Book Review


The book Essentials of Social Work Policy Practice has 10 chapters, a reference list, and an index section and is part of a series in the Essentials of Social Work Practice series. The purpose of this book is to inform and to provide social work students and practitioners with ample and sufficient knowledge to practice professionally, successfully, and competently in various social work practice settings. The book also provides basic principles of policy practice and process planning and discusses how to plan for and apply specific change strategies in various practice settings.

Chapter 1, “Introduction to Community-Based Policy Practice,” highlights concepts of policy practice and the ethics involved in the profession. The book also explains the roles of social workers in policy, discusses whom to target to effect policy changes, and furnishes the readers with necessary tools to apply theory to practice. Chapter 2, “Essentials of the Planning Process,” discusses the five steps of the policy planning process: problem identification, advocacy intervention plan, intervention strategies, implementation, and evaluation.

The next four chapters (3–6) outline step-by-step guidelines and instructions on policy planning used in various organizations and at the policy level. Chapter 3 elaborates on the “Essentials of Effective Interpersonal and Communication Skills.” This chapter highlights the ability to empathize, listen, participate, and effectively facilitate discussions with those we work with. This chapter also discusses the importance of interpersonal skills in gaining grassroots participation, community involvement, and support in policy practice. We should have respect for the diversity of our clientele and have impeccable listening skills to accommodate those we work with. This chapter also urges the sharpening of problem-identification skills and the cultivation of feelings of empowerment in order to mobilize the masses. Chapter 4 discusses “Communication with the Public through the Media.” The media is a useful tool for communicating, advertising, creating awareness, effecting policy, and getting the most information to a large crowd. Other media outlet
strategies suggested include opinion editorials, public service announcements (PSAs), public television, and radio talk shows.

Chapter 5, “Utilizing technology in Policy Practice,” addresses the use of the Internet, cell phones, e-mail listservs, and Web sites, among others. The author encourages the use of desktop publishing to create information documents, brochures, and pamphlets to inform the public and the community. Rocha acknowledges that there is still an existing digital divide in technology and introduces the notion of virtual communities such as Friendster and MySpace to get information to a large crowd.

Chapter 6 discusses the importance of “Interest Groups Politics, Coalition Building and Task force Development.” The author recommends the organization of groups of people into task forces in order to have enough power to bring about change, such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). This organization of people is mandatory for effective decision making, collaboration, and consensus building in agencies or communities. This also aids in the election of candidates to represent the community and is useful in work with the government in areas of policy implementation. Matters pertaining to conflict and conflict resolution, the importance of constructive conflict, and cultural aspects of conflict are also discussed in great detail.

Chapters 7 through 10 provide specific strategies for working with communities, organizations, the legislature, and judicial levels of government. Chapter 7, titled “Community-Based Policy Practice,” discusses the various target groups for grassroots campaigns for local elections. It also highlights points in advocating for changes in already existing policies and influencing systems on multiple levels. Chapter 8, “Essentials of Legislative Policy Practice,” draws attention to the process of introducing and passing a bill and working as a lobbyist. This chapter also brings to light what steps to take to communicate with your representative and how social workers can intervene at the legislative level.

Chapter 9 is titled “Monitoring Bureaucracy and Creating Change within Organization.” This chapter deals with monitoring the implementing policies at the executive level. The author discusses the roles of the executive level, which include interpreting and ensuring proper implementation of laws and policies. This chapter highlights the differences between for-profit and nonprofit agencies. There is also discussion of the distinction between top-down versus bottom-up change strategies. Empowerment and collaboration are also addressed as potential change strategies. Chapter 10 is titled “Essentials of Judicial Policy Practice.” This chapter begins with an introduction to the court system at the local, state, and federal levels. It focuses on the interaction of the three branches in the policy creation process and the breakdown of the federal court system. This chapter concludes with several guidelines on implementing court programs and procedures. The author concludes by providing useful skills for working with the court system.

Rocha’s book has several strengths and makes an important contribution to the literature and knowledge base. The author highlights key points
in the “Rapid Reference” section and provides step-by-step guidelines on the policy planning process, thus making the chapters succinct for easy readability. An additional strength is the use of theory and research incorporated throughout the book to emphasize the merging of theory and evidence-based practice in social work settings. The sample case studies and the “Putting it into Practice” segments provide actual examples of the policy planning process within the community. Additional strengths include the definition of terms to familiarize readers with the policy planning process. The “Test Yourself” portion has activities to help apply theory to practice and additional resources for further reading and as a source of reference.

Some weaknesses in Rocha’s book are the use of statistics from a single state: Tennessee. There is also no overall conclusion to tie together the chapters and summarize the entire book. The book is ideal for students in undergraduate- and graduate-level policy practice classes, faculty, nonprofit professionals, and social work practitioners.

Bardach’s book, A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving, is divided into three parts, four sections of appendices, references, and an index. Part I describes the eightfold path; Part II focuses on assembling evidence, which involves gathering and interpreting data; and Part III deals with researching, understanding, and making use of good ideas. Appendix A has a preface and a summary of a study done by the RAND Corporation in California, which is an example of an actual policy document. Appendix B, “Things Governments Do,” has a survey of 11 different types of government instruments that can be used for societal intervention. Appendix C has a section called “Understanding Public Policy and Nonprofit Organizations”; “Asking the Right Questions” and “Strategic Advice on the Dynamics of Political Support” are the subjects in Appendix D.

The introduction discusses the eightfold path and provides a general overview of the book. The introduction concentrates on the concepts and analysis applied in the policy analysis process. The roles of policy analysts are also highlighted. It also lists and defines the eightfold path process, which includes defining the problem, assembling some evidence, constructing the alternatives, selecting the criteria, projecting the outcomes, confronting the trade-offs, deciding, and telling your story.

Part I deals closely with the eightfold path process in detail, from defining the problem, researching, constructing alternatives, and using literature reviews and statistics. Under the subtitle “Constructing the Alternatives,” matters of design policy alternatives and collaborations are addressed. In “Selection of the Criteria,” issues of evaluative criteria such as efficiency, equality, equity, fairness, justice, freedom, legality, robustness, and improbability are brought to light.

Under the section “Project the Outcomes” in Part I, issues regarding the reality of policy, the logic of policy projection, magnitude estimates and sensitivity analysis, scenario writing, and construction of an outcome matrix
are discussed. The segment “Confronting the Trade-offs” details the difference between the use of money and goods or services received and social benefits. The author suggests that policy analysts narrow and deepen their analysis regarding the intended impact of their policy. Under the section “Decide,” policy analysts are encouraged to evaluate their work and how well it has been done. The eighth and final section of the eightfold path is titled “Tell Your Story” and includes redefining the problem, your clients, and the stakeholders and having a logical narrative flow. Some common pitfalls of the eightfold path are also brought to light.

Part II of Bardach’s book deals with the process of “Assembling the Evidence.” This section deals with evaluating current policies and bureaucracies, locating relevant resources, and consulting both documents and people to gather facts and statistics to support your policy. This section also highlights additional evidence-gathering methods, such as seeking secondhand information, finding multiple sources of firsthand information, and searching for sources and knowledge. The author discusses and suggests ways of protecting the credibility of your evidence from motivated and intellectual attackers. Bardach suggests paying attention to your opponents, gaining access and engaging assistance from your opponents, and preparing for premature exposure if required by your stakeholders before the research is finalized. Strategic dilemmas of policy research are also touched on.

Part III is titled “Smart (Best) Practices, Research: Understanding and Making Use of What Look Like Good Ideas from Somewhere Else.” This section deals with research solutions that have been tried in other agencies and organizations. This segment helps you avoid the pitfalls of “best practices research” by offering tips on how to get the biggest payoffs from the search for best practices. The author also urges policy analysts to develop realistic expectations, analyze smart practices, and characterize the features of a smart practice.

Appendix A, titled “Specimen of a Real World Policy Analysis,” is an excerpt of an actual policy document used by the RAND Corporation. Appendix B, titled “Things Governments Do,” gives readers ideas on how to tackle their policy problems. The issues include taxes, regulation, subsidies and grants, service provision, agency budgets, and information. Other issues include the structure of private rights, the framework of economic activity, education and consultation, financing and contracting, and bureaucratic and political reforms.

Appendix C, “Understanding Public and Nonprofit Institutions: Asking the Right Questions,” highlights different aspects of organizational structures. This appendix details what type of questions need to be asked regarding the mission, environment, performance measurement, and technology of an organization. Additional key points in starting, managing, or maintaining a nonprofit organization include matters of production delivery processes, culture and communication, politics, leadership, and change, among others. Appendix D is “Strategic Advice on the Dynamics of Political Support,” which highlights the
rational and logical aspects of policy analysis. In order to influence policy change involving the public, policy analysts have to garner consensus from both supporters and opponents and mobilize allies toward a common goal.

Some strengths of Bardach’s book include incorporation of subheadings; the “Semantic Tips” section, which highlights the practical examples used within the context; key concepts; and practical illustrations such as the RAND Corporation study. The author also discusses challenges of policy analysis and provides step-by-step guidelines to combat these challenges. Integration of tables, diagrams, and graphs offers a visual representation of statistics and provides additional clarity to the reader. Bardach’s book also teaches policy analysts and students how to present their finished work as a policy analysis proposal or presentation.

Some observable drawbacks of Bardach’s handbook would be its numerous topics and subtopics and the fact that the content is dense and hard to read. The subject matter seems too technical and complex and may be intimidating to beginners. Many readers and users of this book will need to have a general background in politics, public policy, and economics before reading it. Another drawback of Bardach’s handbook would be its inability to be used single-handedly and that it must be used in combination with other texts or other sources.

Bardach’s book is best suited for graduate-level public policy students, faculty, and practitioners ready to undertake a policy analysis project. However, I do not think the book is suitable for beginning social work students or beginning-level policy students due to the subject matter presented. The book also seems more suitable for political science majors, urban and public affairs students, and public administration students.

There is a distinction between Rocha’s and Bardach’s books. Rocha’s is more inviting to beginners in policy courses. Bardach’s book, on the other hand, is more technical and may be a little intimidating to beginners in policy courses. Rocha’s book is more readable, better organized, more engaging, more challenging, and has a better flow as opposed to Bardach’s book, which is more dense and complex. Rocha’s chapters are succinct and have step-by-step guidelines and highlighted key points that make readability easy and manageable.

Both books use case study examples and real-life situations that make the content more transferrable and applicable to students and policy practitioners. I definitely enjoyed reading Rocha’s book more than Bardach’s book. However, both are great authors and continue to make tremendous contributions to the literature in the areas of policy planning and policy analysis processes.

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