COMMENTARY

The Advocacy Coalition Framework—a Must-Know for Macro Social Work Policy Practice, Research, and Education

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Readers of this space know that one of the goals of my editorship is to expand the use of theory in designing social work policy research. For too long social work policy academics have done our research without paying enough attention to the theoretical frameworks that are needed to support our field as a serious research endeavor. This may be because most policy theories do not come from social work but come from the political science and sociology (particularly power relations). While social work scholars have access to these theories and frameworks, they frequently rely on the descriptive approaches found in BSW and MSW policy texts. Descriptive studies are useful but do not point to generalizable understanding because the methodology limits thinking beyond the specifics of the one investigation.

Since Volume 2, Issue 2, of *The Journal of Policy Practice and Research*, my introduction to each issue has included an overview of one major policy theory. While experienced researchers may know and even teach about these theories, these essays provide a substantive reason to read the introductory material of each issue. Each contribution hopes to explain (very briefly) a theory and how it specifically relates to social policy practice and research. Even a little overview may be enough to spark interest in a different approach to policy research.

Thus far, I have looked at civic engagement theory (Hoefer, 2021a), the policy stages framework (Hoefer, 2021b), rationality (Hoefer, 2021c), the multiple streams framework (Hoefer, 2022a), institutionalism (Hoefer, 2022b), feminist policy analysis (Hoefer, 2022c), and democratic theory (Hoefer, 2022d). Moving into the fourth volume of *The Journal of Policy Practice and Research*, I continue the series. This issue we look at is the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF).

This framework was first developed in the late- 1980s by Paul Sabatier (Sabatier, 1987, 1988). Despite being widely discussed and used in political and policy science realms, ACF is rarely seen in the social work literature, and no easily digestible source

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seems available. Fortunately, though not a social work policy academic, Stachowiak (2013, p. 9) summarizes the approach succinctly:

> individuals have core beliefs about policy areas, including a problem's serious-ness, its causes, society's ability to solve the problem, and promising solutions for addressing it. Advocates who use this theory believe that policy change happens through coordinated activity among individuals and organizations outside of government with the same core policy beliefs.

Importantly, individuals are the drivers of change, not organizations, yet organizations are the medium through which individuals assert their policy preferences. Advocates search for others with similar beliefs and seek to create advocacy coalitions.

Coalitions use one or more of five basic strategies (labels are mine):

- Electoral, where coalitions "support efforts of individuals with same core beliefs to get into power" such as by promoting get-out-the-vote efforts and voter registration drives (Stachowiak, 2013, p. 10)
- Recruitment, where coalitions "coordinate with individuals with same core beliefs in power" (Stachowiak, 2013, p. 10)
- Federalism, where coalitions "appeal to 'higher ups' to make change" such as through legal advocacy and ballot initiatives (Stachowiak, 2013, p. 10)
- Knowledge generation, where coalitions "change beliefs through data or information exchange" through research and think-tank publications (Stachowiak, 2013, p. 10)
- Public opinion change where coalitions engage with mass media (including social media, demonstrations, and testimony (Stachowiak, 2013, p. 10).

Stachowiak's (2013) simplification of the advocacy coalition framework is designed to improve the evaluability of advocacy efforts. Desired outcomes for coalitions include measurable outcomes such as changing social norms, strengthening individual organizations' support levels, and increasing coalitions' strength and viability. On a larger level, desired outcomes can be measured as better policy and an improved society.

Stachowiak's (2013, p. 1) intent is to assist advocacy organizations to "clarify expectations internally and externally, and … facilitate more effective planning and evaluation" of their efforts. Fortunately, she also provides social policy researchers with a very nice framework for research as well. Little to no research in social work has explored the use of strategies by advocates using this framework.

Here are only a few possible research questions that could be asked:

- Do advocates consciously think about their efforts in these ways?
- Are these identified strategies used (consciously or not)?
- How well are the strategies (once chosen) implemented?
- When used, which strategies have better outcomes?
- Under which conditions is each strategy more successful?

- How do individuals receive training in these strategies?

I can imagine conducting even basic research into these five strategies would be helpful in social work education in many ways. There is always room in social work macro practice for additional frameworks for strategically selected action planning. The advocacy coalition framework could become a staple in the field. Who wants to work on it?

Articles in this Issue

For this issue, we look at research papers that are strongly connected to current issues, including how to support social workers taking social action, responses to Covid-19, gender dynamics in recruitment for political office, and discrimination in voting interest. The final article proposes a strategy for advocates to work towards radical change. Let us take a closer look.

Krings, D'Angelo, Ivery, and Murphy-Nugen provide a commentary from our partner organization, influencing social policy. Their reflections on social and political change challenge us all to apply the equiticity racial justice movement framework as a tool for individual or collective discernment about approaches to social change. After briefly explaining the framework, the four authors provide reflections on how they use the process. These examples will help students and professionals exposed to the framework to be able to understand and apply it as well.

Krase, Lane, Chana-Fishman, Fuentas, and Wang explore the connections between political ideology and how individuals chose to protect themselves during the early part of the pandemic in the USA. The conclusion reached by the authors is that political ideology was related to different choices in responding to COVID. This finding is important because it may lead to compliance or non-compliance around how to respond to social policies. Different messages may need to be used to ensure that ideology and political leanings do not unnecessarily lead to harm in certain populations.

A second article also relates to the COVID-19 pandemic. Marmo and Hirsch apply the institutional betrayal theory framework to understand how people impacted by policy react and the problems that arise for both care-dependent hospitalized patients and their family members who were blocked from visiting their loved ones. Lessons for interprofessional team members, including social workers, are many. Social workers may need to work as advocates within their organization and in executive branch rulemaking to ensure the best outcomes.

Two articles follow which both address the functioning of the electoral system. Ostrander, Berkowitz, Meehan, and Tallon's work explores the political recruitment of social workers to understand better the gender dynamics at play. They provide solid evidence that males are significantly more likely to be recruited for running for political office than are women, across all practice areas except political organizing. This depressing conclusion is another example of the need for more equity and more humility among social workers in terms of our sometimes-self-congratulatory

thoughts about our own virtue. A better awareness of our own areas for growth is an excellent way to see and act more in line with our professional values.

Another aspect of the American political system is examined in da Rosa, Henderson-Posther, Yang, and Cetin's research on voting motivation. Their work finds that among people interested in politics, those who feel they experience major or everyday discrimination are more likely to vote. As the authors conclude, empowering marginalized communities can lead to higher political interest and then higher levels of motivation to vote.

In the final article, Temko provides historical research to better understand how advocates for radical change may be successful, over time. The process of "deradicalizing" or "normatizing" policy positions was used in Iowa to require gender balance on state and local boards and commissions, a result that at first seemed highly unlikely.

It seems that this can work not only for more progressive policy in this example from Iowa, but also for conservatives across the country as local school boards and libraries have been inundated by demands for many highly controversial and radical policies to ban books and the ever-nebulous critical race theory.

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