research in practice

NHS
The Tavistock and Portman
NHS Foundation Trust

US
UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Knowledge Briefing

Knowledge Briefing: social policy and social workers

Introduction

For social workers, the term 'social policy' can sometimes feel unclear, disconnected and removed from their daily work lives. There can also be confusion about the relationship between social policy and social work policy. The aim of this briefing is to demonstrate the relevance and applicability of social policy for you as a social worker, especially if you are working as a practice supervisor where you have opportunities to influence team colleagues.

Purposively and perhaps controversially, the briefing locates you as a social policy agent, especially if you work as a social worker for a local authority, a Children's Trust, the NHS or for any organisation receiving State income to fund your employment. If the State is paying your wages, it is expecting you to do something on its behalf.

This briefing also invites you to reflect on your relationship with wider systemic factors such as the role of the State and its political philosophy. There is also an exercise to help your reflexive thinking around your own ideological stance on fairness, and a team-based exercise encouraging you to think critically about social policy.

What is social policy?

Social work students may prefer some parts of their curriculum to others. They generally welcome child development theories as these are readily applicable to the children they observe or interact with during practice placements. On the other hand, students can find it more difficult to connect teaching about State-level social policies with their own aspirations to work at a micro or local level to support families. For example, it can be difficult to understand how incremental changes in housing, education and welfare policies not only affect the wellbeing of families, but also influence how social workers do their jobs and what they can offer families.

O'Connor & Netting's (2011) approach helps social work students and practitioners to understand social policy in more concrete and practical ways. They avoid mystifying cul-de-sac explanations of social policy by minimising abstract, explanatory phrases such as 'government actions to promote wellbeing'. Instead, they share a more dynamic perspective that illuminates social policy by allowing us to imagine social workers as key social policy actors.

For example, let's look at how they characterise social policy:

> The State's (or Government's) social policy is made up of collective interventions through its health policies, education policies, social work policies, social security policies, housing policies, environmental policies – and plenty of other policies – to prevent and address social problems (O'Connor & Netting, 2011).

> An example of this would be the State's social work policy to protect children. Specifically, by creating legislation such as the Children Act 1989 to guide local authorities' responses to managing children at risk, the State is seen to be taking responsibility to prevent and address the social problem of child abuse.

> The State has many social policy instruments (Jansson, 2008) at its disposal (such as provision of information, the use of financial instruments, legislation, and regulations). When it looks at implementing its social work policy, **it relies heavily on social workers to do so**. Through central or local taxation, the State pays social workers to be social policy agents to prevent and address the social problem of children at risk.

All quite abstract so far, but when O'Connor and Netting (2011) start to discuss social policy analysis, social policy comes alive.

Social policy analysis

O'Connor and Netting say that social policy analysis is 'a systematic study of chosen courses of action within unique contexts with goals of preventing and addressing social problems.' (O'Connor & Netting (2011, p. 2)

Approaching social policy in this way, they are inviting us to think about:

> the constituents of social problems

> who defines these elements

> the extent to which these problems can be addressed to achieve resolution (and by whom).

'Social problem' is a key term that needs unpacking. It is a socially constructed term, without fixed meaning. When people say there are particular social problems in need of State intervention, they are likely to be drawing on various political ideologies or philosophies to justify their stance.

For instance, think about hunger in the UK. Do you believe that we should have food banks today, supported by churches or community donations? Or should the State make higher social security payments and in-work benefits to parents to eliminate the need for food banks? Or, should the State pay for and commission food banks? While we may all agree that children should not be hungry in modern-day UK, we may disagree on what role, if any, the State should play in eliminating that hunger.

Returning to O'Connor and Netting's analysis, it might be helpful to consider the different phrases in their definition in more detail.

> **Systematic study**
> A methodical activity or process, working to a plan. It is marked by thoroughness and consistent effort. It suggests a particular aim for analysis and offers an understandable way of conducting the analysis.

> **Courses of action**
> These can be understood as State-level social policies and programmes. In social work, this usually means the approaches and work undertaken by social workers.

> **Unique context**
> This is where the analysis occurs. For example, at a State-level, in a local authority area, or with a particular cohort (e.g. children, particular communities, etc.).

> **Social problem**
> There is a social issue which the State feels it needs to address.

When we consider courses of action in social work policy, we are really considering what social workers do. Activities such as assessing risk to children, working systemically with families and removing children from dangerous situations are courses of actions to operationalise social work policy. For this reason, it can be argued that social workers are social policy agents, as social work policy is a constituent of social policy more broadly.

Nevertheless, social workers may have room to manoeuvre in their role if they see themselves as street-level bureaucrats with technical and social capabilities to navigate ambiguous work settings (Moore, 1987). For example, there can be some flexibility in terms of how service thresholds are applied. At the same time, it cannot be stressed enough that social work policy is just one of a number of policies that make-up what is commonly understood as social policy. There is, of course, a relationship between different sub-policy areas, such as cramped or unaffordable housing exacerbating family tensions, which can then lead to social services involvement.

The State and political ideologies

Rogowski (2020) suggests we cannot understand the potential of social work without understanding the nature of political ideologies influencing how social problems are defined and what social policies are needed. By 'political ideology', we mean a system of ideas or beliefs about human nature, our responsibilities towards others and the role, intention and limits of State and other institutions in our lives.

While there are a range of political ideologies (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018; Moore, 2002), arguably, the main ones operating in Britain today are:

> **New Right**
  People should be self-reliant as far as possible with only a minimal State safety net for those judged to need it. People prioritise their self-interest, and society is comprised of fragmented individuals and families. The State reduces people's freedom, so it is preferable for the State to stay out of people's lives except to protect them from harm. Markets increase choice as people are essentially consumers.

> **Social Democratic**
  The State has a role in creating conditions of equality (e.g., opportunities, equity, outcomes), especially as the market cannot be relied upon to protect vulnerable people or to reduce inequality. The State uses policy instruments such as regulation and the redistribution of resources to balance different societal interests.

> **Feminism**
  Social policy needs to address patriarchy and male-dominated views of how the world works. This viewpoint stresses relational-based and affirmative ethics.

> **Anti-racism**
  Anti-racists suggest that discrimination comes about through racist practices and attitudes, aided by institutional structures (i.e. institutional racism), which need to be examined and challenged. Policies of integration or multiculturalism have limited effects. Anti-racists advocate challenging institutional racism and practices.

> **Environmentalism**
> Global warming places the future of our planet at risk. We need to rethink our priorities, placing greater emphasis on sustainability and protecting the ecosystem, and far less on economic development. Wider systemic thinking reminds us that humans live interdependently with other species and that human behaviour affects the planet future generations will inherit.

Each of these defines social problems and the role of the State in solving them. For example, an anti-racist approach would locate the social problem of racism in society, organisations and individuals who have discriminated against Black and ethnic minoritised people (Moore, 2002). Social policies to address this might include introducing legislation and penalties to counter racism, increasing awareness of the stigma, barriers and trauma experienced by Black and nonwhite people, and creating inclusive opportunities to address this. An example would be public sector organisations explicitly seeking to recruit Black and nonwhite staff to senior management positions.

Political ideologies can be expressed in social policies in a number of ways (O'Connor & Netting, 2011). Firstly, if the State's function is seen to control, then social policies will be authoritative and highly regulatory. Secondly, if the State's role is to maintain the current situation, then policies will limit how much change can occur. Thirdly, If the State's role is to intervene and transform the needs of vulnerable groups, then policies will be designed to promote inclusiveness and reduce inequality.

Berlin (1969) draws a distinction between two kinds of freedom – negative and positive – to think about the State's role in our lives. A negative freedom is when the State intervenes to protect us from harm in some way. For example, social workers and police officers intervene to remove a child from a risky situation. A positive freedom is one where the State intervenes to give people the chance to become or do things that allow them to attain greater autonomy and control over their lives. This resonates with the Scandinavian social pedagogic tradition of helping young people to develop greater self-efficacy in their lives (Stephens, 2013).

Over the course of a social work career in England, child and family social workers will work under different governments promoting different kinds of social policies, some of which align more sympathetically to positive or negative conceptualisations of freedom.

Reflective questions

> What do you think of the classification of 'positive' and 'negative' freedoms?

> Which freedom might you be drawn to in your work as a social worker?

Self-reflexivity and your ideology as a practitioner

You may or may not have the capability to work as a 'street-level bureaucrat' (Lipsky, 2010) to shape how social policies are implemented by your agency. But you do have a responsibility as a social worker and as a practice supervisor to reflect on your own ideologies, and how these may influence your practice. Echoing Burnham's (2012) work on the social GGRRAAACCEEESSS which has taken hold in social work, Marchak (2011, p. 1) offers the following definition to think about how ideologies may seep into us without our awareness:

> *'Ideologies are screens through which we perceive the social world. Their elements are assumptions, beliefs, explanations, values and orientations. They are seldom taught explicitly and systematically. They are rather transmitted through example, conversation and casual observation. Sometimes these values can be considered to be personal ideologies.'*

If personal ideologies remain under our surface, we need to ask self-reflexive questions (Tomm, 1988) to bring them to light. And one way to do so is to use case studies.

Practitioner exercise – reflecting on our ideologies

However you respond to this exercise is okay – self-reflexivity shines a torch on our values and invites us to consider how these show up in our professional lives.

Anne, Bob and Carla are nine years old. They are arguing over who should get a flute. Anne claims the flute on the grounds that she is the only one of the three who knows how to play it (the others do not deny this). Bob demands it on the basis that he is so poor, unlike other children, he has no toys to play with and it would therefore mean a lot to him to have the flute. Carla says it belongs to her because she has made it with her own labour.

Who do you think should get the flute?

The Nobel Prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen, introduced his book, The Idea of Justice (2009, pp. 12-14), by asking readers to consider this puzzle. When a class of social work students examines this brainteaser, we often find a range of answers emerging. The difference of opinion over who gets the flute is not surprising. Our views and values are informed by our upbringing and life experiences, and we're sometimes unaware of how powerful those influences can be.

In the puzzle above, we are being asked the question, 'What is the fairest distribution of a resource?' and it is not an easy one to answer. What we are looking at here are conceptualisations of justice. There is also an implicit invitation to reflect on the extent to which the State should intervene to advocate for different kinds of justice.

Some students suggest that Anna should be awarded the flute because she or society would get the greatest pleasure or benefit from her ownership – literally, music to our ears. In this situation, the State could actively intervene to control who uses the instrument, prioritising that society at large will be the beneficiary. Similarly, we often see the State in its cultural policy supporting galleries to purchase paintings for the benefit of the nation.

Other students think Bob should be entitled to receive it because he is the poorest and has no other toys. Giving him the flute may also reduce his sense of inequality in relation to Anna and Carla. In some ways, this resonates with a social policy intervention that promotes equity or societal transformation for those who are in poverty.

Sometimes students feel that Carla should have the right of possession since she made the flute, with some suggesting that Anna (or her parents) could buy it from her. This position of social justice resonates with one of individual responsibility where the State's function is to maintain the status quo, rewarding those who are producers or staying out of private legal transactions between individuals, resulting in minimal social policy intervention.

However, whatever preference you opted for, the invitation is there for you to think about how your preference might play out in your role as a social worker. For instance, think about the following:

> What do we understand about 'deserving' and 'undeserving' families, adults, children, and young people? What do we think these words mean?

> Should social work's priority be protecting individuals from harm or facilitating individuals to develop their capabilities?

> Where do these beliefs come from? Are they influenced, for, example, by the family scripts we inherit (Byng-Hall, 1995), or the social systems we inhabit (Eriksen, 2015)?

Reflective questions for supervisors

> Might your personal ideologies impact how you expect age assessments for unaccompanied young people to be undertaken?

> How might personal ideologies about the State's role in our lives influence how you think Mental Health Act assessments should be carried out?

> Would you always feel comfortable using Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) to restrict a person's liberty?

Reflective practice invites us to consider how our personal ideologies influence our approach to social work. However, it is not always easy to reflect on the elements of our ideologies, as we are formed by our values and beliefs. Therefore, as practice supervisors we need to be careful how we challenge the ideological positions of our colleagues, whilst remaining open to being challenged on our own social work vision and how this shapes our social work practice.

Social workers and social policy activism

It is incredibly difficult to change a social policy as a practice supervisor, particularly if you are working for a local authority, a Children's Trust or the NHS. However, you may be able to influence social policy through how you interpret or apply social and organisational policies (Healy, 2012).

As a social worker you can, 'make a significant difference to who gets services and why, and what services they get and how' (Fawcett et al., 2010, p. 124). For example, social workers might differ in terms of how the problem of child abuse is framed and addressed. Is the problem seen as protecting children from 'degenerative relatives', or is it created as a result of social and psychological difficulties? And are these augmented by poverty, cramped living conditions or community fragmentation? How the problem is framed might lead to different services, such as a child protection or family service response (Barton, 2022).

Social workers might also engage with others through social policy activism. Healy (2012) reminds us that social workers have campaigned with experts by experience and others outside of social work to have social problems recognised and addressed by central and local government agencies. Areas of activism have included the needs of parents where children are not accommodated locally, parents who have survived domestic violence, and the over-representation of Black children in the child protection system.

Finally, Reynolds (2019), coming from a therapeutic and community work background, invites us to consider activism as a way of being. She asks us to contemplate whether we wish to work to change the real conditions of people's lives rather than supporting them to adjust to oppression. This is part of what she calls justice-doing. She introduces the idea of solidarity to underpin our interconnectedness with others and to enable us to reflect on the extent to which relational and collective ethics influence our practice.

Key messages

> Many social workers find it difficult to make connections between what they do every day and the term 'social policy'. This can occur as the immediate effects of changes in social policies for children and families might be difficult to detect in a social worker's caseload. For example, it is difficult to ascertain whether the closure of a youth centre might be a primary or secondary factor (or perhaps not even a factor at all) that increases risk for a teenager, as the closure has to be understood in relation to how the teenager and their wider support system adapt.

> This relationship between social policy and what social workers do can be demystified if social workers reflect on whether they see themselves as social policy agents working on behalf of the State.

> Unlike other professions, such as engineering or pharmacy, the work of social workers is likely to be more influenced by the political philosophies of the government of the day.

> It is therefore incredibly important for social workers to understand and keep in mind the significance of social policies on their capacity to do their job well and on the lives of the children, families and adults they work with. Life is generally easier for all who work in and use social care if the State uses policy instruments such as appropriate funding and regulation to create adequate housing, social security, schools, mental health and community services. Housing, social welfare, education, mental health and social work policies can utilise such instruments to promote social justice for those in our society who most need our support.

> Social work policy is best understood as a subset of social policy, interacting alongside other policies such as health, education and social welfare policies.

> It can be helpful to think about social work activities in terms of whether they primarily help protect people from harm and / or support children and families to develop their capabilities. It is likely that most statutory social workers will locate their work somewhere on a risk-capabilities spectrum, but might hold different aspirations about what they would like social work to achieve.

> It is incredibly difficult to work as a social policy activist if the State pays your wages. At one end of the spectrum, you might have some discretion and flexibility in your role to interpret and apply particular policies as a practice supervisor. You might also work with others to highlight particular social problems and possible solutions, inside and outside work. At the other end of the spectrum, you might consider social work as a way of being and have a commitment to justice-doing.

Team exercise: critical policy analysis

Aim

For a team to examine the impact of a social policy.

Context

It's important to focus attention when analysing social policy. Guba (1984) suggests the focus of policy analysis could be on a policy's intention, content or make-up, implementation or impact. In addition, one needs to consider the epistemological perspective through which policy analysis takes place.

Can we consider policy analysis as an objective, scientific, neutral and value-free exercise, and look for evidence of a policy's effects in a similar way to ascertaining the impact of Covid vaccines on different populations? Or do we have to consider social policy more critically, as it's impossible to understand its nature and function without considering the prevalent social values and systems in which it was conceived, situated and executed? More practically, do we need to consider power and its intersectional presence (O'Connor & Netting, 2011) when undertaking a policy analysis?

Jerome Schiele (2000) offers a framework of policy analysis to critically consider the impact of a policy for vulnerable groups. He draws on an Afrocentric paradigm where the focus of analysis 'is the degree to which exploitation, Eurocentrism, and disrespect are outcomes rather than empowerment, opportunities, and respectful inclusion' (O'Connor & Netting, 2011, p. 230). His intention is to consider intended and unintended consequences of policy for those with less power.

Schiele poses a series of questions (Schiele, 2000, pp. 175-177; O'Connor & Netting, 2011, p. 231) which a social work team could consider in reviewing the impact of a policy on vulnerable groups. These questions have been adapted for this exercise.

Exercise

Pick a social policy directly relevant to your team's work. Examples might be the two-child limit in universal credit, Liberty Protection Safeguards for those aged 16 and 17, or policies on drug use.

Encourage your team to read up on the policy you choose (perhaps share one or two key documents with them), but mainly ask your team to think about how the chosen policy affects their day-to-day work.

Then, as a team, discuss the following questions together:

> To what extent does the policy increase the responsibility of vulnerable groups to find a solution to a social problem without the support of the State?

> To what extent does the policy improve or make worse the conditions of minoritised people?

> To what extent does the policy enhance or hamper opportunities for non-professionals and others without power?

> To what degree does the policy exclude or include interpretations and cultural values from the groups targeted by the policy?

> To what degree does the policy include provisions that protect Black or ethnic minoritised people from physical harm, harassment, intimidation, or stigmatisation?

> To what extent does the policy reinforce and promote continued Eurocentric domination?

> To what extent does the policy offer additional opportunities for Black or ethnic minoritised people, or vulnerable communities?

> To what extent does the policy support the strengths and resources for Black or ethnic minoritised families or vulnerable communities through the inclusion of diverse groups of people in its formulation and implementation?

Other ways to use this briefing

> Introduce specific social policy discussion when reflecting on a case in supervision.

> Encourage those you supervise to think about recent examples of social work activism (such as Black Lives Matter) and why this is important.

References

Alcock, C., Daly, G., & Griggs, E. (2008). *Introducing Social Policy (2nd ed).* Pearson Education.

Berlin, I. (1969). *Four Essays on Liberty.* Oxford University Press.

Burnham, J. (2012). Developments in Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS. In I.B. Krause (Ed.), *Mutual perspectives: culture and reflexivity in systemic psychotherapy.* Karnac.

Fawcett, B., Goodwin, S., Meagher, G., & Phillips, P. (2009). *Social policy for social change.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Guba, E.G. (1984). The Effect of Definitions of "Policy" on the Nature and Outcomes of Policy Analysis. *Educational leadership, 42*(2), 63-70.

Healy, K. (2012). *Social Work Methods and Skills: The Essential Foundations of Practice.* Bloomsbury Academic.

Jansson, B. S. (2008). *Becoming an effective policy advocate (5th ed).* Pacific Grove.

Lipsky, M. (2010). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public service.* Russell Sage Foundation.

Lister, R. (2010). *Understanding Theories and Concepts in Social Policy.* The Policy Press.

Marchak, M.P. (2011). *Ideological perspectives on Canada.* McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP.

Moore, S. (2002). *Social Welfare Alive! (3rd ed.).* Nelson Thornes.

Moore, S.T. (1987). The theory of street-level bureaucracy: A positive critique. *Administration & Society, 19*(1), 74-94. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F009539978701900104

Mullaly, B., & Dupré, M. (2018). *The New Structural Social Work (4th ed.).* Oxford University Press.

O'Connor, M.K. & Netting, F.E. (2011). *Analyzing Social Policy: Multiple Perspectives for Critically Understanding and Evaluating Policy.* John Wiley & Sons.

Parton, N.A. (2022). Comparative Research and Critical Child Protection Studies. *Social Sciences, 11*(4), 156. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11040156

Reynolds, V. (2019). *Justice-doing at the intersections of power: Community work, therapy and supervision.* Dulwich Centre Publications.

Rogowski, S. (2020). *Social Work: The Rise and Fall of a Profession? (2nd ed.).* Policy Press.

Schiele, J.H. (2013). *Human services and the Afrocentric paradigm.* The Haworth Press.

Sen, A. (2009). *The Idea of Justice.* Allen Lane.

Stephens, P. (2013). *Social Pedagogy: Heart and Head. Studies in Comparative Social Pedagogies and International Social Work and Social Policy.* Europäischer Hochschulverlag Gmbh & Co Kg.

We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools.

Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas.