

## When social workers impact policy and don't just implement it: A framework for understanding policy engagement

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Bristol University Press, Bristol, 2023  
ISBN 978-1-4473-6475-7, pp.174, Hardback

The ANZASW Code of Ethics (2019) requires social workers to challenge oppression and injustice as part of the social work responsibility to achieve social change. The Social Workers Registration Board (2023) competencies deepen and extend this requirement and ask social workers to understand and advocate for social and economic justice to provide equity and fairness to all. Furthermore, social workers must contribute to the policy-making process to shape more responsive systems and structures for those people who use them. How do we go about that?

*When Social Workers Impact Policy and Don't Just Implement it: A Framework for Understanding Policy Engagement* helps us to answer how we can contribute to the policy-making process. Reading this book reminded me of Heywood's (2021) contention that political ideologies surround us, shape our thinking, we use them in our practice, but we often are not able to understand them in any coherent way to make sense of the world we encounter. Given social policies are practical (and pragmatic) expressions of such ideologies, I found those observations comfortably apply to social workers' encounters with social policy. How do we make sense of the social policies that surround us? To what extent do policy approaches influence our social worker positioning? How do we resolve our conflicted positions when implementing social policies we might not wholly agree with?

Gal and Weiss-Gal offer the reader an accessible explanation of the motivation, enablers, and barriers to engaging in the policy decision making process. This ethical requirement of ours is set out in seven digestible chapters with a constant focus on the authors' "policy engagement conceptual framework" and aided by the liberal use of real examples of policy engagement around the world (including from Aotearoa New Zealand).

It has been my experience that frameworks can be difficult to understand, even when explained in accompanying narrative. This book succeeds in overcoming that issue. The authors explain the framework by discussing one aspect per chapter, walking the reader through the social worker–social policy nexus, then discussing the environments that constrain or permit policy engagement, the following chapters then consider the opportunities, facilitation, and motivation social workers have to influence the policy-making process. In doing so, the authors gradually (and necessarily) move from the macro to micro considerations.

The chapter on the environmental factor discusses the encounter with policy at a macro level. It sets out the four environments (the welfare regime, policies and problems, the profession, and people) using examples in social work to describe how these environments shape social workers and their actions. There are interesting examples which the authors skilfully use to bring

an abstract discussion into focus, and they demonstrate the grand accomplishments that social workers have achieved through history. I did wonder if their discussion on neoliberalism deserved greater consideration and weight than what is currently present.

With the environment identified as the context in which social workers can (must) influence policy, the rest of the book sets out the three factors (opportunity, facilitation, and motivation) which shape if and how social workers engage in this ethical requirement. I would suggest that opportunity is the crux of the matter—how can social workers reach into the decision-making institutions? The authors discuss that thorny issue and provide plenty of quite inspirational examples for this humble street-level social worker. But that might be the issue for me, rather than amplifying the many tireless examples from street level social work, the authors do tend to amplify “not your average” social workers here with the examples. This chapter left me frustrated, not at the book, but at the opportunities most social workers struggle to find or grasp through no fault of their own. It did also leave me (fleeting) wondering whether this book was for me, or those working in transnational social advocacy groups.

The chapter on facilitation helpfully calls out that social workers’ place of employment will have a significant impact on their ability to engage in policy decision-making. The recognition of barriers to engagement moves the theoretical/conceptual preceding chapters into the practical world. Here the authors discuss the varying types of social work organisations: from central and local government social work organisations, large advocacy agencies, and non-profit social service providers. Following the style set out in preceding chapters, Gal and Weiss-Gal present the reader with more examples of social workers manoeuvring past barriers or where their workplaces enable policy-making engagement. Two main points around enablers

stood out for me: increased professional accountability, and the role of management in community social services. I am reminded (indulge me here) of the narratives told to me by tireless (and tired) social workers in my master’s research into street-level advocacy, with one participant’s observations of social work colleagues standing out in particular: “some get absorbed in fighting against and advocating within the organisation ... some give up, some get acculturated into the organisational and systemic values and principles” (Renau, p. 60, 2021).

The book rounds off the framework with a discussion around individual motivation. As expected with this aspect, this chapter contains many individual-level examples of social workers, but also draws on interdisciplinary (public administration, psychology, and political science) theory and evidence to unpack the influence of personal values, attitudes, skills, and so on. In a chapter that focused on the micro level, it was slightly frustrating that a number of theoretical considerations frame these discussions. However, this chapter is an essential read in that it makes sense of the other aspects of the framework and offers the reader... motivation.

Is this book worth reading? The authors conclude by revealing the goal of this book: “to enlighten scholars and professionals who care about social work and about what it can contribute to people, communities and societies” (p. 130). It does (and it is). Let’s get ethical.

#### References

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