The Janus Assignment: Past and Future of Social Policy Practice Research

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Famously, the Roman god Janus had two faces—one to look back and one to look forward. This is why he is immortalized in the name of the first month. When we pass from one year to another, January becomes a time of reflecting regarding the outgoing year as well for considering the upcoming year. When we pass from one journal (*The Journal of Policy Practice*) to another (*The Journal of Policy Practice and Research*), it is a good time to do a “Janus Assignment” as well. This essay is an effort to be like Janus, examining the past scholarship of social policy and looking at where researchers might go in the future with these topics.

The first section of the paper provides a quick sketch of macro practice to set forth a context. It then brings some ideas forward about where social policy research has been and where we might go in this new journal.

Sketching Macro Practice

General consensus reigns in social work education that the “macro” area is comprised of three fields of practice: administration, policy, and community (CSWE 2015, 2018). What is less clear from the literature is the parameters of each of the fields. Figure 1 shows one way to look at the subfields, seeking to identify fundamental areas of expertise within the broader fields. Administrative practice is the study both “leadership” and “management”; policy practice is both “policy and program evaluation” and “advocacy/social action”; and community practice (following Rothman’s (1969) initial description of ideal types) consists of “social action,” “locality development,” and “planning”. (Due to space constraints, I do not discuss administration and community practice except to point out an article by Austin (2018) about administration and Gutierrez and Gant (2018), who cover the area of community practice.) Figure 1 shows a number of dashed lines that indicate connections between the macro subfields. The

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end result shows that nearly every aspect of macro practice is connected to every other part, yet each area maintains its core separate from others.

Social Policy and Policy Practice

Two subfields of social policy practice exist as shown in Fig. 1. The two subfields are “Policy” and “Program Evaluation.” These, along with the related areas under Administrative and Community Practice, are the purview of *The Journal of Policy Practice and Research*. The older tradition (still well represented in recent work) looks primarily at the history and/or effectiveness of policies. Allen et al. (2018) analyze the current situation of social policy scholarship as they look at three core areas (as they see it) of the field: anti-poverty, child welfare, and health and behavioral health policy. Typical questions using this approach include “What are the policies now in place?”; “What do they do?”; “Who do they serve?”; and “How do they work?” Recent examples of such literature include Chang et al. (2017); Holcomb et al. (2017); Reinbold (2017); and Wang et al. (2012). The Social Work Policy Institute (n.d.) follows suit as it provides a useful list of social policy research topics that seem prescriptive as much as descriptive:

1. Assess the needs and resources of people in their environments
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of social work services in meeting peoples’ needs
3. Demonstrate relative costs and benefits of social work services
4. Advance professional education in light of changing contexts for practice
5. Understand the impact of legislation and social policy on the clients and communities we serve.

This top-down approach is challenged by looking at the purposes of the field of social policy practice research from a different view. Rather than starting with a presumptive list of what research should be looking at, one team of authors (Santos et al. n.d.) looked at the topics of articles published in one year of *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*. They found five areas of research:

Fig. 1 The macro field's fundamental areas of expertise within the broader fields

convergence or divergence of nonprofit and for-profit organizations; theory testing; development of new frameworks; the delineation of predictor variables; management, strategy, and innovation approaches; and performance, fundraising, and decision-making (Santos, et al. [n.d.](#)). While this is a small sample of papers and is restricted to only one journal, it may represent a useful approach to determining the “purposes” of the field through a “what is published” rather than a “what should be published” list approach.

Another way of understanding social policy research focuses on the policy practice model first developed by Bruce Jansson ([1990](#)). His early departure from the then-orthodoxy was controversial but through his work and others’ (such as Ezell [2001](#); Hoefer [2006](#); Rocha [2007](#); Schneider and Lester [2001](#)) a new subfield in social work was born. People following this newer approach want to understand how advocacy can be integrated into social work practice in the making of policy, not the description of policy. Background literature includes heavy doses of political science theory (Feldman [2019](#); Hoefer [2015](#); Weible and Sabatier [2018](#)) and research results (for just one example, Webster and Abramowitz [2017](#)). Typical questions include “Who makes decisions?”; “What values are represented?”; “How are decisions made?”; and “What is the process used?” Examples of literature using this approach include Goldkind ([2014](#)) and Mellinger ([2017](#)).

The hallmark of this advocacy or policy practice approach is to ask many more questions regarding “how” policy is made, drawing upon the political science literature on legislative processes (including lobbying at all levels of government), interest group activities, administrative practices, and so on. *The Journal of Policy Practice* (now relaunched as *The Journal of Policy Practice and Research*) is guided by this policy practice approach more than the analysis and evaluation research slant to social policy.

The Future of Social Policy Research

While histories of social policy are legion, social policy academia is only now looking reflectively at its own history (Hoefer [2015](#); Hoefer [in press](#)). As we move forward, we need to understand what separates us as much as what brings us together under one umbrella. We need, also, to understand the core themes that we desire to explore and the important challenges that we face when doing so.

Overcoming disagreements will undoubtedly be a portion of this work. Yet, working together, we can explore the boundaries of this conception of the field of social policy with its two clear subfields and the connections between all three macro social work fields. *The Journal of Policy Practice and Research* thus has a core focus but is open enough to allow for collateral fields to link this core. In addition, other ideas about the field of social policy and policy practice will lend spice to the field, especially because we do not want to come at the topic from only an American viewpoint. Wonderful work from scholars in other countries continues to be published and extends both conceptual lenses and empirical results. Using the creative abilities of scholars and practitioners from around the globe will propel us more quickly and more surely to deeper understanding of the topics of interest.

My thanks are to everyone who is on the journey to expand and cement social policy research and practice within the field of social work. My hope is that the current group of scholars and practitioners and those to come find a rigorous yet friendly home to publish their work in this Journal. Manuscripts with interesting insights based on theory and expanding knowledge are most welcome. I look forward to working with seasoned veterans and up-and-comers to make the *Journal of Policy Practice and Research* the most interesting and prestigious journal in the field.

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