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Beth Spenciner Rosenthal
York College

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Upper Middle Class Support for the Idea of Family Allowances

Beth Spenciner Rosenthal

York College/City University of New York

There is a newly arisen opportunity for reassessment and redirection of children's policy using non-ideological, pragmatic solutions. Middle class attitudes toward family allowances are crucial to the implementation of the proposed solutions. This paper presents preliminary data indicating that current middle class attitudes are favorable toward the idea of family allowances. Potential explanations of this phenomenon are presented along with policy implications.

The incidence of poverty among children in the United States has been increasing since the late 1960's (Aldous & Dumon, 1990; Hewitt & Howe, 1988; Kamerman, 1989; Ozawa, 1991). Family allowances (income payments to families with children) are often proposed by policy planners as a major component in the solution of children's poverty (Bell, 1987; DiNitto, 1991; Dolgoff & Feldstein, 1980; Jansson, 1988; Kamerman, 1989; Ozawa, 1991).

Family allowances exist in 67 countries, including most industrialized nations in both Eastern and Western Europe and in Canada and Israel (Bell, 1987; Kadushin & Martin, 1988; Kamerman & Kahn, 1978). These allowances usually are provided on a flat-rate, specified amount per-child basis; and are universal, (that is, provided regardless of parental income level or work force status), tax-free, begun when children are born and financed out of general tax monies (Bell, 1987; Kamerman, 1989).

The United States does not have a family allowance system at present. An opportunity for reconsideration of this policy may now be at hand, however (Aldous & Dumon, 1990; Ozawa, 1991). This opportunity for reassessment and possible redirection of policy stems from a confluence of the astounding shift in the political situation in Eastern Europe (which reduces the need for massive defense expenditures); an economic downturn

that has revealed problems in the infrastructure of the economy (the discovery of the deteriorated state of bridges and highways due to lack of appropriate attention raises the possibility of a similar deterioration in human capital resources due to lack of appropriate attention); and the persistence and expansion of social problems associated with poverty in spite of current social policy (for example, the continued high level of teenage pregnancy; and the failure of welfare spending to decrease).

Social scientists and social service professionals can perform several functions in such a reconsideration of policy (Aldous, 1989; Aldous & Dumon, 1990): the shaping of issues through advocacy; the providing of rationales for policy by conceptual and theoretical analysis; and the guiding of the political process of policy making by empirical research. The roles of advocate and expert need to be kept separate to be most effective, however (Aldous & Dumon, 1990). Advocacy is a value based activity but providing expertise is a knowledge based activity (Rosenthal, 1992). If the two are comingled and not adequately differentiated, the credibility of the expert is likely to be diminished (Aldous & Dumon, 1990; Rosenthal, 1992).

The failure of the United States to implement a family allowance policy is generally attributed to a lack of public support. This lack of public support is thought to be grounded in value and ideological considerations: a historical bias against direct governmental involvement in the personal welfare of citizens (Granger, 1989); a historical lack of strong support for child welfare polices in general (Chilman, 1973; Sargent, McDermott, & Carlson, 1982; Zimmerman, Mattessich, & Leik, 1979); the view that the social and economic status of a child properly is dependent on the status of its parents (Hecl, 1986; Ozawa, 1991); and the belief that the status of parents reflects their adherence to the nation's central value, the "work ethic" (Hecl, 1986; Ozawa, 1991; Williamson, 1974).

Ozawa (1991) has presented a cogent analysis of child poverty that shifts the focus from value laden ideological issues to a more value-neutral pragmatic issue. She provides a rationale for a family allowance system in terms of an investment in "human capital" that is required to ensure the continuation into the future of today's level of US economic productivity.

The concern of the present paper is the political process that results in the implementation of social policy. The assumption that the public's attitudes ultimately shape governmental policies is widespread. Sociologists (Aldous & Dumon, 1990; Coughlin, 1979; Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989; Kleugel, 1987; Kleugel & Smith, 1981; Lauer, 1971; Rainwater, 1974); political scientists (Burstein, 1979; Monroe, 1983; Page & Shapiro, 1982; Rubin, 1980); social scientists (Eckart & Durand, 1985; Feagin, 1975; Williams, 1989; Wright, 1977); policy analysts (Bajgier & Moskowitz, 1982; Benton, 1983; Ozawa, 1991); and social workers (Chilman, 1973; Granger, 1989; Klemmack & Roff, 1983; Macarov, 1981; Wohlenberg, 1976) all assume that citizens' attitudes affect the implementation of policy in legislation.

Some segments of the public are considered more important than others for influencing legislation (Benton, 1983; Marmor, 1983; Monroe, 1983). The groups crucial to legislative action are variously referred to as "elites", "activists", "influentials", "leadership echelons" or "attentive constituents" (Benton, 1983). The common theme in these characterizations is that, to be influential, a member of the public must be active in the political process—likely to vote in general, and, in particular, interested in a given issue and likely to vote on it.

The upper middle class tends to supply these crucial voters. In general, the higher the socioeconomic class, the more likely the members of the class are to vote (Lane, 1959; Milbrath, 1965); those in the middle class are more likely to vote than those in the lower class and the working class; and members of the upper middle class are most likely to vote (Milbrath, 1965).

The middle class has been seen as pivotal in policy determination regarding child welfare issues (Kameran, 1989) and poverty issues (Kleugel, 1987; Lauer, 1971). While other groups such as child advocates and social reformers are important because they raise issues and arouse concern, the middle class is essential to policy implementation because it provides the votes required by politicians to validate the politicians' legislative decision making. Aldous and Dumon (1990) perceive the passage of the federal Family Support Act of 1988 as the result of consensus within the middle class that government welfare policy should reflect the values of individual obligation, the

importance of work and the centrality of the family. Contemporary child abuse policy is a reflection of middle class values (Zimmerman, 1985), and day care became an issue only after large numbers of middle class mothers entered the work force (Aldous & Dumon, 1990).

Thus, information about the middle class' attitudes toward family allowances would appear to be crucial in developing a political strategy to take advantage of the newly developing opportunity for reassessment and possible redirection of policy regarding child poverty. Unfortunately no such information now exists in the literature. The following study is a preliminary attempt to provide initial empirical information on the topic. It is especially apropos in that the issue of family allowance is framed in the study in a non-ideological way which makes the information directly relevant to Ozawa's (1991) pragmatic rationale for a family allowance system.

Method

The study describes a middle class sample's attitudes toward the idea of family allowances. The sample was 160 masters degree level students in three professional schools within a single small metropolitan New York City university who were nearing completion of their degrees in Spring 1990. This sample comprised nearly all students who were completing these degrees at that time. Data were collected from 62 business students, 54 education students and 44 nursing students by self-administered questionnaires administered during a class session at the end of the semester. This university does not have a medical school, a law school, nor an engineering school; it does have a graduate school of social work, but the students of this school were excluded from the study because they were thought to be less representative of the general middle class public in as much as they would have explicitly studied social policy issues and would perhaps have a professional interest in child and family advocacy.

The sample is clearly upper middle class by virtue of its graduate education and its "professional" occupational status. This upper middle class status is confirmed by the sample's current high household income levels: half (49%) report annual

household incomes between \$35,000 and \$55,000; only 22% report incomes—even as students—below \$35,000, the approximate median income for households in New York State the year of data collection (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989).

The mean age of the sample is 30 with the distribution skewed positively. Slightly more than half (57%) were not married; 75% were female; and 89% were white. In terms of families of origin, 27% of the sample come from poor or working class homes; more than half (55%) of the respondents come from middle class homes; and 18% come from upper middle class and well-to-do homes.

Support for family allowances is measured by a four-item additive scale, each item having nine alternative response categories. The items are of two styles. One style presents a series of statements and the respondent is asked to report the degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement. Two of these statements referred to the federal government providing financial assistance to all families with young children. The other style asked the respondent to consider several provisions of hypothetical "bills pending before the US Congress," and to report the level of approval or disapproval of each provision. Two of the provisions referred to guaranteed allowances to all families which contain young children.

In scoring, the response weight for the negative item was inverted and the weighted responses summed across the four items. The scores theoretically could range from 4 to 36; high scores represented high support for family allowances. The reliability of this support for the idea of family allowances scale (Cronbach's alpha) was .75. The scale has face content validity.

Findings

There were no statistically significant differences in level of support for the idea of family allowances among the three subsamples from business, education and nursing. The three subsamples were, therefore, combined into a single sample for reporting level of support.

The general level of support for the idea of family allowances was quite high within this upper middle class sample (Table 1); the mean level of support is 24 on a scale for which the

neutral point is 20. There was great variation in level of support within the sample, however, with the actual scores ranging from one possible extreme to the other—that is from 4 to 36.

Table 1

Distribution of Support for Family Allowances Among the Upper Middle Class

Degree of support for family allowances	(scale score)	Frequency	
		n	%
Strong support	(30–36)	35	22
Support	(23–29)	55	34
Neutral	(18–22)	35	22
Rejection	(11–17)	28	18
Strong rejection	(4–10)	7	4
Totals		160	100

Over half (56%) of the sample clearly approve the idea of family allowances; slightly less than a quarter (22%) were neutral; and a similar proportion rejected the idea of family allowances. Moreover, 22% of the sample expressed strong approval, but only 4% were strongly rejecting. The level of support for the idea of family allowances was not related to the variables of age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, household income and degree of social mobility (Table 2).

Discussion

These data indicate that there is considerable sentiment favoring the idea of family allowances among middle class Americans, and that the level of hard core opposition to the idea is relatively small. One must, of course, be careful in generalizing these findings. They come from a restricted convenient sample of graduate students in the professional schools of a single university. This university, however, has a reputation of being relatively conservative in its social, political and economic outlook; and the students in the graduate school of social work—who would be more likely to contain advocates

Table 2

Analysis of Variance for Family Allowances by Selected Demographic Variables

Variables	(df)*	F ratio	p
Profession	(2,157)	1.44	.24
Age	(2,142)	.30	.74
Gender	(1,153)	3.45	.07
Marital status	(1,142)	1.58	.21
Ethnicity	(1,153)	.10	.75
Household income	(2,149)	.84	.44
Social mobility	(2,146)	.55	.58

*n's differ from variable to variable because of missing information in a few questionnaires.

for the underprivileged—were excluded from the study. Thus, any obvious bias in the sample might be expected to be in a conservative direction.

These findings are clearly preliminary and need to be confirmed within a larger more representative sample. Nevertheless, these findings are consistent with conclusions of other observers, reached on the basis of more indirect data, that the American public, in general, is more aware of the need for a children's policy and more favorably disposed toward the implementation of governmental policies to deal with children's issues now than it has been for some time (Granger, 1989; Kamerman, 1989; Scales & Brunk, 1990; Wisensale, 1990).

The relatively high degree of support for the idea of family allowances found within this upper middle class sample seems to contradict established beliefs: "welfare" spending is not particularly popular among citizens in general (Feagin, 1975; Granger, 1989; Williamson, 1974; Wright, 1977) or among the middle class and well-to-do in particular (AuClaire, 1984; Kleugel, 1987; Lauer, 1971); indeed, "cutting 'welfare' may be especially appealing (to the middle class because they) do not directly benefit from spending on anti-poverty programs" (Kleugel, 1987, p. 84).

Two explanations may be suggested for this "new" attitude. The first explanation is in terms of the self interest theory which asserts that people support policies that are in their own immediate personal self interest (Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989; Heaton, 1987; Kamerman, 1989; Sudit, 1988; Williamson, 1974). In this conceptualization, the middle class has differentiated family allowances from traditional child welfare and public welfare areas. That is, the middle class does not perceive family allowances either as a program targeted at a specific type of deprivation or welfare program for the poor, but rather as a program which would help families in general including their own (actual or potential). Family allowances are thus viewed as personally benefitting themselves.

The second explanation of the high level of support for family allowances in this sample is that it contains a substantial number of a "... 'new class' of younger, high SES groups who favor rather than oppose the expansion of government" (Eismeier, 1982, p. 137), especially in terms of support for governmental investment in the postindustrial infrastructure of society. In this conceptualization, certain segments of the middle class view family allowances as an investment in "human capital" that will ensure the continued economic and cultural productivity of the nation in the future. A family allowance system becomes, in this view, an appropriate allocation of society's resources, an appropriate investment in conserving and maintaining the essential nature of the present society.

In both of these "explanations," the middle class has begun to differentiate family allowances from broader poverty, public welfare, child welfare and child poverty issues. Such an analysis implies that child welfare and children's policy advocates, if they wish to maximize the potential for successful passage of family allowance legislation, also need to differentiate family allowances from broader child welfare issues. Such partialization of the children's agenda will facilitate the use of Ozawa's (1991) compelling "investment in human capital" rationale for a family allowance system. The use of this value neutral rationale will avoid a head to head ideological value conflict that reformers are unlikely to win (Ozawa, 1991; Rosenthal, 1992).

The findings from this preliminary study of this relatively small non-representative sample are unlikely to be compelling in and of themselves to legislators in the political process of implementing social policy. Nevertheless, the potential implications of the findings, if they can be verified in a larger representative sample, are considerable. An obvious next step is an attempt at replication.

Finally, one must note that we do not, at this point, really understand the underlying dynamics of attitudes toward family allowances. Speculations regarding two potential explanations of the empirical findings were presented above, but these are only plausible starting points for further attempts at explicating such dynamics. A deeper understanding of these phenomena would be extremely helpful in attempts to generate additional support for a social policy of family allowances. Given the importance of public support in validating legislative action, an understanding of the dynamics of middle class support for family allowances is crucial to enabling our nation to move closer to “. . . improving the prospects of the least of us”—our poor children—and “. . . assur(ing) a more productive, just, and civil nation for all of us” (Schorr, 1988, p. 294).

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