

BOOK REVIEWS

Book Review: Family Policy Matters (4th Ed.)

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This book review explores the content, field application, and strengths and limitations of *Family Policy Matters* (4th Ed.) by Karen Bogenschneider (2024).

“...a family perspective has the potential to bring an essential quality to American policymaking that no other institution or interest group does as well – commitment to others.”
(Bogenschneider, 2006.)

Introduction

In a 2023 survey of undergraduate human services students at my medium-sized urban university, the most-selected response to a question about why they chose the human services field was “I want to make a difference.” I think most faculty members and practitioners in Human Services probably know this intuitively, and it is one reason why I was interested in *Family Policy Matters* (4th Ed.) by Karen Bogenschneider. The title of chapter 1 is “If you want to make a difference, you should care about family policy.” This was enough to hook me, and I think it will hook most of my students as well.

Content and focus

Dr. Karen Bogenschneider, who has decades of experience as a family policy researcher, teacher, and activist, begins her book *Family Policy Matters* (4th Edition) with a ten-word summary of its contents: *It is possible to build a better public policy for families* (Bogenschneider, 2024, p. xv). The book spans research in three primary fields: Families, policy making, and political activism. It begins with the real-life stories of everyday Americans who engaged in the policy process and made a difference. Following chapters 1) examine the political, economic and cultural forces that have worked against the development and/or adoption of family policies in the U.S., 2) compare family policy in the U.S. to much more advanced policy in other countries, and 3) describe how the transformational changes in family structure affect both the need for and implementation of family policies. The final part of the book focuses on how to apply what was learned in the previous chapters and take action. The book naturally leads into this section that includes tools, examples, and guiding questions. Students interested in making system-wide change will relish this part of the book that is part research, part how-to manual. For example, the chapter on engaging policymakers in family policy

includes a guide on writing for policymakers that addresses what information they want and how they prefer to receive it. This section also asks readers to consider the question: Should I *advocate* for a certain policy or simply *educate* about the facts/data that are currently available?

One of the most important chapters in the book focuses on individualism. Bogenschneider argues that the negative impact of individualism on culture and policymaking, and its detrimental influence on democracy, are best counterbalanced by families, “the first institution to teach commitment to others, empathy and morality,” (Bogenschneider, 2024, p. xxviii). Some may argue that this discussion is better suited to a political science class than human services, but understanding the concept of individualism - including its deep-seated history and how it can be a barrier to caring for fellow humans – is important context for human services providers who are navigating family systems as well as for those professionals who advocate in organizational and political arenas.

Policy in Human Services

Including coursework in social policy is not new to human services programs, with several standards of the Council for Standards in Human Services Education specifically mentioning advocacy, legislation, and social policy. The content of this book aligns well with Standards 11, 12, and 13, as the text discusses legislation on human service delivery, examines how public and private attitudes influence legislation, and explores and explains advocacy skills and community organizing (Council for Standards in Human Services Education, 2024). Recent calls for the importance of combining research, practice, and advocacy as a part of a human services curriculum also support the consideration of such a text (Pica, 2024). Certainly, as politics continues to have a growing impact on the creation, availability, and delivery of human services programming, we will do well to equip our students with an understanding of how policy affects people, and vice versa! There are other books that address social policy more broadly (DiNitto & Johnson, 2015; Lane et al., 2019), that are focused on social policy analysis (Chambers & Bonk, 2012), and that argue for specific policy changes (Reid, 2017). These texts are also suitable for a policy-focused human services course, but they do not include a focus on the family.

Strengths and limitations

Bogenschneider strives to write a book that, much like her, bridges the research-practice divide, and she largely succeeds in doing so. The primary strength of the book may also be its primary limitation: Its focus is squarely on family policy, and thus other social policy does not receive equal examination. Indeed, the book argues that family policy is a distinct field from social policy. However, Bogenschneider is clear that what some might consider “social policy” is actually implicit family policy because of its indirect

effect(s) on the family. This leads to the inclusion of many policies important to human services funding and delivery, as well as policies more related to other fields such as education policy and economic policy.

Other strengths of the book are the inclusion of insights from elected officials across the political spectrum and the combination of theory with real-world application. The text includes clear and comprehensive discussions of how to understand and maneuver the policy process, and it is both historical and contemporary, with comprehensive discussions of social media, political polarization, political pessimism, and political hope.

From a teaching perspective, the 15 chapters align well with a 15-week semester and the author provides an instructor's manual that includes classroom activities, discussion questions, handouts, lesson plans, PowerPoint slides, sample syllabi, and videos. Even for instructors who usually create their courses without assistance, the resources should prove useful. I especially appreciate the videos of policy makers and policy activists from across the political spectrum. I envision that this book would serve as the primary text for a family policy course within a general human services program. A culminating assignment for such a course may be to have students work in teams to conduct a family impact analysis of a chosen policy, and then to design materials and a communication plan for sharing their ideas with legislators.

This is a high-level text, some of it is theory-laden, and I would recommend the book for undergraduate students in their third or fourth year (or graduate students). Even with a grounding in human services and liberal arts, there are some chapters that I expect will require significant additional scaffolding for students, such as the chapter on the polarization of politics and the *Theory of Paradox*. This chapter, as well as the chapter on political pessimism, will also require astute facilitation by the instructor, as the topics can be as contentious as they are important. Two chapters arguing for the establishment of family policy as a field distinct from social policy may feel a bit academic for students, and I do not know if I would assign them as required reading for an undergraduate-level course.

“[H]uman service educators are charged with inspiring the next generation of human services practitioners and professionals to engage both interpersonally with clients and communities and at the systemic level through advocacy for social change” (Pica, 2024, p. 4). *Family Policy Matters (4th Ed.)* invites students to think about their role as advocates as well as helpers, and it gives them the knowledge and tools they need to engage on a policy level. This book, and any course that it supports, will no doubt get students talking, sometimes disagreeing, and perhaps better envisioning how they can “make a difference.”



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