Policy Analysis Frameworks

Engaging in policy analysis is important for social workers at all levels of practice. Many authors organize policy analysis into frameworks, similar to the strengths-based policy analysis framework. Generally, policy analysis frameworks identify key policy elements vital to understanding and/or judging a policy. The specific elements and the approach taken in evaluating the elements differ depending on the model. The frameworks presented here are discussed in terms of policy analysis; however, they are also applicable to program analysis.

Donald E. Chambers (2009) formulated a policy analysis framework, building upon the work of Eveline Burns in her book, *The American Social Security System* (1949). Chambers highlights the importance of looking at the analytical description of a policy by focusing on its key elements. The elements that he highlights as essential to implementation of any policy include:

1) Goals and objectives
2) Forms of benefits or services delivered
3) Entitlement (eligibility) rules
4) Administrative or organizational structure for service delivery
5) Financing method
6) Interactions among the foregoing elements

(Chambers, 2009, p. 54)

For each of his elements there are subtypes, for example, types of eligibility rules include means/asset tests, professional discretion, prior contributions, etc. However, Chambers asserts that it is not enough to simply describe the policy elements, but social workers must go beyond the description and make a value-based judgment about the policy. His three evaluation criteria
include the “fit” of the policy elements to the social problem, the adequacy, equity, and efficiency of policy consequences for clients and program participants, and other criteria unique to a single policy element (Chambers, 2009). The evaluation criteria are used to make value-critical appraisals of a particular social policy and to aid in decisions about the value of a given policy.

**Gilbert & Terrell (2009)** conceptualized another model of policy analysis derived from Eveline Burns’ book, *Social Security and Public Policy* (1956). Their framework expanded Burn’s framework to apply to all social welfare policies. Due to Burn’s influence in its development, it has many similarities to the framework presented by Chambers. Gilbert & Terrell (2009) assert that policy formation involves choices. Policy analysis looks at the dimensions of choice or range of alternatives available when forming and implementing policy. The basic components or “dimensions of choice” are designated by the following four questions:

1) What are the bases of social allocations?
2) What are the types of social provisions to be allocated?
3) What are the strategies for the delivery of these provisions?
4) What are the ways to finance these provisions?

(Gilbert & Terrell, 2009, p. 61)

The first dimension, basis of social allocation, addresses who benefits from the policy and the nature of entitlement, similar to Chambers’ third element entitlement (eligibility) rules. The nature of social provisions focuses on the form of benefit, whether it is cash, in-kind, or an alternative form such as vouchers or power. The third dimension, design of the delivery system, deals with the organization of the service providers and consumers. The mode of finance is separated into two sections, sources of funds and systems of transfer. Each of the elements in
Gilbert & Terrell’s model of policy analysis corresponds with an element in Chambers. The main variance between these two frameworks is Chambers’ inclusion of goals and objectives.

Similar to Chambers’ framework, Gilbert and Terrell did not simply illuminate essential elements of the policy, but further emphasized the role of values, theories, and assumptions in policy analysis. The purpose of social policy components and the entire policy can be understood by looking at the values, theories, and assumptions. Values help to explore the distributive justice aim of social policy by observing the adequacy, equity, and equality of social policy in addition to looking at the value of the individual versus the collective (Gilbert & Terrell, 2009). Thus, this framework examines the range of alternatives available within each dimension of social policy, the social values that support them, and the theories or assumptions that underlie them.

Popple & Leighninger (2004) formulated a model of policy analysis with Gilbert & Terrell’s framework embedded into one element. This model systematically focuses on all dimensions of policy. Popple and Leighninger advise that a social work practitioner might not focus on all components, but depending on the policy analyzed and reason for analysis, different elements are focused upon selectively. The framework includes the following elements:

- Delineation and overview of the policy under analysis
- Historical analysis
- Social analysis
- Economic analysis
- Political analysis
- Policy/program evaluation
- Current proposals for policy reform
The first element, delineation and overview of the policy, focuses on the nature and definition of the problem being targeted and the design of the policy utilizing Gilbert and Terrell’s framework. The historical analysis looks at earlier policies and the development of the policy over time. The social analysis includes the problem description, social values related to the problem, and goals of the policy. Economic analysis addresses the effects and potential effects of the policy on the functioning of the economy as a whole, as well as on behaviors of individuals, firms, and markets and opportunity cost or cost/benefit analysis. Political analysis focuses on the major stakeholders and the decision-making process during implementation. Policy/program evaluation includes outcomes, unintended consequences, and questions about cost effectiveness. Lastly, it is important to focus on current proposals for policy reform (Popple & Leighninger, 2004).

Andrew W. Dobelstein (2003) posits that policy analysis guides policy making activity to appropriate conclusions. His framework draws heavily from social science knowledge and research methods and includes the following elements:

1. Identifying, understanding, or clarifying the problem
2. Identifying the location for policy decision
3. Specifying possible solutions (alternatives)
4. Estimating or predicting the impact (outcomes) of those solutions on different populations

(Dobelstein, 2003, p. 76)

The following segment provides a brief explanation of Dobelstein’s approach. The primary purpose of policy is to resolve problems, so an important component of policy analysis
is problem identification. The definition of a problem usually determines how it is resolved so it is critical to identify the origin, scope, and pervasiveness of the problem in order to understand the policy presented. The second step of policy analysis is to locate the place of policy decisions such as the legislature or courts. With an understanding of the location, it is essential to know that the place determines the character of analysis and policy. For instance, federal and state policies will differ greatly from administrative policies. Alternatives are explored to understand the choices available for addressing the normative issues inherent in the problem. Looking at the alternatives allows for the exploration of the impact and unintended effects of social policy, making up the fourth component of policy analysis. There is no certainty about predictions of the future state of affairs and the actual impact may differ from predictions due to value conflicts and differences in normative views. However, understanding potential effects on existing circumstances can be beneficial in analyzing specific policies and their alternatives (Dobelstein, 2003).

The four frameworks discussed here are only a fraction of the available policy analysis frameworks available in the literature. These frameworks as well as others have great variability in terms of their focus and intent. Some frameworks are short and contain only a very limited number of key elements compared to other frameworks that focus on certain policy elements as well as the broader context within which the policy is being formulated or implemented. Some frameworks place a greater emphasis on understanding the problem so effective policies can be formulated. Frameworks vary greatly in their emphasis on strengths, but as a social worker with a general understanding of the strengths perspective, it is possible to use these models and the strengths perspective when analyzing a policy.
The four frameworks discussed (Chambers, 2009; Gilbert & Terrell, 2009; Popple & Leighninger, 2004; Dobelstein, 2003) have many similarities as well as differences. In order to complete the discussion of varying models of policy analysis frameworks, it is useful to spend a small amount of time presenting some of the similarities and differences among these models. Three of the models (Chambers, 2009; Gilbert & Terrell, 2009; Popple & Leighninger, 2004) discussed key elements that are critical to the evaluation of a policy. Chambers and Gilbert & Terrell’s model was almost exclusively intended for examining those elements whereas Popple & Leighninger thought it was an important piece, but not the only area of focus. The elements that all three of these models had in common were forms of benefit, financing, eligibility criteria, and the service delivery system. Chambers and Popple & Leighninger also focus on the element of the goals and objectives of the policy.

Some aspects that were not discussed in the Chambers and Gilbert & Terrell frameworks were discussed at length in the other frameworks. Popple & Leighninger focused much of their policy analysis on the broader historical, social, economic, and political context of a policy. Like Popple & Leighninger, Dobelstein also stressed the importance of the political context in understanding a policy. In addition, Dobelstein’s framework focused most of its attention on understanding the problem and then from there finding solutions and predicting the outcomes of those solutions. Popple & Leighninger also addressed the importance of defining the problem and looking at the consequences of a policy.

When completing a policy analysis, you might be overwhelmed by the vast quantity of information that can be explored. Most components of all these models are discussed somewhere in the text including different elements of policies such as the goals and financing, the historical, economic, and political context of policy development, and definition of the
problem and solution finding. Depending on the nature of your policy analysis, the actual policy being considered, and your time constraints, it could be beneficial to look at varying models and begin to determine for yourself which elements and aspects of policy you want to consider as priority when undergoing policy analysis.
References


