

Understanding Family Policy

Theoretical Approaches

L. Zimmerman

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hirley L. Zimmerman

What the reviewers say . . .

"Understanding Family Policy illustrates the value and weakness of utilizing theories to analyze the real world. . . . The public policies cover the entire family life span, from severely handicapped infants to elderly disabled. This section shows care and understanding and should make it clear to students that public policies affect all age groups. . . . Zimmerman is recognized as a leader in the study of family policy. . . (and) I believe the book will be beneficial to students and instructors in understanding family policy."

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—Journal of Comparative Family Studies

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—The Prevention Report



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Acknowledgments

This book was written out of the belief that the relationship between families and public policies at all levels and in all areas is important, and important to recognize and understand. The privacy rights of families, which are protected by the Constitution, have made it easy to deny or disregard this relationship both conceptually and practically. Not helping matters in this regard is the fact that related developments in the fields of family and policy studies have been independent of one another, feminist theory being an exception. This book attempts to link the micro and macro in ways that hopefully will be useful to those who would like a conceptual basis for understanding the relationship between families and public policies and its underlying influences; for influencing policy processes as they relate to families such that their outcomes are supportive of families; and those simply who may find this area of study to be as deeply and intrinsically interesting as I do.

The help, support, and goodwill that I received from friends and colleagues in this endeavor are gratefully acknowledged: Richard Hey who read and commented on the first draft of the book in its entirety; Edwin Shneidman who read and commented on selected chapters; Jan Hogan, Geraldine Gage, Pauline Boss, Paul Rosenblatt, and David Olson who encouraged my efforts and supported the way in which I conceptualized the book; the Family Study Center at the University of Minnesota, which is where I began my work in this area; the Agricultural Experiment Station and All University Council on Aging at the University of Minnesota, which funded some of the research reported in the book, as well as the Minnesota Developmental Disabilities Planning Program; the family representatives who participated in the various research studies; and research assistants Joyce Schultenover, Sherry Mulroony, Carol Eide, Jacquie Tascher, each of whom carried out phases of the different studies.

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most of the time. Their names are: Peter, my spouse; Julie, Casey, Danny and Mike, our children; Lonnie, Irene, and Ellie, our three additional children; and finally, Rachel, Joel, Eli, and Joshua, our grandchildren.

Foreword

Dr. Shirley Zimmerman has drawn upon her vast experiences in family policy studies to provide an important guide to the development of family policy as it exists today and as it might be better developed tomorrow. In the book, Dr. Zimmerman has traced the development of public family values in light of our historical, philosophical, and cultural traditions, and developed a conceptual framework for analyzing these values and the impact of policy changes by drawing upon the disciplines of policy studies and family studies. In so doing, Dr. Zimmerman helps the reader to examine the effect of seemingly unrelated decision and policies upon families and our family values.

Our policymakers have begun to recognize that, for a variety of reasons, we have too long neglected the connection between policy choices and family outcomes. Through her insights in this book, Dr. Zimmerman helps to crystallize this recognition. It must be hoped that policymakers and public alike will take insight and understanding from her work, and realize that policy choices affecting families, even the choice to do nothing, are choices with critical consequences that can and must be carefully examined and weighed systematically as well as compassionately.

—Walter F. Mondale

PART I

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

CHAPTER 1

Family Policy: Definitions, Domain, and Concepts

This book is about family policy. Although the United States does not have an overall, official, explicitly stated family policy, it is now widely recognized that almost all government policies affect families directly and indirectly, intentionally or not. The aim of this book is to provide ways for understanding policy as process and content and the family dimensions of policy. Because no one theoretical framework can encompass all family policy phenomena and because such phenomena can be understood in more than one way, a larger rather than smaller repertoire of such frameworks is required. Such frameworks are useful because they provide the concepts necessary for ordering and assigning meaning to observations of policy phenomena related to families, and vice versa, thus facilitating better understanding of them.

The policy perspectives that this book presents are drawn from the policy studies field; they include the rational and incremental choice frameworks, interest group, elite, and game theories. The family perspectives that this book presents, drawn from the family field include: conflict theory, symbolic interaction, exchange theory, family stress theory, and the systems framework, with special emphasis on the latter. To illustrate their usefulness, some of these frameworks will be applied in examining the relationship between families and policy.

Many of the frameworks overlap conceptually within and also between the family and policy fields. Such overlap should be advantageous to policy analysts and family specialists as they interface with one another around issues of common concern. By becoming familiar with the unique application of the frameworks to policy and families, family specialists will be better able to identify and understand the policy implications of their research and clinical work with families, and policy practitioners will be better able to identify and understand the family

implications of their policy practice and research. The development of such common understandings portends both to improve the quality of family policy discourse, and to facilitate the development of policies that reflect better understandings of their family dimensions and implications. Those who work with policymakers, such as legislative staff, advocates, interest group spokespersons, school and health care personnel, social service workers in all kinds of settings and others just interested in families, have a special interpretive role to play in this regard.

To establish the terrain for the ensuing discussion, the remainder of this chapter will focus on definitions, of policy, social policy, and family policy, outlining their respective domains and highlighting their commonalities and distinctions.

Policy

DEFINITIONS, VALUES, AND ISSUES

According to Harold Lasswell (1968), policy focuses on fundamental and often neglected problems of individuals in relation to society. The term *policy* connotes choice with respect to the pursuit and achievement of goals or values. In contrast to topical issues, values persist and cut across topical issues that tend to wax and wane over time. Values pertain to individual freedom; family well-being; fairness, equity, or justice; equality of opportunity; life; rights; efficiency; economic security; quality of life; and so forth. Issues such as abortion, comparable worth and ERA, tax reform, deinstitutionalization, welfare reform, catastrophic health insurance, surrogate parenthood, teen pregnancy, homelessness, and jobs programs all involve values. Because all values related to specific issues cannot be pursued or achieved simultaneously, the political system has the task of ordering and ranking them in terms of their relative importance, and then of persuading society's members to accept its rankings as binding most of the time (Easton, 1968). Commitment to these rankings may be discerned by willingness to pay taxes, obedience of laws, and general support of the aims of government under which individuals live.

Policy comprises a series of related choices or decisions to support an agreed upon course of action with respect to the pursuit and achievement of a goal or value, or as Kahn (1969) says, it consists of a

cluster of overall decisions. The qualifier "agreed upon" course of action suggests that policy is a process of collective decision making governed by rules. Rules enable decision-making bodies to make choices, even when members are not in unanimous agreement about them. The rule or procedure that allows this is some version of majority rule. The extent of member agreement may be discerned from the distribution of votes on particular issues. A vote of 5 to 4 among members of a 9-member body indicates substantial disagreement among individual members with respect to that body's collective decision; a vote of 7 to 2 would indicate substantial agreement. Some decision-making bodies, such as Congress, have rules about rules, as illustrated by the rule that specifies whether an item can be on the legislative agenda for discussion and debate.

Because the problems that come to policymakers' attention cannot all be addressed at the same time and not all problems come to their attention, many may remain neglected for long periods. Also because of the values they hold, policymakers may not perceive certain phenomena, such as widening income disparities and homelessness, as problems. Such perceptions are not immutable, however, in that policymakers often are required to reorder their values in accordance with changes in the larger sociocultural-economic environment and to attend to phenomena they otherwise would disregard. Thus greater emphasis may be placed on the pursuit of efficiency and productivity at one point in time, as in the 1980s, while at another point in time greater emphasis may be placed on equality of opportunity and equity or fairness, as in the 1960s.

LEVELS AND SCOPE

As a term, policy can be used and applied to almost all levels of human endeavor: individual, family, group, organization, community, county, state, regional, national, and international—in public, quasi-public, and private sectors. Individuals, for example, may develop policies that guide their actions as illustrated by the individual who says, "It's against my policy" when asked to state his or her opinion about a political candidate or to reveal his or her party affiliation. Families similarly develop policies to guide their actions with respect to savings, for example, or expenditures for housing, vacations, or child rearing. Business and industry develop policies with respect to personnel, social concerns, and profit margins. Municipal governments develop policies concerning water, sewage, and noise control; parks and recreation;

libraries; and police and fire protection. School boards develop policies concerning the education of children and related matters. County governments develop policies with respect to income maintenance programs, and health and social services, including correctional and court services. State governments develop policies with respect to income maintenance programs, health and social services, employment and manpower programs, and natural resources. In terms of the federal government, it develops policies concerning defense and international affairs; general science, space, and technology; natural resources, the environment, and energy; aid to businesses, agriculture, and communities; human resources, such as education, employment and manpower, social services, health, income security, and veteran's benefits; law enforcement, justice, and general government; and general purpose financial assistance (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1985).

Clearly, policies or decisions made at the federal level are the widest in scope in that they affect all citizens of the United States. In contrast, policies of lower levels of jurisdiction, such as states and counties, apply only to persons residing within them, although in some instances, they also apply to visitors—traffic and no smoking laws being examples. That state and county policies often are made to conform with federal policies and guidelines, as well as with each other, suggests that policymaking is highly interactive among the three levels of government. Reflecting not only compliance with federal law on the part of states and counties, state level policy also reflects the diffusion of policy responses to identified problems; one example being marital rape laws enacted in several states. Although policy applies to all levels of human endeavor, in both the public and private sectors, this book is mostly about decisions made by governments, not individuals and families, except as the latter has implications for the former, or serves to illuminate family/government relationships.

Social Policy

DEFINITIONS AND GOALS

Another term important to this discussion is *social policy*. If policy pertains to important choices with respect to an agreed upon course of action in the pursuit of a goal or value, what then is social policy? Baumheier and Schorr (1977) have defined social policy as consisting of principles and procedures that guide any course of action dealing with