Social policy: theory and practice.

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Chapter 20: Social policy for practice

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Applying social policy

Any adequate understanding of social policy has to be able to identify the implications of policies for practice. There are three main areas of applied policy work: policy formation, public management, and policy analysis.

- *Policy formation.* The formation and development of policy depends on knowledge of the specific subject area and ideas about options and approaches. Studies in this field focus on what policies are, what they do, and how else they might be done. Because this is often done in an attempt to bring about change in policy, or to defend particular approaches, it is sometimes referred to as 'policy advocacy'.[1]
- *Public management* is mainly concerned with the process of administering policy, implementation and managing organisations. The skills include project management, resource management and working with people.
- *Policy analysis.* This is about examining policy - finding out and assessing what is happening; monitoring implementation; and evaluation, or finding out whether policies do what they are supposed to do.

Social policy draws heavily on a range of academic disciplines. It cannot lay claim to a distinctive view of the world, or special methods and approaches. It is defined by what it studies, not by how it goes about it. The kind of work which I have been outlining does not mark out social policy as a discipline, in the sense of clearly setting the analysis of social policy apart from other kinds of academic study, but it is characteristic. There are four recurring features:

1. The work is *problem-oriented*. Research and evaluation are done for a purpose, quite apart from their academic interest.
2. The general approach to analysis tends to be *pragmatic*. Given that there are problems and issues, the task of social policy analysts is to find material which can effectively serve the kinds of work they intend to do. Often, as in the use of indicators, this implies a degree of compromise; such compromises are a necessary part of the approach to the subject.

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[1] M Hill, 2005, The public policy process, Pearson/Longman.

3. The work is *multi-disciplinary*. It is possible to confine oneself to one kind of approach, but this is not always consistent with the pragmatic concerns of work in the subject. The eclectic approach of social policy can be seen as a virtue, because the kinds of skill called for in practical fields require the kind of range and adaptability that social policy fosters.

4. The work is *political*. The analysis of policy is not simply a technical exercise, undertaken in order to choose the best methods for a range of agreed aims or goals; it is an intensely political activity in which arguments are being made for different kinds of philosophy, approach and outcomes. Academic work in social policy is inevitably developed in a political environment. This affects the selection of the issues: housing research has been dominated in recent years by studies of privatisation and affordability, while the implications of housing shortages - homelessness and lack of access - have been examined relatively little. It affects the understanding of the issues; educational outcomes, for example, are likely to be judged differently if they are considered in terms of academic success or social mobility. The evaluation of evidence, as Taylor argues, is heavily dependent on its social context, and politically contested.[2] The relationship between policy analysts and agencies is sensitive and sometimes difficult.[3]

The applied nature of the subject means that academics working in social policy have to take into account the potential consequences of their work. Research can be a tool for changing policy - though it is important to note that the use to which work is put is not necessarily the use that researchers would wish - and those who begin with this awareness are often looking to justify a particular result. Research into poverty provides a powerful example. Most commentators want to make the same basic point - that people on benefit do not receive enough to live on. But they make the point differently, defining the issues in ways which they believe will best support their political case.[4] This is an area in which knowledge is used for particular purposes, and consideration of the implications for policy is itself a crucial part of the academic process.

This brings us back to the discussion in the introduction, about the nature of social policy as a field of study. Social policy has its own knowledge base, its own literature, and a set of common approaches. Studies in social policy have a recognisable style. But the terms in which policy is interpreted are strongly affected by perceptions of the social, economic and political context in which decisions are taken; insights from all the disciplines are important as a means of understanding that context. The remit of social policy is not confined to the academic world, and it cannot afford to emphasise its academic distinctiveness at the expense of these insights.

Box 20.1: Policy without theory

[2] D Taylor, 2005, Governing through evidence, Journal of Social Policy 34(4) pp 601-618.

[3] A Wildavsky, 1993, Speaking truth to power, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books; D Taylor, S Balloch (eds) The politics of evaluation, Bristol: Policy Press.

[4] e.g. P Townsend, 1979, Poverty in the United Kingdom, Harmondsworth; J Bradshaw, D Mitchell, J Morgan, 1987, Evaluating adequacy: the potential of budget standards, Journal of Social Policy 16(2) pp 165-181; S Stitt, D Grant, 1993, Poverty: Rowntree Revisited, Aldershot: Avebury; D Gordon, L Adelman, K Ashworth, J Bradshaw, R Levitas, S Middleton, C Pantazis, D Patisos, S Payne, P Townsend, J Williams, 2000, Poverty and social exclusion in Britain, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

In a book which focuses on the relationship between theory and practice, it seems appropriate to pause and to ask whether theory is always the best way to go. Critiques of social policy can be scathing about responses which seem to be addressed to 'symptoms' rather than basic causes, or which 'paper over the cracks'. That position should be treated with some scepticism. There is nothing much wrong with dealing with symptoms, which at least will have some effect, and dealing with superficial issues like discomfort and misery is no bad thing. Dealing with 'fundamental' issues, by contrast, is often wrong-headed. Box 1.2 and Box 4.1 have pointed to some of the problems of relying on causal explanations. One of the main methods of policy development is to focus, not on what ought to work, but on what does.

There are many approaches to policy which try to find solutions to problems without necessarily understanding how a problem comes about. If, for example, governments are concerned about individual behaviour, like gambling or alcoholism, they do not need to start by analysing the causes, and they may not even need a detailed understanding of the problem. An obvious first step is to limit the opportunities to gamble or to obtain alcohol. This will not stop the problem from happening, but it will generally reduce the scale of the problem. The main limitation in practice is not the lack of knowledge, but the problem of enforceability; there is a limit to what governments can do effectively, and absolute bans, like prohibition, tend to be ineffective.

An approach which is based on taking practical steps rather than general principles is called 'pragmatism'. The test of whether a policy was beneficial, Edmund Burke argues, is not whether it fitted preconceived notions, but whether it worked. The way to develop policy, then, was incremental - trying things out, doing a little at a time, seeing what worked and what did not. It was better, in Burke's view, to end up with a patchwork of things that worked rather than a grand system which didn't. 'From hence arises, not an excellence in simplicity, but one far superior, an excellence in composition.'[5]

There are however some vexing problems with pragmatic approaches. The first is that things that work in some places do not necessarily work in others. A common experience of pilot programmes is that approaches which seem to be promising have much less effect when they are applied more generally. Pawson and Tilley argue that unless we understand the processes and relationships, it becomes almost impossible to identify which elements of a policy are having an effect.[6]

The second problem is that dealing with a problem in part is not necessarily good enough to make a difference, and it may make things worse. It may not seem unreasonable to suppose that where a problem has several dimensions, dealing with one of them will make the problem smaller and easier to solve. However, the effects of partial remedies may be no better, and may even be worse. Economists refer to this as the 'second best' problem: second-best solutions may be worse than apparently inferior choices. When, for example, inequality in education was identified as a key social issue, the response of governments in the UK was to improve equality of access, particularly in secondary schooling and higher education. Greater equality of access should in principle have led to less inequality overall. In practice, it is not clear that it has done so; greater equality of access has made competition harder for those who are disadvantaged.[7] Where access is equalised and other issues are not,

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[5] E Burke, (1790), Reflections on the revolution in frnace, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston , 1959, p 209.

[6] Pawson, Tilley, 1997.

[7] J Blanden, P Gregg, S Machin, 2005, Intergenerational mobility in Europe and America,

the outcomes in terms of examination results and opportunities for higher education seem to reinforce existing inequalities.

The third problem is that governments do not necessarily do look in the right places. Welfare has been heavily influenced in recent years by policy in the United States, a notorious welfare laggard.[8] The influence of the US is partly a result of its political and economic status, partly a result of aggressive marketing (US providers have incentives to sell their products)[9] and partly a matter of convenience, because of the accessibility of English and of published information. By contrast, countries which are brimming with interesting approaches but where the language is inaccessible (like Finland) or which are less prominent politically (like New Zealand or the Netherlands) tend to be overlooked.

Fourth, regrettably, pragmatic approaches are slow. Measures have to be tried and tested, and that takes time.

In these circumstances, recourse to theory is inevitable. Evidence needs to be interpreted before it can be applied; policy-makers need to make an informed selection; often they need to do it in a hurry. The most common procedure is neither pragmatic nor theoretical, but what Etzioni calls 'mixed scanning' - switching back and forth between pragmatic and theoretical modes in order to make informed, practical decisions.[10]

Skills for social policy

Many people working in the field of social policy come to it as practitioners. The kind of work discussed in this book falls outside the common range of professional fields, like medicine, social work or policing, but there are roles within those professions where competence in social policy is a necessary complement to professional skills. Conversely, there are people working in social policy who work closely with practitioners, but they are not in practice themselves. We can dispose of one myth immediately: policy analysts, researchers and advocates do not have to be able to do the job themselves to make relevant comments about a service. It is important for a social policy specialist to gain some working knowledge of the area which is being investigated. There is a jargon to be learned; professionals in the field will want to communicate their concerns; users ought to be able to explain about their experiences. The skills which are needed to do this, though, are not necessarily the skills of the relevant profession. It does not take a doctor to ask a patient about their treatment - in some circumstances, being associated with the medical profession may be an obstacle. It does not take a social worker to talk to the users of social work. (Despite the impression one may gain from the specialist literature, these are not just 'service users'. They are *people*.) It is important, though, to be sensitive to the situation that people are in, and to know how to ask them the questions which will produce the answers. These are the basic skills of a researcher, and there are many fields in which people learn those skills.

London: London School of Economics, http://cep.lse.ac.uk/about/news/IntergenerationalMobility.pdf

[8] See R Goodin, B Headey, R Muffels, H-J Dirven, 2000, The real worlds of welfare capitalism, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[9] See A Pollock, 2004, NHS plc, London: Verso.

[10] A Etzioni, 1977, Mixed scanning: a third approach to decision making, 87-97 of N Gilbert, H Specht, Planning for social welfare, Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall.

The academic skills that are looked for in social policy have been the main subject of this book, and at this stage it is possible to list them briefly:

- the application of theory to practice, including the process of analysis and classification;
- skills of research - identifying source material, finding it and organising it;
- the skills of selecting, processing and evaluating evidence; and
- skills of policy analysis, adopting a systematic approach which can recognise what is missing as well as what is happening.

A second set of skills relates to communication. Three kinds of communication, apart from those required in research, are particularly important:

- *work in committees*. A social policy practitioner may be a member of a committee, but just as likely is that the practitioner will be someone asked to inform a committee, as an officer, a researcher or a consultant. People working in these roles are not usually expected to argue a position, because outsiders do not make decisions; contributions in committee have to be informative and to the point. In academic seminars, students are encouraged to talk, to interact, to work out what they have to say. In a policy committee, the opposite is true. The contribution of policy analysis has to be relevant, brief and well-chosen.
- *presentations*. Policy analysts have to be able to present material directly and effectively, in a way which is tailored to a specific audience. Often the audience is non-specialised - a community group, a public meeting or elected members. The central test of a good presentation is not how the presenter performs, but how well the material is prepared and delivered for the people who are hearing it. Presentations need to be clear, accessible and engaging. Handouts, diagrams and clear layouts can help. Slide-shows and video material have to be comprehensible – there is no excuse for long sentences in tiny print, or academic references presented in a way that cannot immediately be related to the content. Most presentations need to be concise and delivered to time; it is very rare to hear someone coming out of a meeting complaining that the presentation didn't go on long enough.
- *reporting*. Reports are usually presented in writing. The tests applied to reports are simple enough: appropriateness to the audience and fitness for purpose. Sometimes several reports have to be presented at once - a short report for general readers, a fuller report for decision makers, a technical report for specialists. Clarity is usually (but not always) preferred; references should be used sparingly, and always placed where someone can find them without having to flip through the papers (academic conventions are not helpful here, and the Harvard referencing system so beloved of universities may get in the way). Because the report will be the subject of detailed discussion, there should be a means of referring clearly and unambiguously to the main points, such as numbered paragraphs.

   Reports conventionally have an executive summary. This is not an introduction or guide to contents; nor is it a short report, though occasionally it may be the basis of a press release or website summary. The executive summary is a concise statement of the report's substantive content, and some readers will use in place of the report itself. It should be short, typically on one side of paper. Its purpose is there to get decision-makers up to speed, and to focus the discussion. (One also

has to say that it's a rare committee where everyone will have read all the papers before the meeting. I was instructed very early on in my career never to base a committee presentation on the expectation that people will have read more than the first page. I've found that to be good advice.)

Many reports also include recommendations, though some decision-makers and committees may prefer statements of options, so that they are left to arrive at their own conclusions. Where there are recommendations, they should be raised both in relation to the section which justify them, and separately in a distinct list with cross-references, enabling the points to be discussed either together or separately by decision-makers.

Thirdly, there are skills of interaction and engagement with the policy process. They include:
- *networking and informal communications*. It helps if analysts are able to build a rapport with the people they are dealing with. It improves both the flow of information which will be used in the analysis, and it is likely to make the messages that policy specialist has to communicate more acceptable.
- *advice giving.* An adviser's task is not to tell people what to do; it is to identify options and potential outcomes so that they can make informed decisions. That calls for clarity, brevity and even-handedness.
- *negotiation and brokerage.* Some situations are adversarial, conflictual or based on competing issues. In such circumstances the task of the practitioner is often to determine what options are available that will best serve the competing interests, and so to establish what compromises are possible and appropriate.
- *advocacy*. The skills of advocacy have been referred to at several points in this book: it may refer to advocacy on behalf of a person or organisation, making and presenting a case on their behalf, but increasingly advocacy is identified with the process of voice, mingling argument with support and facilitation to enable service users to make their case to best effect.

The other part of what is required of practice in social policy is, obviously enough, academic knowledge - the kinds of issue discussed throughout this book. Much of the literature on social policy analysis is concerned, with explaining what policy is, how it is developed and why it matters.[11] Understanding the process through which policy, too, is made is an important part of understanding social policy overall. But the study of social policy is not simply a study of policy, or process; it is very much concerned with outcomes. The analysis of social policy has to extend beyond description; it is important to make judgments and to consider choices for action. To do this, students and practitioners working in the subject area need to be able to collate information and to evaluate policy. They need to know what effects a policy is having, whether it is being implemented appropriately and, if necessary, what to do about it. The skills and approaches which are needed to do this kind of work are sometimes referred to as 'policy analysis', but it is a different kind of policy analysis from much of the material found in the academic literature. It is analysis *for* policy, rather than analysis *of* policy.

Social policy as a professional role

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[11] See e.g. M Hill, 2005, The public policy process, Pearson/Longman.

There is no profession of 'social policy' as such, but the applied focus of the subject, and its direct application to practice, mean that it is frequently used in a professional context. Many of the people who study social policy are practitioners in other fields, who use the insights and the approach of the subject as a complement to the work of their profession. Examples are social workers, teachers, housing officers, doctors, accountants, administrators, health workers, statisticians, community workers, planners, and research officers. Aspects of social policy are often taught in professional training as a complement to their studies. Then there are academic specialists who find themselves effectively working in social policy fields - sociologists, economists, psychologists, statisticians, management specialists and lawyers amongst them. And then there are a wide range of jobs in policy formation, public management or policy analysis or review, for which social policy offers a preparation. Social policy has many of the features of a profession - for example, the application of broad, theoretical knowledge in non-routine situations, the ethical character of the work, and the emphasis on public service. The reason why it is unlikely ever to become one is the first - the extensive contribution to social policy of people with an existing range of professional commitments, roles, education and professional organisations.

In the absence of a clearly defined professional role, the application of the methods and approaches of social policy has to be negotiated. Sometimes it will be part of a person's employment; sometimes it will be done by outsiders, as consultants, evaluators or researchers; it may be part of policy-making, possibly with elected authority, possibly with voluntary organisations; and it may be part of working in partnership with others in the public services.

Wildavsky emphasises the role of the policy analyst in 'speaking truth to power'.[12] However, the compromises that are called for can be problematic. There can be considerable pressure on analysts and researchers to provide analyses which are convenient, rather than truthful. At different times, I have been asked to alter the focus of the analysis being done, to change findings, to drop critical comments made by stakeholders, and to postpone disclosure of findings until after an election. I have had public statements I didn't agree with made on my behalf, and in one government-funded report had the facts I had reported in one passage replaced by other claims which said the opposite in the final publication. It all goes with the territory. Becker writes:

> officials usually have to lie. That is a gross way of putting it, but not inaccurate. Officials must lie because things are seldom as they ought to be. For a great variety of reasons, well-known to sociologists, institutions are refractory. They do not perform as society would like them to ... officials develop ways both of denying the failure of the institution to perform as it should and explaining those failures which cannot be hidden. An account of an institution's operation from the point of view of subordinates therefore casts doubt on the official line and may possibly expose it as a lie. [13]

He may be right about the pressures, but lies should be avoided. One of the characteristic elements of public service is that actions have to be accounted for; most actions are recorded, reported and open to scrutiny. Prevarication and misdirection might be excused; lies get found out.

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[12] A Wildavsky, 1993, Speaking truth to power, 4th ed., New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

[13] G Becker, cited in A Grinyer, 1999, Anticipating the problems of contract social research, *Social Research Update* 27, http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU27.html..

Social policy as public service

The practitioners of social policy are public servants. That does not mean that they all work for government; it means, rather, that the work is driven by a dedication to public service, a commitment to welfare, and a sense of purpose. The huge variety of activities undertaken in the field makes it difficult to offer confident generalisations, but in general, social policy practitioners speak for others. The contemporary emphasis on governance, networks and partnerships has shifted the emphasis in social policy from technocratic expertise toward a more fluid, interactive approach to policy, heavily dependent on engagement with stakeholders and service users. Workers in the field of social policy have become increasingly aware in recent years that there are different, often conflicting perspectives on issues, and it matters whose perspective is being taken. For practical purposes, stakeholders can be thought of in three main categories. The first category consists of organisations, officials or agencies who are engaged directly in policy making. These are often people with specialised knowledge. Beyond that, they are also likely to be people who may be able to take responsibility for action. Organisations, Catt and Murphy suggest, adopt three main positions in these processes. These are

- information provision: organisations pull together data from a range of sources
- 'contestation', or advocacy; organisation adopt positions in relation to policy questions.
- synthesis - bringing together different types of information, position and voices.[14]

The second category of stakeholders includes people on the receiving end of policy - people who are directly affected by decisions. A decision to close a town's hospital, for example, affects the staff who work there; it affects people providing services in the vicinity, such as the local authority or voluntary organisations; it affects other services who rely on the hospital to do their own work, like general practitioners and community nurses; it affects patients, who may or may not be represented by patients' organisations; and it affects the general public, who even if they are not patients, may become so. Third, there are citizens. In a democracy, there are arguments not just for enlarging the information base, but for the general involvement of members of a political community in decision-making.[15] The concept of political 'participation' stretches from the rather limited engagement required in voting, through to active participation in deliberation and decision-making. In its most complete form, the concept of participative democracy offers an alternative approach to the policy process, but that is not the purpose of considering it here. The nub of the argument is that the public are the source of political legitimacy, and so that the public must be able to make the decisions. Every citizen is a stakeholder.

   David Byrne argues that social policy has to represent a commitment to welfare; but more than this, it has to think about how to achieve it. 'Speaking truth to power is not enough. Knowledge is a necessary condition of power; it is not a sufficient one. We need not just to say what is true, but to act on it. We have to think about agency and therefore about audiences with the potential for agency.' [16]

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[14] H Catt, M Murphy, 2003, What voice for the people? categorising methods of public consultation, Australian Journal of Political Science 38(3) pp 407-421

[15] A Richardson, 1983, Participation, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

[16] D Byrne, P Spicker, 2009, Ethical principles in social policy research and practice, Social

The analysis of social policy in practice is, to some extent at least, a *technical* activity. It involves the application of social science techniques to practice in order to make judgements about policy. Policy analysts are commissioned or requested by policy makers to collate essential information and to provide the basic material for judgments. The analyst is seen as an expert who uses a set of techniques - particularly economics, statistics or other forms of social science - to make an impartial, scientifically valid judgment. The technicalities mean that at times policy analysis sometimes seems devoted to blinding people with science; but, as Wildavsky comments, 'the technical base of policy analysis is weak.'[17] There are too many factors to consider, and too many normative issues, to treat policy analysis as a dispassionate, scientific activity.

Social policy is also a *political* activity. Wildavsky goes on: 'unlike social science, policy analysis must be prescriptive; arguments about correct policy ... cannot help but be wilful and therefore political.'[18] At the simplest level, social policy is political because its subject matter is political: the issues requiring analysis are often contentious and sensitive. This part of the book is less concerned with the technical issues in analysis than with interpretative skills. But policy analysis is also political in a broader sense: the work of policy analysts typically depends on networking, negotiation, and diplomacy. In a traditional hierarchy, roles and functions are determined by rules, commands and instructions. Because policy analysis is usually done by someone who is not working in the same team, policy analysts have to negotiate their relationships with policy makers and practitioners. A good general rule, Majchrzak suggests, is that communication with policy makers should start at the beginning of a project and should be maintained all the way through it.[19] I expressed caution in Chapter 13 about systems that rely on good working relationships, because that implies an acceptance that services will fail if relationships break down, and formal structures should protect against routine failures. However, in a situation where there are no such structures and the activity is not routine, there may be no choice. It follows that maintaining good relationships is basic to the cooperation needed to do the job.

Social policy as an ethical activity

Social policy is partly political, and partly technical; but it is also an ethical activity. Public policy matters, in general, because it makes a difference to people; if it does not, it is using resources which ought to be making a difference somewhere else. Social policy analysis is important partly because of its effect on public policy, but also because the actions affect the staff, institutions and users of public services.

Ethical conduct in public services has been insufficiently investigated as a subject for discussion, and the literature on the subject is inadequate. Most of the strongest ethical discussions relate to professional activity, for example by doctors, teachers, nurses and social workers, whose position in relation to the public services is not fundamental to their ethical position; the ethics of the profession remain the same whether or not they are operating in the context of public service. Several aspects of professional ethics distance them from the aims

Policy Association conference, University of Edinburgh, p 10.

[17] A Wildavsky, 1993, Speaking truth to power, 4th ed., New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, p 16.

[18] Wildavsky, 1993, p 16.

[19] A Majchrzak, 1984, Methods for policy research, London: Sage, pp 92-3.

of the organisations within which they work: they include individual responsibility for action, accountability to the standards of the profession through professional councils, and duties to disregard the aims of the organisation where they conflict with professional rules.

There are four main kinds of ethical rule which apply to work in the public services. They are:

- requirements for the agency to act ethically in relation to the community which it serves
- responsibilities to the agency
- individual requirements for ethical conduct, and
- ethical constraints not to abuse power or position.

Requirements for the agency to act ethically. Public services have, evidently, responsibilities towards the public. I identified four main principles in the discussion of the values guiding policy in chapter 11. These are beneficence, citizenship, issues of accountability and ethical procedures - that is, institutional constraints intended to ensure that agencies adhere to ethical principles.

Beyond this, many people working in public sector agencies would consider that they have further responsibilities which stem from their specific remit. Even if the task of an education department is substantially concerned with administration and finance, for example, it is rare to find an education department in which people have no sense of the value of education. The same kind of argument can be made about each of the public services. There are strong traditions: examples include the powerfully activist tradition of environmental health officers, the neo-liberal agenda associated with economic development, or the judgmental paternalism which reflects the influence of Octavia Hill in housing management.

Responsibilities to the agency. The responsibilities which officials owe to the agency are often unfortunately unclear - unfortunately, because transgression of unpublished rules is not infrequently a reason for individual dismissal. There are different, and potentially conflicting, models of conduct. What, for example, should a public service worker do when offered the opportunity to combine work for the agency with an independent consultancy? Within a bureaucratic model, this would generally be unacceptable, because the role of each person has to be understood in the context of the role within the organisation. Within a management model, this is often encouraged as completing the range and diversity of actions within the agency, and the agency would expect to participate in the work. Within a professional model, the issue is a matter for the individual, and subject to the professional's judgment about meeting other responsibilities.

Saying that officials have an ethical responsibility to the agency is not equivalent to saying that they must comply with instructions; the duty of the official may be to ensure that the agency behaves ethically. 'Whistle-blowing', when corrupt practice is identified within an organisation. The standard rule on whistle blowing is that people should first take such a complaint through the procedures and mechanisms provided within the organisation. This presumes that the organisational has procedures and lines of accountability which are able to deal with the problems. This is hugely problematic, especially where there are specific allegations made against individuals. The rules of natural justice mean that the person accused must have the opportunity to respond to allegations, and will remain responsible for other aspects of their work before the allegations are tested. The alternative, which is suspension pending investigation, is seen by many as punishment prior to trial - and is no less subject to abuse, because it could be use to remove people in a position to prevent problems.

Individual requirements. The ethical position of each person follows a similar pattern:

there are some general ethical rules, but there are also differences in codes in professional, bureaucratic and management-oriented organisations. An example of a general ethical rule is the view that no official should comply with breaches of human rights or crimes against humanity. That sounds straightforward enough, but millions of public servants have got it wrong in the course of the last century, and it is arrogant to suppose that, faced with such a policy, that we would be sure to do the right thing. The defence of Maurice Papon, a senior official in the Vichy government, on trial for his role in deporting Jews, was that he thought he could help to make things better: to quit, he argued, would have been desertion.

An example of differences in codes of behaviour might be confidentiality. Confidentiality applies fairly strictly in the medical profession, but that has led to conflict with the bureaucratic structures of hospitals. (Currently the legal position is that notes made within a hospital belong to the hospital, not to the doctor). Confidentiality does not apply within bureaucratic structures, because a report to one person is a report to the whole agency: a social worker in criminal justice, for example, is an officer of the court, and has a duty to disclose material to the court (at the risk of being held in contempt) which overrides professional discretion.

Both of these principles relate to general moral rules - rules which apply to everyone. Individual officers may also incur particular moral responsibilities in the course of their work. For example, a promise binds the person who makes it to the person who has been promised, not to every other person. The principle that people should respect the undertakings they make is usually referred to as 'integrity', though that term is also used in almost the opposite sense to indicate immunity from influence.

Constraints on the abuse of power A special category of ethical constraints refer to the abuse of power. It is legitimate to use power in circumstances where it is authorised: a teacher who disciplines a pupil, an environmental health officer who threatens to close a restaurant, or a probation officer who threatens to breach a client who is considering breaking the law, are all using power, and are allowed to do so. Equally, however, it is illegitimate to use the authority which stems from a role in public service in ways which are not directly compatible with the functions of that service. There are two obvious cases where the use of power is illegitimate: taking personal payments, and having sexual relationships with clients. What these have in common is that, even in circumstances where there are no explicit rules forbidding the action, and the action seems to be innocent, the fact that the official is in a position of power inevitably taints the relationship to the client.

The reference to seeming innocence might strike the reader oddly, but it is not always clear when action is improper. A housing association committee who are invited to dinner by an architect to discuss business, or a doctor who receives free goods from a drug company, are not being 'bribed', but there is clearly a material inducement. Sex between consenting adults is not a criminal offence. The borderlines are fuzzy, then; if they were not, it would not be so easy to fall foul of them. (I should also add a brief defence of the corruptors. When I worked as a housing officer, I was occasionally offered bribes, and there were times I had to make sure I did not see certain applicants alone. I controlled the only prospect of decent housing for people who had no resources and saw no alternatives. People do not offer bribes just because they are corrupt; sometimes they offer bribes because they are desperate. That increases the weight of moral responsibility that has to be borne by the official.)

Box 20.2: Corrupt practice

Corruption occurs when people pursue their own self-interest illegitimately. Private enterprise is based in the pursuit of self interest, and in that context it is usually approved of;

the main issue is whether it is done legitimately. There may be cases where the pursuit of private interest is permitted in the system, for example through personal incentives. However, public officials are invested with the power to act for public purposes; when they subvert those purposes, or divert them to pursue their own interests instead, it becomes illegitimate.

Corruption is a major problem in the public services of developing countries.[20] The low income of public servants is an important part of the problem: it simply costs far more to bribe an official in a rich country, who stands to lose security, a good salary and fringe benefits, than it does to bribe an official in a poor one. A second element is the underdevelopment of market provision. It is common in some countries to have to pay a bribe to receive 'free' medical care, because there is no accepted system of charging; in other countries the fee would be open, predictable and legitimate. Third, systems for financial monitoring, and the cultures associated with them, are often not strong enough to avoid the problems. The systems used in the west were developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth century: they include accounting practice, the division of financial authority and audit. The introduction of computerised information technology has undermined some of these systems, often removing important but poorly understood safeguards like multiple consents and personal signatures. Fourth, the ethos of the public sector may not be fully developed. In places where the public sector is underdeveloped, where business practice dominates, confidentiality can be considered more important than accountability or public awareness. Business practices are not necessarily appropriate to the needs of public services; this is visible in the influence of multinational corporations, which have often exacerbated problems through questionable financial practices.[21] That relates to the fifth factor, which is the lack of transparency. It is not coincidental that some of the world's most corrupt countries are also some of the least democratic, because transactions cannot effectively be subject to scrutiny.

Corruption is not, by any means, confined to poorer countries. Savedoff and Hussman argue that corruption is likely to occur whenever opportunities exist. The transparency of procedures, the existence of alternatives for consumers and the institutional structures all affect the scope for corrupt activity.[22] Where there is insufficient monitoring, policing or penalties, there is little reason for corrupt practice to stop.

The American Society for Public Administration code of ethics offers guidance intended generally for officials in the public sector; the central principles are to

- serve the public interest
- respect the law
- promote democratic participation
- strengthen social equity

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[20] See Transparency International, 2005, Corruption Perception Index, at http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2005

[21] S Hawley, 1999, Exporting corruption: privatization, multinationals and bribery, Corner House Briefing 19, http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/item.shtml?x=51975.

[22] W Savedoff, K Hussmann, 2006, Why are health systems prone to corruption?, in Transparency International, Global Corruption Report 2006, http://www.transparency.org/content/download/4816/28503\file/Part%201_1_causes%20of% ; and see R Klitgaard. 1998, , Controlling corruption, Berkeley: University of California Press.

- fully inform and advise those in authority
- demonstrate personal integrity
- promote ethical organizations, and
- strive for professional excellence.[23]

The journal *Policy Evaluation* is more prescriptive: it suggests that policy analysts have a moral responsibility to take account the side effects of what they do, to be aware that their recommendations are subject to uncertainty, and to examine the risks they are exposing people to.[24] An activity which is profoundly political and ethical in its character can hardly be constructed in a dispassionate, technical, non-normative framework. There is hardly any activity in social policy that has no ethical dimensions.

It is important to recognise, however, that social policy work is heavily constrained. Policy formation begins from a wide range of sources - ideas, networks, coalitions of interests, agencies, and so forth. Most social policy in practice, by contrast, begins with a policy that has already been decided and set, usually by someone else. Policy analysts and practitioners have only a limited scope, and limited power, to make changes in policy. The main way that changes can be brought about is by working through the formal process - pointing to undesired implications for policy, giving advice which favours better policy, and providing a focus for stakeholders who share the analyst's concerns to exercise their influence. In circumstances where a practitioner actively disagrees with a policy, the options are very limited. In serious cases, such as breaches of ethical codes, this may imply withdrawal from engagement with the policy (which generally means leaving it to someone else who does not have the same reservations), possibly including resignation. This, however, is a counsel of despair, reflecting the inability to change the policy internally, and it removes the prospect of affecting other aspects of policies in the future. Academics sometimes refer to engagement with practice as 'getting your hands dirty'. There is more than one way to read that metaphor. If you really want to avoid political and moral conflicts, you should consider taking up a different line of work.

Issue for discussion

Social policy practitioners are not only asked to promote welfare; they may also need to take action to coerce, direct, restrain or punish people. Often those people will be vulnerable or disadvantaged. When is it legitimate to use power in a way that is contrary to the interests of service users?

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[23] http://www.aspanet.org/scriptcontent/index_codeofethics.cfm

[24] Policy Evaluation, 2001, Ethical policy analysis, 7(1) pp 15-17.