

Family Impact Analysis and Social Work: It's Time to Reconsider our Policy Analysis Strategy

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Family Impact Analysis

Have you ever listened to the news or heard about a new policy and thought, “who came up with that—did they even think about what that would look like in real life?” If you answered yes then this editorial may be for you. Family impact analysis (FIA) is not a new strategy when it comes to analyzing policy, but it could provide a useful framework for the challenges that we face as social workers in enhancing the scope and impact of our research and practice. In the spirit of policy and the need to convey an important point in a short amount of time, I will present to you a brief but detailed elevator speech. It is my hope that it will stimulate you to evaluate your research and practice from another angle and think critically about the impact that you could have on policymaking. I will begin by defining FIA, identifying the need for FIA, discussing the historical and contemporary context that makes FIA a practical framework, relating FIA to our current professional values, identifying the solution and strategy contributed by FIA, and end with a call to action.

Definition and Need

FIA is an assessment strategy based on the family impact lens. The family impact lens examines the impact of policy on family well-being, ways that families could be

supported to fulfill functions that achieve the goals of public policy, and makes an effort to determine whether families should be included in the administration of policy benefits or goals (Bogenschneider et al. 2012b). Assessment of policies is based off five principles with subcomponent questions to guide analysis: family responsibility, family stability, family relationships, family diversity, and family engagement (Bogenschneider et al. 2012a).

Multiple arguments can be made towards the need for FIA and this information will be woven into the context of this editorial. However, I would like to highlight two primary reasons. First, there is a strong need and a growing trend of evidence-based policymaking (Huston 2008). Second, economic issues often take center stage in making policy but little or no attention may be paid to the actual impact of policies on families. Policymakers are quick to consult with economic researchers for intended or unintended consequences, but perhaps, social work researchers and practitioners should be consulted with to the same degree to determine how families might be impacted by changes in policy (Bogenschneider et al. 2012a).

Context

Historically, FIA was conceptualized in the 1980s following the implementation of family impact seminars in the 1970s (Ooms 1995). This was after policymakers and prominent family researchers raised concern about the need for an approach to better understand the potentially beneficial or harmful effects that policy may have on American families (Ooms 1995). These concerns centered on three main themes: the rapid demographic changes influencing child and family well-being and structure, the increase in public policies related to families and initial

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negative results, and the limited impact that private and public organizations had on child well-being (Ooms 1995). Some of these challenges are still relevant and support the application of FIA.

More recently, the changing demographics of family life have produced a difficult task for policymakers in trying to understand the impact of these changes and how exactly to respond (Bogenschneider 2014). Specific examples of these changes include an increase in mothers working outside of the home, the increase in divorce, the increase in nonmarital childbearing, and the increase in cohabitation (McLanahan 2004). These trends, as well as many others that cannot be covered in this short space, have created a new dynamic for policymaking. Although these changes have produced both positive and negative implications for families and society, the troubling gap in various aspects of well-being between low and high income families, White and racial minority families, as well as between dominant and cultural minority families require attention. Policymakers shape the context of community and family life by creating the structures and infrastructures in which families can either thrive or merely survive.

A second trend or force that supports the need for FIA is the growing political contention over social and family issues between Democrats and Republicans (Layman et al. 2006). Despite the growing investment of policymakers on both sides of the aisle in supporting children and families and the need for some opposition to drive the policymaking process, too much dissention can put effective policymaking in gridlock (Bogenschneider 2014). In addition, it could be important to consider the systemic or isomorphic influence that political contention can have on society. FIA may offer a more value-neutral framework for moving forward.

Third, despite the growing evidence of success regarding family-centered policy and practice (Bogenschneider et al. 2012a, b; Dunst et al. 2007; Spoth et al. 2002), many professionals do not understand the importance of family-centered practice nor how to work systemically. Researchers also fall into this group by lacking the knowledge for how to turn their research into usable policy implications (Bogenschneider et al. 2000). Family-oriented policies are desired and needed, but we also need to build the capacity and manpower to support the changes that need to be made. That starts with us.

Social Work Values and Ethical Principles

The core values and ethical principles that underlie our practice as social workers complement FIA in many ways. FIA provides a tool for improving rules, legislation, laws, programs, agencies, or organization to evaluate their family

focus (Bogenschneider et al. 2012a). The overarching value we hold as social workers that aligns with the FIA framework is the importance of human relationships (NASW 2008). FIA recognizes that families are not just defined structurally through blood-ties, but family may include a variety of extended members and fulfill a variety of functions. Additionally, as social workers, we pursue service, believe in social justice, advocate for social and political action, are called to evaluate our work, and include the public in change efforts (NASW 2008). FIA proposes a framework for better understanding how we can make community or policy level change through evaluating existing holistic structures that have not traditionally been included. The FIA framework also has the potential to help identify new ways of empowering families and including them in the solution to social problems. Lastly, we value the dignity and worth of a person, cultural competence, and social diversity (NASW 2008). The FIA framework allows us to think about the uniqueness and diversity that exists in families as either a resource or strength instead of a problem.

Solution and Strategy

FIA provides a new purpose for our research and systemic training as a potential impetus for structural change. It also provides an objective framework for understanding potential changes that need to be thoroughly explored by those in the policy realm. In a personal communication, Bogenschneider (April 1, 2015), the Rothermel-Bascom Professor of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, writes:

“Even though families have long been heralded as a basic building block of society, they have never systematically been placed at the center of policy and practice. Recently gaining momentum is the two-generation approach for moving beyond a singular focus on individuals to a more holistic focus on children and their parents. Family impact analysis brings methodology for operationalizing the two-generation approach by specifying what it would take to “leave no family behind.” In an era of partisan polarization, the idea of family impact may be more important now than ever because it appeals to common values with the potential to rise above politics.”

Call to Action

As social work researchers and practitioners, we cannot work with children or adolescents without also considering the family system. To do so would be shortsighted and

potentially ineffective or even dangerous. Why would we do this in policymaking? Without a systemic focus, our research and practice will lack the power to make meaningful change. The challenge to you is to determine how to use your practice with clients, community work, and research to inform FIA for macro-level change. Whether you see your role as an advocate or educator, this evaluation framework can enhance your impact.

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