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Teaching Family Policy: Macro Societal Trends in Family Life

LeaAnne DeRigne, PhD, MSW

ABSTRACT

Students in many different fields will inevitably work with families in their professional practices. Successful practice must incorporate an understanding of macro societal trends that impact family life. A course such as Family Policy will train clinical social workers, nurses, educators, public administrators, and many others to understand the larger social systems that may be causing problems for their clients and patients. It will also provide students with an understanding of the key policies that need to be reformed or passed in order to better support families. This article presents techniques for teaching a dynamic course on family policy including reading resources and sample assignments.

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BACKGROUND

Since the middle of the last century the American family has undergone profound changes. The traditional American family model in which the father works outside the house and the mother works at home has vanished. "Much more common today is the family in which both parents work or, increasingly, the family is headed by a single parent" (Lofquist, Lugaila, O'Connell, & Feliz, 2012; Farley, 1996). The American family has been altered by increasing divorce rates, rising rates of childbearing by never-married women, greater numbers of women in the paid labor force, increasing cohabitation rates and delayed age at first marriage and parenthood, and declining birthrates (Logquist, Lugaila, O'Connell, & Feliz, 2012; Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013; Farley & Haaga, 2005). Child poverty is on the rise, due mostly to the increasing numbers of single mother headed households (Redd et al, 2011; Farley, 1996, Farley & Haaga, 2005). All of these trends have put pressure on policy makers to respond to the changing American family.

The course, *Family Policy*, was designed to teach students to understand the many definitions of the modern American family, and understand and critically analyze the issues and challenges that threaten the welfare of families in America across the lifespan. There is a focus on state and federal legislation that affects families, particularly at risk, marginalized, vulnerable, and underserved families. Finally the course teaches students strategies for engagement in the legislative process of advocating for better family policies. This course fits into the curriculums of many

programs including but not limited to social work, education, mental health counseling, public health, women's studies, political science, and public policy.

GOALS OF THIS PAPER

This paper outlines several innovative techniques for teaching *Family Policy*. It presents a broad inventory of macro societal trends that would be appropriate topics for the course. The paper will also present suggested supplemental readings and sample assignments. The paper also reviews electronic and media resources that are key sources of information for policy analysis.

The course is taught using a policy practice model in which, "the emphasis is not simply on understanding the import of policy for social work programs and clientele, but on the active process of influencing how policy is formulated" (Sundet & Kelly, 2002, p. 51). The model focuses on teaching students how to critically analyze policy as you would if you were a practicing policy analyst or lobbyist. Assignments are based on products that public policy organizations produce for legislators and the public. The goal is for students to become professionals who pursue social change and who are able to advocate on behalf of their clients and agencies.

GETTING STARTED WITH THE COURSE

It is important to begin any policy course with a review of basic information about the American political process. Even though this information may seem too elementary to cover in graduate level courses it is vitally important. Most Americans forget even the

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most basics of how our government is organized. Topics that need to be reviewed include: the branches of government and leadership of each, how a bill becomes a law, and the organization of the House and Senate. It is also important to review political party majority and minority information at the state and federal level as it influences what type and how quickly bills become public laws. Most students don't even know who their elected officials are so having them track down that information is valuable. Project Vote Smart (www.vote-smart.org) will provide students with a list of their elected officials based on their nine-digit zip code.

The next step in this course is to review sources of information for policy analysis papers. Doing policy research involves a unique set of references that many students are not familiar with. It is not a course that draws only upon social work's typical scholarly journals. To start students need to become familiar with the Library of Congress's website that tracks federal legislative activity- <http://beta.congress.gov>. It was launched in 1995 after the 104th Congress instructed the Library of Congress to make information on federal policy freely available to the public. It was also a sign of the times with the growth of the Internet. Before the Internet was available it was nearly impossible to track legislation on a daily basis. The website allows a person to track information on both current and past legislation and public laws. A person can search by keyword, phrase, or by bill number. The site also includes information on Congressional activity by providing a summary of legislative activity for the day before and what is currently happening on the floor of the House and Senate. Getting students comfortable with this website will allow them to track their chosen policy topics.

There are several other resources that are very helpful in doing policy research. They include Congressional Quarterly (www.cq.com), National Journal (www.nationaljournal.com), National Council of State Legislatures (www.ncsl.org) and the National Governor's Association (www.nga.org). Students will find not just status related updates on legislation that is moving through Congress but also commentary on the debate surrounding the bills, which helps to fill in their research on the policy topics.

Finally if student select a family policy topic that Congress is not acting on then they may pursue state legislation. This option can tie-in with the National Association of Social Worker's annual Lobby Day if the class is taught the same semester as the event. Students will have to familiarize themselves with that state's bill tracking websites. Every state has one that is typically linked to both the state House and Senate

website. The site typically works very much like the Library of Congress website and allows a user to search by topic or by bill number and to look at past and current legislation. The National Council of State Legislatures and the National Governor's Association provide reports on a broad spectrum of policy topics with a state-by-state comparison of legislative activity. Those two sites will provide students with state policy information as well.

One of the supplemental texts used in this course is newspapers. Students are required to read a national level newspaper at least two to three times a week. Over 500 colleges participate in the *USA Today* college readership program, which provides free newspapers to college students on a daily basis (*USA Today*, 2009). Typically the program offers three different newspapers, the *USA Today* of course, along with a local newspaper and one other national newspaper usually the *New York Times*. If your college does not participate it is still usually relatively easy for students to pick up newspapers on a thrice-weekly basis. Each class session students are asked to bring in and discuss the articles they found in the paper on family policy topics. These articles will lead them to the topics for their assignments.

WHAT IS FAMILY POLICY?

After establishing a common knowledge of American government basics and policy research sources the course launches into the core topics of family policy. The class begins by discussing the definition of family and of family policy. What exactly is a family? Students have diverse opinions about this question and a lively debate typically ensues. "A family as defined by a statistical system is typically defined as two or more persons related by blood, marriage, or adoption that share a home" (Farley, 1996). When unrelated individuals live together they constitute a household (Farley, 1996). For this course using a broad definition is useful, really whatever a student defines as family will work as approaching the class with a narrow traditional view of family does not adequately validate the diversity of the modern American family.

Next we discuss what family policy is. As Zimmerman (2001) states in her text, "Family policy can be defined in many ways. It is ostensibly aimed at addressing the problems families are perceived as experiencing in society." In general these are problems in marriage and divorce, reproduction, adoption, parenthood, childcare and education, income security, household labor and market labor demands, family lifetime care giving, and family violence. In reality nearly every social policy topic is a family policy

topic. It is best for this class to allow students broad discretion in selecting policy topics that they are interested in. The policy practice methodology is more interested in students understanding the process and practice of policy making rather than developing an expertise in any one area of policy (Haynes & Mickelson, 1997; Sundet & Kelly, 2002; Tropman, 1984).

FAMILY POLICY AND TRENDS

The first major family trend covered is marriage politics. What has happened to marriage since the 1950s? The most obvious answer to that question is that divorce rates have been on the rise beginning in the 1960s and leveling off in the late 1980s and 1990s (Kreider & Simmons, 2003; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). The divorce rate doubled between 1960 and 1980 to a level where at least one out of two marriages is expected to end in divorce (Martin, Bumpass & Bumpass, 1989; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Using data on marriages beginning in the 1980s and 1990s suggests that the percentage of marriages ending in divorce may have peaked and may fall to around 40% (Norton & Miller, 1992; Farley, 1996). The divorce rate varies according to the age at first marriage with people who marry younger divorcing at higher rates than people how married at older ages (Norton & Miller, 1992). There are other variables associated with divorce rates including ethnicity where it is highest among African Americans and lowest among Asian Americans (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Other characteristics associated with a greater probability of marital dissolution include lower education, lower family income, having no religious affiliation, and already having a child at the start of the marriage (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). One of the documents students read in this class is an article from the New York Times entitled: “Questions couples should ask (or wish they had) before marrying (December 17, 2006). It is an article that touches on many of the correlates mentioned above. It will most certainly be useful information for them personally and in their clinical practices with couples.

Remarriage is common and is usually cited at somewhere between two-thirds to three-fourths of people remarrying after a divorce (Bumpass, Sweet, Martin, 1990; Norton & Miller, 1992). This trend has led to an increase in the number of blended or stepfamilies and is an issue that most definitely needs to be covered in a course on *Family Policy*.

Delayed first marriage is another influential trend that is associated with increased education and work experience among women in particular. The percentage of men and women aged 25-to-34 years-old

who report they have never been married has increased dramatically from the 1950 to the 2000 Census reaching 39% for men and 30% for women (Kreider & Simmons, 2003). This increased education in turn is associated with delayed and lower fertility rates (Vespa, Lewis, & Krieder, 2013).

Finally there has been an increase in cohabitation. The numbers of cohabiting couples increased by 6% annually throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Farley, 1996). The U.S. Census in 2010 documented 7.7 million cohabitating couples up 41% from 2000 (Lofquist, Lugaila, O’Connell, & Feliz, 2012). This is becoming the norm in America for couples to live together as their relationships progress. All cohabitation arrangements do not lead to marriage however. The probability of a first premarital cohabitation becoming a marriage is 58% after 3 years of cohabitation and 70% after 5 years (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

So what policies are relevant to these trends? A major way the federal government has been involved in marriage is with the passage of The Defense of Marriage Act in 1996. It made two unprecedented changes to marriage policy. First it allowed states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states. Secondly it defined marriage as “a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife” (www.thomas.loc.gov). A session on gay marriage and the politics and policies affecting this movement must be covered in this course. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in June of 2013 that DOMA was unconstitutional yet there is still much work to be done to gain access to full equality under the law. According to the Freedom to Marry organization (www.freedomtomarry.org), the federal government confers nearly 1100 rights, benefits and responsibilities on married couples including access to health insurance and information, parenting and immigration rights, social security, veterans and survivor benefits, and transfer of property. There are additional rights to marriage given by state and local governments and by employers. Gay couples are denied these benefits in most parts of the United States. The policies on gay relationship recognition change on a nearly weekly basis given the number of court challenges and state laws being considered. There are several good resources for tracking changes to marriage laws including The Human Rights Campaign, www.hrc.org and The Lambda Legal Defense Fund, www.lambdalegal.org. The HRC has great maps on their site that visually present the complex state policies that have been proposed, and passed including civil unions, domestic partnerships, and true equal marriage rights.

There have been a couple of other smaller ways that the federal government has influenced marriage. The first is in changes to our welfare program. With the reform of welfare in 1996 an emphasis was placed on establishing paternity of children born to women receiving welfare (Lichter & Qian, 2005). There was also a push made to increase marriages among this population. States were given extra money if they could decrease the out of wedlock birthrates. There was funding set aside for marriage promotion programs as well (Lichter & Qian, 2005). Families headed by single mothers are vulnerable to poverty. Forty-seven percent of children living in mother only families are living below the poverty line compared to only 9% living in two-parent families (Farley, 1996). That number had dropped to 45% in the 2010 Census (Lofquist, Lugaila, O'Connell, & Feliz, 2012). Only a minority of children will reach their 18th birthday while living consistently with their two parents (Hernandez, 1993 & Bumpass, 1984). Marriage is viewed as a protective factor against poverty.

State policies have changed over the years concerning divorce. In general there has been a liberalization of divorce laws. The passage of no-fault divorce laws in many states happened at the same time that the divorce rate started to climb (Kreider & Simmons, 2003). On the other hand there is a small movement toward covenant marriages, which makes dissolution more difficult (Lichter & Qian, 2005).

The next major section of this course covers the trends in reproduction, contraception, adoption, and sexual relationships. This section usually begins with a lecture on the rise of same-sex couples. The Census began documenting whether individuals were "unmarried partners" which gave researchers the opportunity to identify same-sex cohabiting couples. Results indicate that nearly 600,000 same-sex couples are cohabiting in the U.S. (Lichter & Qian, 2005). This is likely a low estimate since not all gay individuals feel safe and comfortable identifying their sexual orientation. It's appropriate at this point in the class to discuss the gay civil rights campaigns, which includes not just the fight for same sex marriage, which we have already covered, but also nondiscrimination in employment and protection in hate crime legislation.

The increase in sexual activity among adolescents is discussed next along with the trends in contraception and abortion. Nearly 50% of all 15-19 year olds have had sex at least once (Abma, et al., 2004). Nearly 750,000 women aged 15-19 become pregnant every year with one-third ending in abortion, 14% miscarry, and 57% end in birth (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2006). Globally, there has been an increase in contraceptive use, a decline in unintended pregnancies

and a decline in the number of abortions worldwide (Singh, Wulf, Hussain, Bankole, & Sedgh, 2009).

It may be appropriate at this point in the class to bring in representatives from Planned Parenthood and/or other organizations that are integrally involved in the policies and programs of reproduction. They tend to be able to provide a fantastic summary of legislation and judicial cases pending in your state and at the federal level that impact sexual policies. A couple of the big trends in this area at the federal level under the Bush Administration has been a focus on abstinence only education in the public schools and decreases in family planning funding both domestically and internationally.

The next trend discussed is that of the increasing numbers of adoptions taking place in the United States. An estimated 120,000 children are adopted each year (Flango & Flango, 1994; USDHHS, 2004). There are several types of adoption, which should be discussed including those involving the public child welfare system, kinship adoptions, and private agency adoptions both domestic and international. Policies on international adoption vary by country and there has been some interesting changes recently that should be covered particularly the changes China, and Russia have made to their adoption policies. Clearly state policy impacts adoptions involving children that have been removed from their homes and placed into foster care. Adoption to gay parents is also a macro trend, which should be covered. State laws vary in whether or not they allow gay couples to adopt children through the public system (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001). Gay couples also pursue parenthood through other means including the use of surrogates and sperm donation (Bowe, 2006).

Finally a topic that is getting increasing attention in the realm of reproduction is infertility and the great lengths women are going to in order to become a parent perhaps due to the trends in delayed marriage. Advancing reproductive technology is allowing women to get pregnant when before they couldn't. Procedures are expensive and the outcomes can be mixed, including financial burdens, failed procedures, risky pregnancies and births. There is also a rise in the births of multiples, of twins, and triplets and so on, which result in long stays in the hospital and high medical costs (Saul, 2009a; Saul, 2009b). This is not to say that there are not also wonderful outcomes too but this is a trend that warrants discussion in a family policy course.

The last section of the course covers care giving burdens and division of household labor in families. This includes not only care giving of children but of elderly or disabled parents as well. Many men and

women are falling into what is being called the “sandwich generation” where they are caring for not only children but parents too (Abaya, 1999). Topics covered in this section include how household labor (child care, cooking, cleaning, etc.) is divided in families with children and includes an assignment where students keep a time-use diary. Discussions center on the differences in household labor by union type (single-parent, married parents, dual versus single earner parents). It also discusses how household labor has changed with the influx of women in the paid labor market (Blau, Ferber, & Winkler, 2001; Sayer, Cohen, & Casper, 2005). Studies support the theory that men and women exhibit traditional divisions of labor after marriage with an increase in women’s housework hours and a decline in men’s (Gupta, 1999) Studies also show that the greatest gap in housework hours is among married couples compared to other couples. I utilize another book titled, “The changing rhythms of American family life” to cover these topics and for the time-use diary assignment (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006). Policies that fall into this area include family leave, maternity and paternity leave policies, flexible work schedules, and childcare subsidies. An international comparison is given to illuminate what other countries are offering families for example women receive 40 weeks of job protected leave in the United Kingdom (Alewell & Pull, 2005; Blau, Ferber & Winkler, 2002).

In this course books of short essays about family life are used as supplements to the text. There are many out there that document the trials and tribulations of care giving and marriage and the stress put on parents that have to juggle both. Three books that students have enjoyed include; *The Bitch in the House: 26 Women Tell the Truth about Sex, Solitude, Work, Motherhood, and Marriage* (Hanauer, 2002), *The Bastard on the Couch: 27 Men Try Really Hard to Explain Their Feelings about Love, Loss, Fatherhood, and Freedom* (Jones, 2004), and *Women on Sex, Work, Kids, Love, and Life in a Half-Changed World* (Orenstein, 2000). Use these essays to spark discussion on family trends.

ASSIGNMENTS

This course utilizes four key assignments, three of which are based on the policy practice method meaning that students are writing documents that mimic the products of professional public policy organizations. The students are expected to complete one policy brief which is a short 1-2 page document that summarizes a piece of legislation that is currently being considered by either Congress or a state legislature that deals with a family policy issue. The

larger writing assignment is a more in depth report on a family policy issue that incorporates the legislation that was covered in their brief. The idea is that these documents would be appropriate for an audience of both legislators and potential new advocates. The brief is a snapshot of the issue and the report goes further in explaining the family issue, historical background, and incorporates a student’s recommendations about what should be done to adequately alleviate the problem. Students are also asked to write a letter to the editor in response to a newspaper article on a family issue. This prepares them to be advocates for their clients and agencies. Submission of the letter is required but publication is not.

Finally the last of the key assignments is for the students to keep a time-use-diary based on the work of Bianchi and Milkie (2006). Students are asked along with a significant other, spouse (same or opposite sex), or friend to keep a time-use diary for seven days that documents the activities of their days. Activities are divided into categories including; paid work, commuting time, household work, child or other care-giving responsibilities, personal care, educational activities (since these are students), and free personal leisure time. The household activity category is further broken down into sub-categories including; laundry, cleaning, cooking, shopping for the household, lawn maintenance, and pet care. The assignment is meant to demonstrate the differences in the division of labor between genders, union type, and parents versus non-parents. The data is tallied together, analyzed and presented in comparison to Bianchi and Milkie’s (2006) findings. Students find this project very interesting and it usually leads to great discussion and debate about household division of labor (outlines for related assignments available from the authors upon request).

DISTANCE EDUCATION

Finally this course could be adapted for use in a distance education format. According to a recent study (Vernon, Vakalahi, Pierce, Pittman-Munke, & Adkins, 2009) 41% of BSW programs and 52% of MSW programs are currently offering social work courses online. Over 10% of all social work courses offered online are policy courses (14%, BSW, 13% MSW). They are becoming increasingly common in public health and nursing programs as well. Online courses are valued for the convenience it provides to working students. They also provide educational access for students living in remote areas. The most common online course management system is Blackboard. Lectures for this course could be recorded and broadcast via Blackboard. Collaborative discussion

tools such as threaded discussions (which are asynchronous) and chats (which are synchronous) could be used to allow students to interact dynamically with the course content and with each other. Course assignments can be turned in, evaluated, and graded online.

A course on family policy is an invaluable resource to students of so many disciplines. This article will help instructors and program coordinators design an enriching curriculum applicable to many fields.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTICE AND ACADEMIC PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION

The implications for public health practice are many. The changes in American families, particularly the rise of single parenthood, have made many children vulnerable to economic insecurity. A robust literature exists that documents the impact of socioeconomic adversity on children including learning, behavior, and health outcomes (Blair & Raver, 2012). Studies have found that children in single parent headed households are three times more likely to be food insecure than children being raised by two parents, which means that nutrition programs in schools and after school can be vital to ensuring children have enough to eat (Nepomnyashchy, Miller, Garasky, & Nanda, (2014). Food insecurity during the childhood years is associated with health and nutrition complications, such as iron deficiency, under-nutrition, over-nutrition (obesity), increased hospitalizations, developmental delays, a lack of dietary balance, and family stress (Cook, 2006; Ryu & Bartfield, 2012). Public health practitioners are key players in the provision of nutritional programs to children. Students of public health should be well informed of the vulnerabilities of children in single parent households.

The second implication for public health practitioners as it pertains to the changes to American families is the need for comprehensive family planning services. The United States is lagging behind other countries in providing adequate and appropriate sexual educational programs to young people. So many of the vulnerabilities of women and children could be tackled by good family planning and increased access to contraception and reproductive health programs. Again public health practitioners are key players in the sexual health of Americans. Students need to understand how important family planning is in protecting families from undue hardship.

Finally a class on family policy is important in that it teaches students and practitioners to think beyond the client or community they are working on and focus instead on making big social changes in law.

It's key that students are taught the basics of our American government system and how to advocate for policies that will result in better public health outcomes. Adjustments to policy can impact whole populations of people at one time and lead to an overall healthier nation.

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