the person-in-environment perspective which is crucial in translating theory of policy making into policy practice. Secondly research is as important as a secondary method of social work, professional practice, reaching out to people.

Social workers do not have to be in political office or hold positions of power in order to affect policy. Social workers and social work students have both the skills and perspectives (concepts, values, and beliefs) that are important in the policymaking process. These skills and perspectives are rooted in social work's history and experience of working directly with people to address the challenges and needs they face in their daily lives.

In an environment of reforms and change, social workers need to know the ways in which they can influence legislation; they need to know strategies for changing agency policies, and knowledge of the skills and tasks that are needed in policy reform work. Social policy-making is a creature of the new political systems, closely connected to the ideology, goals, role models and principles of the government and its bureaucratic proceedings. Leppik (1999) has noted that social policy making at state level includes a conscious taking of position on social issues.

Some social workers say they are not involved in policy practice because it really is not part of social work. While the review of NASW Code of Ethics clarifies the doubts that policy practice is not just part of social work, but an important part of the profession's role in communities. Some social workers say they are not engaged in policy practice because they do not know how to affect policy, do not know enough, neither they have a platform and nor they have the skills.

The other argument may be that - they do not have the time to engage in policy practice. To this the counterargument may be that social workers are simultaneously engaged in multiple roles available in social work practice, from the caseworker who works with individual and families about developmental issues, to generalist practitioners who works in multiple setting, including social action and policy practice. Social workers can engage in policy practice as part of their social work positions in agencies or in time off by going to active community groups, city council meetings, Panchayats and other venues to voice their opinions.

Challenges for Social Workers in Policy Making

In their daily work social workers seem to be most concerned about the encounter with the users, whether they are individuals, families or communities. It is difficult to have a conscious approach towards national policies; the persons you meet in your daily work become the most important concern for individual is family and significant others. Hence, it is difficult for the worker to raise the clients' level from micro to macro level approach, to inculcate an abstract and anticipative thinking and to seek opinions on larger issues.

Now the question arises that do we still feel that social workers can act as change agents? And also do the social workers represent a pressure on the welfare state? The immediate answer to this is yes. Despite the challenges and indifferent and alienated attitudes towards social policy issues, the social workers have in common that they are observers of society, spokespersons of people, and also have cooperation with the beneficiaries. It can be expected that they seems to represent a pressure towards maintaining and strengthening social services.

Conclusion

The present work introduced you to how social policy has been and continues to be a principal focus for social work practice. An attempt has been made to visualize the context that must be understood in order to select strategies that are likely to be successful in moving toward the goal of a more just society.

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Titmuss, R.M. 1974. "Social Policy: An Introduction". London: Allen & Unwin. The recent buzz around feminism attracts a lot more amusement than understanding and people often propose to have a humanistic approach rather than a feminist approach. But the point is understood after tracing the historical background of the educational, social, economic, political experiences of people who have undergone phenomenal exploitation. Thus education comes as a support, to counter the claims that seemed futile for centuries. '*As inequality between male and female was rarely recognised as a problem, or at most was seen as an anachronism that would disappear with coeducation* M Roland.'