

Book Review

Social Welfare Policy

Responding to a Changing World

By: John G. McNutt & Richard Hoefler

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Social Welfare Policy is an introductory text on social policy and advocacy in the U.S. context. The book is appropriate for an undergraduate course on U.S. social welfare policy, particularly in the field of social work. There are numerous social policy textbooks available for undergraduate social work classrooms, but the authors distinguish this book from other texts in this field. First, they argue that *Social Welfare Policy* focuses on the most current and emerging social problems, and locates an understanding and analysis of these problems within the narrative of globalization. A second, and related, difference is that the book emphasizes emerging environmental issues related to social policy. Finally, the authors claim that the book is unique because it balances policy analysis with policy advocacy.

The central premise of the book is that social problems are dynamic because society itself is in a state of constant flux. The authors argue that societal institutions—economic, political, familial, religious, and so forth—have evolved over time and in response to different economic and historic conditions. They suggest that this dynamism creates opportunities for the field of policy analysis and advocacy. However, it also requires that students learn to critically assess how the current era—what they call the “information society”—is reshaping the terrain of social problems and possible policy solutions.

The book appears to be organized into three sections. After introducing and defining social welfare policy in the information age (Chapters 1 and 2), the authors briefly summarize the development of the welfare state (Chapters 3 and 4). The second section of the book summarizes various political ideologies (Chapter 5), policy analysis

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(Chapter 6), and policy advocacy (Chapter 7). Each chapter in the final section of the book addresses a different policy domain: poverty and inequality, health and mental health, child welfare, crime and violence, housing, and aging.

The book is clearly written and easily accessible for undergraduate students. The authors have published extensively on the topic of social policy and advocacy, and they are clearly experts in this field. This text is an efficient survey of complex topics. The final section of the book is a particular strength. It succinctly introduces a range of policy issues and presents how different philosophical perspectives—conservative, liberal, and radical (introduced in Chapter 5)—define the associated social problems and policy solutions. This approach to engaging the reader on potentially contentious issues will be pedagogically useful for structuring class debate and discussion.

A core premise of the book is that the new information society presents a distinct set of economic and social conditions and that these conditions demand a new policy response. Chapter 3 provides a thorough review of the history of the U.S. welfare state. Beginning with the Elizabethan Poor Laws (1601), the authors trace the development of social policy through the early 2000s. In Chapter 4, they present the current conditions in postindustrial America, arguing that the loss of manufacturing and other blue-collar jobs and the rise of the information sector have altered the terms of social mobility. Among other policy-relevant implications for this shift, it is no longer possible to join the ranks of the middle class without some postsecondary education, for example. They also illustrate how globalization has touched other societal institutions, including the family and religion, and briefly summarize how these changes might matter for social welfare policy. While their analysis is certainly not new—sociology alone boasts scores of recent books on de-industrialization and changes to contemporary institutions—it is an important orientation to the social problems of today.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 provide students with tools they need for policy analysis and advocacy. Chapter 5 briefly introduces various political ideologies, the values which inform them, and the policy direction they tend to prescribe. The authors explore a diverse range of political philosophies, from libertarianism to social democracy to the Green Party. This chapter also includes a smattering of references to Canada, Britain, and Australia, offering students a broader window into political contexts around the globe. In Chapter 6, the authors summarize the process of policy analysis. They show the importance of understanding the economics of social policy, and the value of assessing policy options by examining feasibility, impact, and associated cost. Their model of policy analysis is straightforward and similar to models articulated in other social policy textbooks for social workers. In their model, the policy analysis process begins with understanding the context; it then progresses to setting goals, exploring policy, and so forth, ending with evaluation. Though basic, this efficient summary will be useful to students who are new to the field of social policy. Chapter 7 provides instruction on policy advocacy. Drawing on one of the author's books on the topic (Hoefler, 2016), they present a condensed version of a more developed, step-wise model. The text quickly moves the reader from identifying an issue to planning and advocacy. It is not intended to satisfactorily equip students with the skills they need. Rather, it merely gives them a taste of what policy advocacy involves.

These three chapters on political ideologies, policy analysis, and advocacy are central to the authors' attempt to equip students with skills and an integrated knowledge

of social policy. The content of these chapters is meant to be interrelated and overlapping: Students need to understand how values and ideological frameworks affect the policy-making process, analysis, and advocacy. However, it is left to the reader to draw these connections. Chapter 5 summarizes how values inform political ideologies, but the authors do not mention how values also inform the framing of social problems and the interpretation of empirical data in Chapter 6 on policy analysis. Indeed, the introduction to Chapter 6 seems to overlook other core aspects of policy analysis. The authors claim that the analysis process should be rational and scientific, and they introduce basic economic principles such as opportunity costs and externalities to explain the theoretical roots of policy analysis. They do not reference the framing literature from political science that analyzes the values that inform the social construction of social problems. They vaguely refer to the idea of framing in the subsequent chapter, but do not make any overt connections between social constructionism in the analysis and advocacy fields.

Although an in-depth treatment of this area may not be possible given the limits of the book, their oversimplification of the “scientific” process of data analysis may lead students to uncritically assume that quantitative data speaks for itself. Framing and social construction are additional analytic tools that suggest that social problems and data are interpreted through a particular lens, which, in turn, is informed by a set of values and assumptions. The framing of social problems is critical to policy analysis, as it is to advocacy. The available policy prescription for a given social problem hinges on how the cause of that problem is explained. These are common elements in many social welfare policy textbooks.

The final section of the book takes up six policy domains. There are some puzzling holes in their discussion of these policies and the social problems they aim to address. For example, the authors identify globalization as a central framework for assessing social problems, but they do not discuss one of the primary—and contentious—issues today: immigration. More concerning, there is little mention of race and ethnicity anywhere in the book, and little discussion of women and the feminization of poverty. Class, gender, and race seem to be largely absent from their analysis. Their treatment of mass incarceration mentions racial disparities during sentencing, but race is mentioned almost in passing and remains woefully underdeveloped. The war on drugs receives one sentence. They mention police violence, but do not talk about the issue of race. They refer to the 2014 Ferguson shooting as an example of “encounters between police and oppressed communities” that are “problematic” (p. 249). Instructors would be wise to supplement with readings that address the centrality of race, class, and gender to the social construction of target populations.

Overall, *Social Welfare Policy* is an introductory text for students who are beginning to learn about the policy world. It is brief and written to be accessible for undergraduate students. Like other social policy textbooks in the field of social work, it provides necessary historical context for understanding contemporary social problems and policy solutions. The textbook makes no pretense of being comprehensive, and instructors should not rely on it as such. Instructors must work to make connections to the practice areas of analysis and advocacy, and additional readings will need to address critical themes that cut across and critically inform the history of the U.S. welfare state, including race, class, and gender.

References

Hofer, R. (2016). *Advocacy practice for social justice* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.