

Family Policy: Why We Need it and How to Communicate its Value

By

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In reality, policymakers do not have a choice about whether or not to affect family life; they already do through their actions and inactions. Policymakers have substantial impacts on families through the choices they make, the directions they take (Myrdal, 1941/1968; Riley & Bogenschneider, 2006). A striking discrepancy exists, however, between the way that families are treated in the policymaking process compared to other domains such as the economy and the environment. Policymakers would not think of passing a bill or considering political action without asking about the economic or environmental impacts. When economic questions arise, policymakers routinely turn to economists for economic data and forecasts. Yet, when family questions arise, policymakers seldom turn to family data or family scientists to make evidence-based decisions (Bogenschneider, Little, Ooms, Benning, Cadigan, & Corbett, 2011). Despite its 35-year history in the U.S., *family policy* is still not a term that is widely recognized or commonly used by policymakers, journalists, or the public. It has not yet achieved the status of economic or environmental policy, nor is it even recognized in its own right as a subfield of social policy (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010a).

The conundrum that I see is this: Family rhetoric is politically popular, but there seems to be a gap (some would say a chasm) between family rhetoric and reality. In the United States and in many countries around the world, public policy discourse has long had a family tilt—an underlying premise that families are the basic building block in society that should be relied upon, protected, and nurtured (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2004; Hass & Wisensale, 2006). Yet it remains one thing to endorse the important contributions families make to their members and society, and quite another to systematically place families at the center of research, policy, and practice. Reality often conforms to the usual default—the individual lens—with little acknowledgement of the families in which most individuals reside. Given the pervasiveness of the individualistic perspective and the highly abstract nature of the concepts of *family impact* and *family support*, the substantive result is predictable: Family considerations are seldom incorporated fully in the normal course of policy and program development, implementation, and evaluation.

To address this conundrum, this paper explores four issues that family policy professionals need to consider. First, this paper explores why we need to communicate about families with those in decisionmaking positions. We need to be able to make the case that family considerations deserve to be taken seriously if family policy is ever to become a recognized and respected subfield of social policy. Second, this paper provides a foundation for discussing family policy by putting forth a set of key definitions. Third, drawing on contemporary research, I provide an evidence-based rationale for what families contribute to society and how to communicate this value to policymakers. Each component of this rationale is illustrated with examples of international family policies that aim to support these key contributions. Finally, based on my experience working closely with policymakers for almost 20 years, I briefly consider whether policymakers, if given good information, are likely to take family considerations into account in their deliberations and decisions.

This paper begins with a number of caveats about forwarding these ideas in an international forum. These ideas are broad in the sense that they are based on a review of the literature that spans a number of diverse disciplines including child and adolescent development, communitarianism, family, family law, psychology, and sociology as well as a number of policy reports from evaluation firms, foundations, government agencies, public interest groups, and

think tanks. At the same time, these ideas are admittedly narrow in the sense that they are based primarily on family research from the United States. The paper is punctuated with international examples available in book chapters and journal articles that tend to focus primarily on policies enacted in developed countries. Thus, the examples provided, the research presented, and the ideas proposed need a full and careful scrutiny with an eye to their international validity in developed and developing countries.

Why We Need to Communicate about Families with Those in Decisionmaking Positions

The argument that I advance in this paper hinges on whether family rhetoric matches the reality of how family decisions are made in policy and practice. Three examples of family rhetoric will be presented here. First, the United States is one of the only countries in the world without a mention of *family* in its constitution, yet political leaders from across the political spectrum endorse families as a sure-fire, vote-winning strategy (State Legislative Leaders Foundation, 1995). In a study of the Congressional Record over a 10-year period, in an average week, *family* words and images were invoked 218 times, making their way into one third of all speeches, statements, tributes, and so forth. Importantly, these mentions of *family* are cross-cutting in that they are not dominated by a single gender or a particular political party. Across the decade, with only two exceptions, *family-oriented* words appeared every single week Congress was in session leading Strach (2007) to conclude: “The business of Congress is conducted in the language of family” (p. 25). Families are also a normative ideal upheld by the U.S. public. An analysis of public attitudes in five longitudinal data sets confirm a strong and even growing commitment to marriage, children, and family (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

Second, in Malta, the valuing of marriage and family is strong. Family scholar Abela (2009b, p. 150) writes, “The unity of the family and the need to uphold marriage as a permanent relationship continue to be important values that are embedded in our culture.” Among Maltese university students, the vast majority still want to marry for life (Abela, 2009a). Third, families are sanctioned in the Vietnamese Constitution with these words found in Article 64: “The family is the cell of society. The State protects marriage and the family.”

Thus, in many countries, family rhetoric is abundant, but the issue is how this rhetoric plays out in policy decisions. Three examples of the mismatch between family rhetoric and reality will be discussed here that illustrate the importance of (a) whether the policy exists at all, (b) how existing policies are designed, and (c) who the target of the policy is—an individual in the family or the entire family unit. First, a compelling example of whether or not policies exist became apparent to me when I met a young woman from Austria who was pregnant at the time and kept in touch with me by e-mail. She explained that she received maternity leave for 16 weeks, a time during which she was forbidden to work and, if found doing so, could have been fined. Following her maternity leave, she was eligible for an additional 18 months of parental leave. About the same time, I received an e-mail from a U.S. friend. She returned to work following a two-month maternity leave. Immediately, she was placed on mandatory overtime, despite having two preschoolers at home and a husband who was working two jobs to make ends meet. For this U.S. family and others like them, the reality of their lives makes the family rhetoric seem like no more than empty words.

Also, the design of policies can have important family impacts. In Malta, Abela (2009a) reports 35% of baptisms in Cospicua are registered with an “unknown” father. She speculates

that this situation may occur because the mother wants to preserve sole guardianship of the baby or because not naming a father makes it possible for her to claim more social assistance. This raises the intriguing possibility of whether this policy may have a perverse incentive for mothers to list the fathers as “unknown” and, in so doing, deprive children of knowing who their father is and of developing a relationship with him.

Finally, for family policy to be true to its name, it should be designed from the vantage point of all the members or complex relationships within a family system, not just one individual or a single dyad. The importance of this holistic family approach was illustrated in a case study of one organization aimed at reducing child poverty in Southeast Asia (the country was not named for confidentiality reasons). This organization initially focused narrowly on *children’s* needs such as child care, health, and schooling. Overtime, the focus of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) shifted to *women’s* needs, basically targeting gender equity as a means to promote their economic productivity and success in the labor force. Bould (2006) criticized this narrow targeting of gender equity arguing that “it is only men and women that are at center stage, not boys and girls, and definitely not families” (p. 89). Focusing solely on women’s gender equity pushes children to the periphery and ignores the fact that in developing countries the majority of poor women are mothers. Focusing instead on the whole family unit would encompass the importance of encouraging both mother’s and father’s economic self-sufficiency as well as protecting children from harm. The family impact lens brings into focus all the children in the family including the younger children, who need access to care and education, as well as the older children (especially girls) who often must leave school so they can provide child care and other labor. If policies do not pay attention to children’s basic needs and end up jeopardizing their development into self-sufficient adults, the investment in their parent’s self sufficiency may well be squandered (Blum, 1992).

In short, I am arguing that we have a feast of family rhetoric but a famine of attention paid to the family concept. Few formal entities, little leadership, and meager resources are devoted to analyzing policies and programs for how they affect and are affected by families. Through the research and practice of the last several decades, our knowledge about families has grown immeasurably but rarely is this knowledge translated into policy and practice due, in part, to the pervasive individualistic perspective. Our field knows much about the complex and dynamic patterns, relationships, and circumstances of contemporary family life, yet policies and programs do not always reflect these realities. As a result, most of the world’s decisionmakers do not think or see things through the same family-colored lens that we do. Decisionmakers do not know and cannot be expected to master, the vast, complex, interdisciplinary body of research about families and family policy. They cannot be expected to keep up-to-date on how today’s families are affected by and are adapting to changing cultural, economic, and social conditions. As family policy professionals, we must assume responsibility for communicating with decisionmakers to help them see families, not as the private problems of a particular family, but as public priorities for policy and program decisions.

Definitions of Family Policy and the Family Impact Lens in Policymaking

To be taken seriously, family policy requires a common language, its own identify, and a clear articulation of its meaning. At its root is *policy*, which I define as a plan or course of action carried out through a law, rule, code, or other mechanism in the public sector (e.g., government, judiciary) or the private sector (e.g., employers, nonprofit organizations). Family policy has been

conceptualized, not only as an end goal, but also as a criterion for assessing policy impact and as a means for achieving other policy goals (e.g., workplace policies that promote employee productivity by providing care for sick children; Bogenschneider, 2000). As initially defined by Ooms (1990), family policies encompass the four explicit functions of families: (a) family creation (e.g., to marry or divorce, to bear or adopt children); (b) economic support (e.g., to provide financially for members' basic needs); (c) childrearing (e.g., to socialize the next generation); and (d) caregiving (e.g., to provide assistance for the disabled, frail, ill, and elderly). Policies that are included under the *family policy* umbrella include adoption, child care tax credit, family leave, long-term care, school finance, welfare reform, and so forth.

The companion implicit term, *the family impact lens in policymaking*, acknowledges the critical role family considerations play in a broad range of policies by analyzing (a) what the consequences are of any policy or program on family well-being and (b) when families are used as a means to accomplish other policy ends. Many policy issues are not considered family policies per se because they affect individuals as well as families, yet they still would benefit from the family impact lens in a couple ways. First, families can be used as a criterion for assessing the advertent and inadvertent impact of policies. For example, political discourse on prison policy in the U.S. has focused primarily on the prisoner as an individual, with little analysis of the effect of incarceration on family earnings, family relationships, and parenting practices. Second, the *family impact lens in policymaking* also encompasses those situations in which families are used as a means to accomplish other policy ends. For example, policies such as child allowances and family leave often are framed as family supports, when in actuality their primary intent may be to increase a nation's fertility rate. As another example, Germany provides a limited number of work permits for low-wage domestic workers from Poland to provide in-home care; the policy supports family's caregiving function, but the government's main goal may be finding workers to fill lower-paying care jobs, while preserving the higher-paying care jobs for German nationals (Cooke & Baxter, 2010).

Focusing on families broadens political discourse because it embodies an essential quality found in few frameworks and one that is seldom advanced by special interest groups—commitment to others even when such actions exact a personal cost. This family focus can counter individualistic, narrow, or self-serving agendas forwarded by lobbyists or political action committees. Rather than concentrating on overly specific problems or solutions, a family-centered view enlarges our organizing frame by moving toward a more holistic, multidimensional way of thinking about policy challenges. A family impact lens promotes a longitudinal lifespan perspective that considers families from the cradle to the grave and acknowledges all forms of intra-family sharing and cooperation.

The terms *family policy* and *the family impact lens in policymaking* move our attention beyond the individual to a relationship between two or more persons tied together by blood, legal bonds, or the joint performance of family functions—a conceptual distinction that is often overlooked in policy debate. For example, children's or women's policy is often incorrectly equated with family policy even though an individual is targeted, not a family relationship or family unit. *Family*, when it is used in policy debate is sometimes misused to represent some, but not all, relationships in families. For example, *family* can be used as shorthand to refer only to the relationship of the mother and child, with no mention of the father, grandparent, or other partners who are intimately involved. Sometimes *family* can be used as a code word for certain types of families (e.g., White families), while others are

undervalued or ignored (e.g., families of color; Bogenschneider, 2006; Ittig, 2004).

What Contributions Do Families Perform for Society and Which Policies Support These Contributions?

If family policy is to achieve standing as a subfield of social policy, the nature of discourse must shift to prioritizing families as worthy of study, investment, partnership, and political action. To encourage public investments in family policy, it is typical for arguments to revolve around the functions of families (e.g., family formation, economic support, childrearing, and caregiving). Or, sometimes, specific family policies sometimes are promoted or lists of recommended family policies are issued that are thought to best support family functioning. I argue that these approaches may be less meaningful, less persuasive, and more short-term in their impact than focusing on the value of families to society. When communicating with policymakers, it may be more effective to move beyond the private contributions that families make to their members and focus instead on the public contributions that families make to society.

In the recent family policy decade review, my co-author and I propose four societal contributions that can be used as a rationale for promoting families as a fundamental focus of policymaking: (1) generating productive workers; (2) rearing caring and committed citizens; (3) making efficient investments to reach societal goals; and (4) using effective means to promote positive child and youth development (see Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010b). This rationale is illustrated below with international family policies that have been enacted to strengthen and support each of these four contributions.

(1) Families are a Fundamental Foundation for Generating Productive Workers

If policymakers better appreciated families as a powerful and unique engine of a dynamic economy, they would be more receptive to public policies rewarding families for their private contribution toward the public good of generating productive workers. Family policy could help policymakers perceive families, not as mere units of consumption, but rather as the contributor most responsible for the development of human capital (Longman, 2004). In the midst of a global economic transformation, every nation's competitiveness will depend more than ever on its human capital, specifically the education and social skills of its labor force (Reynolds & Temple, 2005). Human capital in these new knowledge-based economies requires cognitive and noncognitive skills. These skills are shaped, to a large extent, by socialization that occurs early in family life and in preschool programs (Heckman, 2006).

For example, in a 30-year longitudinal study in the United States, Sroufe and colleagues were able to predict which children would drop out of school with 77% accuracy using only one variable—quality of care up to age 42 months (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005). Well before these children started school, researchers were able to predict the probability of becoming a high school dropout 11 to 14 years later. The odds of dropping out of school were even greater when parents were neglectful or disengaged.

Similarly, educational attainment by age 23 depended on young adults' early and cumulative history. Based on the quality of early care, researchers could also predict which children would return to high school or obtain their GED (high school equivalency degree). In

sum, children's early experiences proved to be powerful predictors of later development, especially when considered in combination with later care, peer relationships, and the immediate environment (Sroufe et al., 2005).

Given the importance of early child development to later worker productivity, several countries have enacted childcare policies to improve their economic competitiveness. The value of emphasizing the economic efficiency of family policy was documented in a study of the European Union's (EU) adoption of the 1992 Recommendation on Childcare (Bleijenbergh, Bussemaker, & de Bruijn, 2006). For the first time, childcare policy became a topic of EU concern and a societal responsibility in Europe and in the member nations. Beginning in the 1980s when the debate surrounding childcare began in Europe, the authors examined the political factors that resulted in a shift in childcare policy a decade later. Overtime, arguments that child care was necessary to promote children's well-being became less important, and arguments that childcare was a contributor to economic efficiency became more important. The authors concluded that the main justification for European involvement in childcare appeared to be economic—the need for women's labor force participation to serve the larger fiscal goal of keeping the welfare state affordable in the context of an aging population. Under this economic umbrella, the specific forces for change varied in different countries. In the Netherlands, for example, politicians defended the labor force participation of women arguing that child care was an efficient way to increase national competitiveness. In the United Kingdom, where participation in formal public child care grew from 2% in 1989 to 34% in 2000, the debate over child care was linked to labor market policy.

(2) Families Contribute to the Rearing of Caring, Committed Citizens

In longitudinal studies, a focus on families and the policies that support them may help a society develop a caring, committed citizenry. Secure attachment relationships (i.e., the bonds that develop when caregiving is sensitively responsive and reliably available) predict many qualities that societies value in their citizenry. For example, in longitudinal studies, children who were securely attached to their mothers were more empathetic, more self-reliant, and less hostile with their peers (Sroufe, 1988). The attachment relationship between a mother and infant was significantly related to a number of characteristics of good citizenship at ages 15 and 16— involvement, leadership, self-confidence, and social competence in problem-solving situations (Englund, Levy, Hyson, & Sroufe, 2000). Parenting competence is also remarkably consistent across generations; positive parenting at age 2 in the first generation predicted positive parenting at age 2 in the second generation (Conger & Conger, 2002; Sroufe et al., 2005). What's more, the quality of caregiving at age 3½ predicted the quality of romantic relationships over two decades later at ages 23 and 26.

Because competent parents tend to raise caring and committed citizens, countries have enacted a number of policies to strengthen parenting among their citizenry. The United Kingdom recently devoted £10 million per year to promote effective parenting. In contrast, the United States allocated \$150 million per year over 5 years to encourage marriage, strengthen couple relationships, and promote father involvement. Cowan and Cowan (2008) conducted three experiments to compare the potential effects on child well-being of the United Kingdom's parent-focused approach and the United States' couple-focused approach.

In one longitudinal study, parents and children were assessed when the children entered

school, at kindergarten, and in the 1st, 4th, and 9th grade. The randomized clinical trial included a brief consultation that served as the control condition. The treatment conditions consisted of two variations of a 16-week couples group led by trained professionals, one group that focused more on parent-child issues and another that focused more on couple issues. Compared to the control condition, couples in the parent-focused group were more effective in their interactions with their children one year later; however, no changes were observed in the quality of the couple relationship. Notably, for the parents in the couple-focused group, both the parent-child and couple relationship improved. Their children showed higher academic achievement and lower aggression in 1st grade and, remarkably, continued to show better school performance and fewer problem behaviors 10 years later when they transitioned into high school. Parents in the couple-focused group experienced a decline in depression, marital conflict, and parenting stress; also, their marital satisfaction did not decline over time as it did in the other conditions. More studies are needed in diverse cultural, economic, and political contexts to examine whether focusing on the whole family system is more effective for enhancing children's (and parent's) development than focusing only on the parent/child subsystem.

(3) Family Policies and Programs are an Efficient Investment of Public Resources to Achieve Societal Goals

Families carry out a variety of functions critically important to society. Economists have estimated the value of these functions if families were unable to provide them. Recently Folbre (2008) used a replacement cost approach to estimate the value of unpaid time U.S. parents devoted to the rearing of children under the age of 12. Her lower-bound estimate of the annual value of parental time (using the average hourly wage for child-care workers in 2000 of \$7.43 per hour) is \$14,338 per child under age 12 in two-parent, two-child families, and \$11,077 in single-parent, two-child families. When expenditures of both time and money are included, a parent's investment amounts to approximately \$23,253 per year per child in two-parent, two-child families, and about \$17,125 per year for each child in single-parent, two-child families.

Folbre (2008) also estimated the value of the cash support provided for childrearing in 2000 by the U.S. federal government to be \$920 – \$2,200 per year per child under age 18 (the estimates included tax subsidies or transfers; social insurance for retirement, death, and disability; and means-tested benefits for low-income families, but excluded tax subsidies for child care and college). Taken together, government cash subsidies represent a small portion of childrearing costs, from 10% – 25% of a middle-class parent's annual cash expenditures on a child under age 18, and only 4% – 10% when the estimates include both a parent's cash and time expenditures. Another way to gauge the value of these parental investments is that taxpayers receive a return of \$10.50 – \$25 in private parental contributions for every public dollar allocated to a child in a middle-class family or \$7.80 – \$18.60 per dollar in a single-parent family.

Long term care has been called the sleeping giant of family policy, given the extent of care provided by family members in several countries. In the U.S., for example, the vast majority (78%) of long-term care for the elderly and disabled is provided by informal caregivers, primarily family members. The economic value of this informal caregiving, which does not show up in state or federal budget ledgers, was estimated to be \$256 billion in 2002 or three times the \$82 billion the government spent through the Medicaid program (Normandin & Bogenschneider, 2006). In a similar analysis conducted in Canada, family caregivers were projected to save the health system \$5 billion (Canadian) in 2002; the services provided by Canadian caregivers were

estimated to be equivalent to 276,000 full-time employees (Harvey & Yoshino, 2006).

In sum, these cost-benefit analyses suggest that government cannot afford to fully replace the functions families perform for the benefit of their members and the good of society. As aptly put by Bronfenbrenner in testimony before the U.S. Congress: “The family is the most powerful, the most humane, and, by far, the most economical system known for building competence and character” (1986, p. 4). Still, families do better in a supportive policy environment—one in which, for example, schools actively seek parental engagement; employers recognize that workers are also family members; agencies and organizations are family-centered in their culture, philosophy, and operation; and laws support family members’ roles as caregivers, parents, partners, and workers. There remains a role for government to supplement and complement private investments in a world that is rapidly changing and becoming ever more demanding of a competent citizenry.

(4) Family Policies and Programs are an Effective Means of Promoting Positive Child and Youth Development

Recently, great progress has been made in family-centered prevention science (Spoth, Kavanagh, & Dishion, 2002). Many tested programs designed to prevent youth substance use focus on the individual and most of these “youth only” approaches have small effects (Kumpfer, Alvarado, & Whiteside, 2003). One study of the effectiveness of several programs for preventing youth substance compared their effect sizes, a statistical test that shows how large (or small) differences are between groups. Programs that change family dynamics proved more effective than approaches that focus only on individual youth. The average effect size for universal, “youth-only” approaches was +.10, ranging from -.05 for school-based affective education to +.05 for knowledge plus affective education to +.28 for life or social skills training.

In contrast, average effect sizes for family-focused interventions ranged from +.31 for parenting skills training to +.82 for family skills training to +1.62 for in-home family support, yielding an average effect size of +.96. Thus, family-focused approaches were, on average, over nine times more effective than “youth-only” approaches.

Several countries have enacted innovative tactics to tackle an insidious deterrent of children’s development—growing up in poverty. In several, large-scale, well-designed, and well-implemented experiments, investments in the employment of parents, particularly among fragile families, improved their children’s school performance and sometimes their social development as well. This finding consistently emerged from three “Make Work Pay” experiments involving 12,000 children in two locations in the U.S and two provinces in Canada (see Berlin, 2007).

One nation moved beyond a single-pronged attack on poverty by incorporating a “Make Work Pay” strategy along with several other evidence-based reforms. In 1999, British Prime Minister Tony Blair made an audacious pledge—to end child poverty. Initially, one in four British children was living in poverty; a decade later, child poverty had fallen by half. Moreover, the average family with children was £2,000 (roughly \$3,200) a year better off, and the lowest fifth of families were £4,500 (roughly \$7,200) better off. This success depended on a three-pronged attack. First, the “Make Work Pay” component included a national minimum wage, tax reductions for low-income workers and their employers, and a working family tax credit. Evidently the reforms made work pay for single parents with employment rates rising from 45%

in 1997 to 57% in 2008; notably, half of this increase could be attributed to the reforms. Second, several steps were taken to raise incomes for families with children whether or not they were employed. For example, the universal child benefit and means-tested income support were raised, and a children's tax credit was established. The third set of reforms focused on children (and the settings in which they are growing up) by introducing universal preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, expanding child care assistance, extending paid parental leave, establishing a parents' right to request part-time or flexible working hours, increasing funding and curricular improvements in primary and secondary education, and ensuring availability (in low-income areas) of the Sure Start Program that guaranteed home visiting and other locally-determined services (Waldfogel, 2010).

What is most remarkable about the British approach is that it acknowledged that multiply-determined, multi-faceted social problems like poverty take multiply-determined, multi-faceted responses. Comprehensive responses can be challenging, especially in modern societies, where universities are organized by disciplines, agencies are organized by divisions, NGOs by services, and policymaking bodies by committees. Social problems are not so easily divided and compartmentalized (Kellogg Commission, 1999).

As summarized by Bogenschneider and Corbett (2010b), family policy can create the conditions for families to better carry out the many functions they perform for their members and for society in rearing the next generation, in economically supporting their members, and in caring for those who cannot always care for themselves—the elderly, frail, ill, and disabled. Yet families can be damaged by stressful conditions—the inability to earn a living, or afford health insurance, or find quality child care, or send their kids to good schools. Policies that support families are politically popular and typically are much more effective than policies aimed only at individuals. When the family foundation is strong today, children are more likely to develop the solid foundation they need for tomorrow—to become competent workers in a sound economy and caring, committed citizens in a strong democracy. “For there to be ‘no child left behind,’ we need to do a better job in leaving no family behind” (Sroufe, et al., 2005, p. 288).

The Potential for Policymakers to Apply the Family Impact Lens

There is no simple, linear association between science and policy. In fact, this relation may be less linear for family policies because they touch on core and often conflicting values regarding equality, personal responsibility, sex, and so forth. Sometimes science is used, sometimes not; sometimes it is used correctly, other times it is misused and misconstrued for political purposes (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010b).

One method that many of my colleague and I use for connecting research and policy is the Family Impact Seminars—a series of presentations, discussions, and briefing reports for policymakers, now being conducted in 27 states across the country. Family Impact Seminars are conducted on timely issues identified by policymakers such as early childhood education and care, health care, helping poor kids succeed, juvenile crime, long-term care of the elderly and disabled, moving families out of poverty, and school finance.

The Seminars aim to (a) promote respect for and the use of evidence in policy decisions, and to (b) encourage policymakers to examine issues through the family impact lens.

We are heartened by the interest of policymakers in evidenced-based information and the gains in knowledge that the Family Impact Seminars routinely demonstrate. We are also heartened by Seminar evaluation data that suggest policymakers' endorsement of families can be more than rhetoric. Policymakers report acting on their interest in families when given information on how to do so. In follow-up interviews three months after a Seminar on long-term care, we conducted phone interviews of 15 state legislators (88% response rate) who were in attendance (Bogenschneider, Normandin, Onaga, Bowman, and MacDermid, 2010). Because of the Seminars, 73% of policymakers reported being "quite a bit" more likely to consider how pending legislation might affect families, and 60% were quite a bit more likely to consider how new legislation that they were developing might affect families.

Summary

This paper is not intended to be an ending point, but rather a starting place. I do not claim that the ideas presented here have cross-contextual validity over time and across different cultural, economic, political, and social contexts. Some family policy scholars argue that certain issues like child care are global in scope (Bould, 2006) and that neither family problems nor their solutions are confined by borders (Wisensale & Haas, 2006). Other disagree, claiming that the effects of policy may vary across countries depending upon such factors as the source and nature of family benefits, the extent of class and income inequality, the existence of varied cultural norms, and so forth (Cooke & Baxter, 2010). Because the jury is still out, these ideas are clearly exploratory and are advanced hesitantly yet hopefully in the spirit of generating ongoing discussions about why families should be the focus of policymaking and how we can best communicate the value of family investments to policymakers.

It is my sincere hope that family scholars from around the world will discuss whether or not these ideas make sense in an international context and, if so, what adaptations and refinements are needed to strengthen this evidence-based rationale for family policy. As a starting point, I propose here four ways that families provide valuable contributions to society, but clearly there may be others as well. In particular, I am interested in international research and experience regarding the value of families to society, and international examples of family policies that contribute to familial and societal well-being.

Despite my enthusiasm for family policy, these ideas should not be embraced without acknowledging appropriate cautions. Family policy can be myopic if it fails to keep pace with the forms, functions, and diversity of contemporary family life. It is important to recognize that families are only one part of a vast, multi-faceted, multiply-influenced, political landscape; it would be short-sighted to assert that family factors affect every issue or that family approaches are always most effective.

I challenge professionals to advance family policy as a subfield of social policy because such efforts may now pay off—during a historical time when families have bipartisan political support (Strach, 2007) and policymakers are increasingly turning to evidence to inform their decisions (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010a; Huston, 2008). Four ways that professionals can help family policy achieve serious standing in countries around the world are detailed below:

- Professionals could encourage decisionmakers to focus on the whole family rather than a single family member (e.g., only the mother or the father or one child) or a specific dyad (e.g., only the couple, mother-child, or father-child relationship).
- Professionals can communicate with policymakers about the value of investing in family policies by focusing on the contributions families make to society. Focusing on families is an effective and efficient means of generating productive workers and raising caring, committed citizens.
- Professionals can encourage countries to establish a locus for family policymaking—a specific agency, organization, or governmental body—that is designated with official responsibility for (a) promoting families as a priority for study, investment, partnership, and political action; (b) analyzing how families affect and are affected by policy; and (c) designing, implementing, and evaluating family policies.
- To encourage international exchange of ideas, professionals could write in books, journals, and reports about their experiences with family policy in their own country—what family policies have been put in place and what contributions they have made to families and society.

Providing evidence-based, family-focused information to decisionmakers has the potential to generate interest in and the momentum for developing policies and practices that can strengthen and support families in all their diversity across the lifespan. Communicating the value of families to policymakers can sound deceptively simple, but in reality can be quite complex and demanding. The fact that it is hard, however, does not mean it is not worth doing. Doing family policy can help turn family rhetoric into reality.

“The end is where we start from.” (T. S. Eliott, *Little Gidding*, Part V, line 3).

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Family policy: why we need IT and how to communicate its value 1. In reality, policymakers do not have a choice about whether or not to affect family life; they already do through their actions and inactions. Policymakers have substantial impacts on families through the choices they make, the directions they take (Myrdal, 1941/1968; Riley & Bogenschneider, 2006).