

**Policymakers Values as Barriers or Enablers to Childhood Obesity
Legislation in Pennsylvania**

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Abstract

Childhood obesity rates remain high in the United States and specifically in the state of Pennsylvania. While many policymakers agree that this is a serious issue that requires further legislative efforts to reduce its prevalence and mitigate its negative effects, it continues to receive a low priority on many of their agendas. There are a multitude of barriers and enablers, cited by policymakers and other experts, that influence their decision-making processes concerning these types of policies. However, the majority of the research and its focus has been on the practical, more objective elements external to the policymaker, rather than the subjective elements specific to the individual proposing, forming, and implementing the policy. In this article, the author reviews the subjective elements, specifically basic human values, that could influence a policymaker concerning childhood obesity legislation. The overlap between the objective and subjective elements of influence will be reviewed as well, considering that complex issues like childhood obesity are open to more than one interpretation and therefore contestable. Exploring how basic human values can influence a policymaker and the policymaking process may help partly explain why some policy actors are more likely to support particular childhood obesity policies and others are not. This can potentially enhance the dissemination of information, expand future childhood obesity legislation, and improve the level of transparency and efficacy between our Pennsylvania legislature, the public and other key stakeholders.

Keywords: subjective elements, objective elements, external barriers and enablers, internal barriers and enablers, policymaking process, basic human values, policy actors, cross-sector collaboration, ideology, evidence-based research

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Introduction

The growing rates of overweight and obese children in the U.S, specifically in the state of Pennsylvania, has created a need for behavioral, political, and economic interventions. This is due to the significant negative effects that obesity has on a child's health and well-being, as well as the economy. Also, children and adolescents that are overweight or obese are more likely to become obese into adulthood and are at risk for other comorbidities (Di Cesare et al, 2019; Lee & Yoon, 2018; Stamatakis et al, 2014; Voigt, 2014).

Controversy exists over the exact etiology or causal factors associated with childhood obesity, which makes this issue complex and contended among experts as well as the general public. Addressing childhood obesity with public policy can be very difficult because some policymaker's believe childhood obesity is primarily an individual behavioral problem, whereas others argue that it is largely a result of socioeconomic factors. Controversy also exists between policymakers as it pertains to legislative solutions to address childhood obesity. These controversies exist because a complex issue like childhood obesity is abstract and relative within the policymaking arena, leaving it open to more than one interpretation. Regardless of the conflict and contestable nature of childhood obesity legislation, "there is also strong evidence that many policy options are likely to be effective and cost-effective ways to support obesity prevention efforts at the population level" (Clarke et al, 2021, p. 2).

Despite these controversies or evidence, little is known about what factors can influence a policymaker when acting on legislation aimed at addressing childhood obesity (Dinour, 2015; Rutkow, 2016). The literature has focused mostly on the external or more objective factors, such as public support, the media, and party affiliation, to name a few. However, research is limited regarding what internal or subjective factors, such as basic human values, may influence a

policymaker when proposing, forming and deciding upon childhood obesity legislation. (Shams, 2016). This is an important consideration because this issue contains subjective and objective elements that are interconnected and at times overlap. This overlap between the objective and subjective elements is essential to a policymaker's decision-making process because it can help validate, reinforce, support or oppose particular values over others.

When issues are framed to activate core values,-such as equality or security-these messages are particularly persuasive because individuals for whom the message resonates are more likely to pay attention to and accept the message, and less likely to resist or counterargue it (Gollust et al, 2013, p. 96).

Therefore, considering the issue, more exploration is needed regarding how personal values can influence a policymaker's decision-making process when considering legislation addressing childhood obesity in the state of Pennsylvania (Botterill & Fenna, 2019).

Furthermore, the external factors that can influence a policymaker's personal values or decision-making process will be described considering the interconnected nature of an individual's core values and the political, social and economic climate at the time. Overall, expanding our understanding of how a policymaker's core values can influence his or her decision-making process may help partly explain why some policymakers are more inclined to participate in legislation addressing childhood obesity and others are not.

This would aid in developing a more comprehensive narrative and potentially identify themes that future advocacy groups, coalitions, academia, and other key stakeholders can use to better educate and inform policymakers in the future. It can also help policymakers by providing them with more ways to garner political support for particular childhood obesity policy proposals. This could potentially lead to an increase in the formation and implementation of

legislation that will produce significant positive health outcomes for this segment of Pennsylvania's population.

Literature Review

The literature surrounding values in policy discourse is not well understood. Several studies cite abstract concepts like political ideology, values, and their corresponding beliefs or attitudes as influential factors in the decision-making processes of policy actors. Values also differ between individuals or groups and change over time, especially when a crisis like the recent COVID-19 pandemic occurs. The literature also describes the significant overlap between objective and subjective elements of the policymaking process, suggesting that these factors are rarely, if ever, mutually exclusive. For example, policymakers can utilize objective data and evidence-based research to garner support for a particular piece of childhood obesity legislation that aligns with the values of their constituency or colleagues, even if it contradicts their own. Contrary to this, policymakers might act in accordance with what they value, even though it is not economically beneficial, practical, or does not mirror the general attitudes of their constituency (Botterill & Fenna, 2019; Jones et al, 2012).

These examples and others in the literature reinforce this concept in the polis as Deborah Stone (2012) described it, of how abstract concepts like an individual's values are relative and open to more than one interpretation, making them a necessary and influential element in the policy process. In fact, effective manipulation and strategic framing of values for political purposes can be identified throughout U.S. history. The very founding of the United States was fueled by ideas and values such as liberty, equality, and justice. During the Civil War, conflicting values created division, turmoil, and death, and at the same time they created unity, justice, and equality. Therefore, the significance of core values throughout the history of the United States,

including state-specific legislation, is well established. To suggest that the policy process, even today in an industrialized and technologically advanced society, is free from subjective influence in the form of individual or collective values would be implausible (Stone, 2012).

There are also certain practical and logistical limitations or enablers to getting particular issues on the agenda and eventually implementing them. Lack of funding or other fiscal constraints, administrative barriers, the policy process itself, or other external factors such as the demographic characteristics of the district or state, can obstruct childhood obesity legislation regardless of what a policymaker values. However, if framed properly and utilized at the appropriate time, an emphasis on values can overcome even practical barriers.

This literature review will first describe the etiology and impact of obesity as a health issue. Most policymakers will utilize objective data surrounding childhood obesity, whether or not values have a significant influence on their decision-making process. Also, some of the external elements that policymakers will factor into their decision-making process will be described. This includes objective, concrete information that can be used for political purposes in order to emphasize certain values over others. Finally, it will describe what experts, from a variety of disciplines, identify as subjective factors that can influence a policy maker and the policymaking process. Primarily, it will identify the various ways that basic human values can influence their decision-making process concerning childhood obesity legislation.

Childhood Obesity Etiology and Impact

Childhood obesity is a very complicated health issue and can significantly increase an individual's chances of becoming overweight or obese into adulthood. The exact etiology is unknown due to the multitude of potential causal factors. Some of these etiological links include genetic, behavioral, cultural, environmental, and social factors that all contribute to the increasing

prevalence of obesity among U.S. children and teens. Obesity can decrease quality of life, increases the risk of death, and is associated with several comorbidities which pose an even greater risk for children and adolescents. “Obesity is associated with increased risks for atherosclerotic cerebrovascular disease, coronary heart disease, colorectal cancer, hyperlipidemia, hypertension, gallbladder disease, and diabetes mellitus, as well as a higher mortality rate” (Zhang, 2014, p. 5154). Some of the specific causal factors cited are genetic regulation of energy expenditure, endocrine hormones secretion, dietary patterns, sedentary lifestyles and lack of physical activity, social support, household context, language barriers, lack of accessible health care, public policy, socioeconomic status, and the media.

Overweight and obese individuals have substantial negative impacts on both the nation’s health and economy, causing \$480.7 billion in direct health care costs and \$1.24 trillion in indirect costs due to lost economic productivity. This accounts for 9.3% of the U.S. gross domestic product. The estimated annual health care costs of obesity-related illness are a staggering \$190.2 billion or nearly 21% of annual medical spending in the United States. (Graf & Waters, 2018, p. 1).

Despite the enhanced awareness and the sense of urgency and increased action among policy actors in the U.S, the number of overweight and obese individuals in the population continues to grow steadily. This is especially alarming for children and adolescents. According to the CDC, 13.9% of children aged 2 to 5 years old are obese, 18.4% for children ages 6 to 11, and 20.6% among 12 to 19-year-olds. Overall, the prevalence of obesity affects 13.7 million children and adolescents at 18.5% for ages 2 to 19 years old (CDC, 2017, para. 7). Pennsylvania is ranked 39th out of 51 states for children ages 2 to 4 years old with 12.2% classified as overweight or obese, and 26th out of 51 for ages 10 to 17 years old with 14.5% classified as

overweight or obese. Many experts are alarmed by these statistics and seek to expand their understanding of the policy process, and which factors influence policymakers concerning childhood obesity legislation (CDC, 2017, para. 7).

The aforementioned statistics and negative health effects associated with childhood obesity demonstrate the need for public policy addressing this issue. This information is vital for any policy actor attempting to address childhood obesity with legislation and should be considered a necessary component to be incorporated in the following external and internal barriers and enablers.

External Barriers and Enablers

Cross-Sector Collaboration

One external factor that can influence a policymaker's action or inaction regarding childhood obesity legislation is the collaboration of multiple stakeholders with interests from multiple sectors. In order to promote and form effective and sustainable policies, efforts must engage actors beyond food production, processing, and distribution, but also in areas such as education, community planning, and child welfare. Johnson et al (2014) described the need for this type of cross-sector collaboration from multiple stakeholders in order for policy actors to come together in two or more groups united through a common set of values. The Advocacy Coalition Framework is cited as an example and an emphasis is placed on how nutrition policy developers would benefit from “a better understanding of how mutual goals and policy values may be used to form nontraditional alliances that improve the likelihood of policy enactment” (p. 173). Abu-Omar et al (2018) described chronic policy problems, like childhood obesity preventative policies, as highly complex “requiring actions from more than one policy sector” (p.

360). The aforementioned studies illustrate how stakeholders and their values are diverse, which is why some childhood obesity policies may be supported, while others may not. Cross-sector collaboration can be utilized as a method to garner more support for particular childhood obesity legislation if messages and objectives are tailored to those diverse human values (Mozaffarian et al, 2017).

Bipartisan Support and Political Party Values

Bipartisan support and value congruence between political party members are important external factors, and they play a critical role in influencing a policymaker's core values and decision-making process concerning childhood obesity. This is due to the importance of garnering support from members of the same party or from across the aisle with different values, in order to ensure childhood obesity remains a high priority on the policy agenda. Eyler et al (2012) conducted a content review from an inventory of 2006 through 2009 state legislation on childhood obesity and qualitatively described predictors of enactment. Some of the predictors identified in their study are legislative support, term limits, bipartisan and committee sponsorship or type of bill sponsor, and topics included in the bill. Eyler et al (2012) also mentioned advocacy groups, which reinforces the importance of cross-sector collaboration described in the previous section. In *The Challenge of Treating Obesity and Overweight: Proceedings of a Workshop* (2017) Matt Galivan and Lynn Sha, both health policy advisors, emphasized bipartisan opportunities and their importance for moving policies addressing childhood obesity forward. Both also echoed the need to include numerous stakeholders. (Olson, 2017).

Kindig (2015) explored whether political common ground for improving population health could ever be achieved. His work was influenced by Jonathan Haidt, whose extensive survey research revealed that both liberals and conservatives share values like caring and liberty.

Ideological differences between the two groups mainly create differing perceptions on how childhood obesity should be addressed or prevented. Kindig (2015) also identified one particular ideological difference of individual responsibility, which is harder for those with fewer economic or social resources and education. “Population health science tells us that health is produced by many determinants, including health care and health behaviors, as well as social and environmental factors” (p. 25). These studies illustrate the importance that values can play in the policymaking process concerning childhood obesity legislation, considering not all policymakers share the same values especially when attributing them to an issue like childhood obesity. Alignment of values for individual or groups of policymakers within the Pennsylvania legislature can potentially lead to increased support for a particular piece of childhood obesity legislation. Ideology was included under political party values but will be examined further for its role as an internal factor.

Public Values

Deborah Stone (2012) argued in *Policy Paradox* how inconclusive and relative issues that can have multiple interpretations or be valued differently by different people, creates divides among the public and policy actors within the policymaking arena. Cullerton et al (2016) described barriers and enablers within two major themes, the “public will” and “political will.” Both overarching categories contained “the rise of neoliberal ideology” and “use of emotions or values” as barriers and enablers (pp. 2643-2653). Rutkow et al (2016) identified facilitators and motivators for stakeholder groups to focus on childhood obesity preventative policies. One of these factors was community priorities. According to one policy-maker, “First and foremost is the engagement of the community. We really went to the community and engaged them in identifying what those health priorities were” (p. 3). Lyn et al (2013) also mentioned the

importance of assessing the social and political environment, stating that public opinion reflects the mood, policy preferences, and values of voters. Botterill and Fenna (2019) reinforced the importance of the external factors in influencing policymakers decision-making processes, including societal values. They cited Rokeach (1981), who described how it is just as meaningful to speak of societal values, ideological values, or the “value-transmitting functions of social movements” than it is to speak of individual values (p. 39). These studies emphasize the importance of the public values as a potential influential factor for childhood obesity legislation. Policymakers often consider the values of his or her constituency and hope to formulate policies that align with those values, especially if he or she wants to pursue re-election. If a Pennsylvania policymaker’s constituency values other issues more than childhood obesity, or believes that the policy will infringe on other values that they prioritize, then that policy may not stay on the agenda and be implemented.

The Media and Value Narratives

Print and electronic media “play an important role in shaping public perceptions about policy issues related to obesity” (Stanford et al, 2018, p. 7). Barry et al (2013) described the complex relationship between the objective and subjective elements in public policymaking, such as the media and public support. They mentioned how elites use data, anecdotes, symbolic images, and emotional appeals to “shift the terms of policy debate” toward preferred solutions “and the media serve as an important setting in public discourse wherein this competitive process unfolds” (p. 327). Nimegeer et al (2019) also described the media as a “key influence” on public perception of health issues and policies such as childhood obesity. The media “grants differing levels of prominence to different topics and influencing how those issues are understood by building frames” (p. 2).

Sun et al (2016) conducted a Web-based experiment that examined media framing of obesity, and their results indicated an imbalance across multiple platforms. This imbalance was created from the obesity issue being labeled as one that results primarily from a lack of control, targeting values of individual responsibility and free choice. “Within the news media, unfortunately, journalistic practices on reporting obesity serve to reinforce such a personal responsibility frame, as has been documented in a series of content analyses” (p. 2). This review included newspapers, television news, and social media platforms such as YouTube. Other ways the media is cited as an influence on public policy and policymakers decision-making processes are the way rhetoric is shaped, which can create polarization, the way scientific experts present evidence, indoctrination, and the way it functions as a “fourth branch” of government that the public uses to support or challenge policy decisions” (Birkland, 2020; Botterill & Fenna, 2019; Stone, 2012). These studies illustrate the significant impact that the media can have on other external barriers or enablers like the public’s perception of childhood obesity as an issue or its proposed legislative solutions. More importantly, policymakers can gauge how much the public may value a particular issue like childhood obesity, or what he or she values individually based on their response to messages, symbols, and narratives conveyed by the media. This is especially true after a crisis event occurs, drawing all of the media’s focus onto one issue over another.

Lobbyists

Cullerton et al (2018) identified one of the key barriers concerning nutrition policy as intense lobbying, which was described as the most noticeable form of pressure from industry. One explanation for this was described by Gauld (2011) as a higher degree of interaction that lobbyists have compared to health organizations as “providers of tax revenue, major employers, international linkages, and as holders of specialized knowledge” (p. 34). Cullerton et al (2018)

review also mentioned that intense lobbying can influence policy by contributing directly to political parties or individual politicians and using high-level contacts. Other ways that industry influences legislation is through the creation of scientific uncertainty or claiming there is insufficient evidence, and influencing cultural norms or the way an issue is framed.

Overall, the literature describes the various ways that lobbying permeates the public policy process, and can influence a policymaker's decision-making process. This is achieved either by supporting their value system, or providing a tangible incentive to oppose it. Holman and Luneburg (2012) describe the impact of lobbyists:

Lobbying can also significantly impair the operation and undercut the perceived legitimacy of a governmental system, producing monetary enrichment or other private benefits for public office holders and skewing governmental decision making in ways that undercut attempts to serve the perceived broader public interests (p. 78).

Childhood obesity legislation can be potentially significantly diminished or manipulated if a policymaker is influenced by special interests in these ways.

Evidence-Based Research and Values

In *Policy Paradox*, Deborah Stone (2012) described how even robust, significant evidence-based research can be interpreted and utilized differently by policy actors with different motivations and values. She described how policymakers will take concrete and factual data concerning childhood obesity, and depending on their goals, motivations, or values, develop a message and present it to the public or their colleagues to achieve a certain end. Researchers can also have different incentives or values than legislators and understand the results of a study by using terminology they're familiar with. This can lead to research that is ill-timed for the

legislative cycle and “synthesized in a language that is appropriate for academic settings rather than being accessible to most policymakers” (Gollust et al, 2014, p. 1894).

Parkhurst (2018) described how “evidence cannot tell us which is the right choice between different arrangements or benefits or which social outcomes should be pursued over others” (p.18). Decisions like this must be made by considering social values. Botterill and Fenna (2019) reinforced some of the limitations of evidence-based policy making some of which include the research question not existing independently of the researcher, their institutional setting, or the priorities of the funding agencies. For example, choosing to research one causal factor or determinant of childhood obesity legislation, or childhood obesity in general, implies a decision to give it greater priority over another, which is partly a value-based choice. “Policy-related areas of scientific activity are likely to be value-laden and influenced by social and political considerations” (p.68). These provide just some of the many examples cited in the literature regarding how evidence-based research can influence and be utilized by policymakers to propose, form, and implement childhood obesity legislation. These studies illustrate the importance that effective and accurate dissemination of results and framing can have on the policy process. If evidence-based research is disseminated to align with what a policymaker and his or her constituents value, then it may increase the chances that the research is utilized in policy formulation. This is true even for policymakers that may not value childhood obesity as an issue directly or one of the policies objectives, but values the others.

Practical Limitations

The literature reiterated several common barriers or enablers to childhood obesity legislation, including fiscal constraints, lack of funding, or other economic factors. Other more practical and logistical barriers include administrative barriers or enablers, the policy process

itself, lack of accessibility or effective communication, and lack of training or expertise, among many others. “Political institutional arrangements greatly affect policy processes and outcomes, including dictating which issues are considered by decision-makers, whose interests are represented or the steps and processes through which decisions can or cannot be made” (Parkhurst, 2017, p. 9). Cullerton et al (2016) identified the issue of time concerning policymakers and how poor communication can lead to disruptions in a schedule that do not have the time permitted to understand complex issues like childhood obesity (Killian, 2020).

Interviews conducted by Rutkow et al (2016) found some emerging themes related to factors that encourage or discourage policymakers that handle childhood obesity legislation. One of the themes involved the potential financial impact of a policy proposal. “Within all groups, a policy’s positive financial implications for the government were viewed as a factor that encouraged policy-maker support, while a policy’s new or additional costs were perceived to discourage such support” (p. 522). Finally, Bernhard and Sulkin (2018) described legislative styles, and how one practical factor of influence may be features of the district or state, like the level of demographic heterogeneity. These studies illustrate how practical and technical limitations offer a unique set of barriers or enablers that impact the policy process, regardless of what an individual values. However, financial constraints, for example, can be potentially overcome if values are aligned accurately with childhood obesity legislation objectives, especially if some of the objectives demonstrate benefits in more than one area. For example, a particular piece of childhood obesity legislation may have multiple objectives such as savings on health care costs, improved academic performance, and enhanced overall quality of life. “Policy-makers respond well when a policy has the potential to create jobs, raise revenue, or is framed in terms of “economics and business” (Rutkow et al, 2016, p. 518).

Internal Barriers or Enablers

Values

Research is limited surrounding the influence values have in a policymaker's decision-making process concerning childhood obesity legislation. For example, in Muer's IPR report (2020), he emphasized the influence that culture and values have on policy outcomes. Muers described how people in a society do not view public services as something to simply be consumed, but rather how public service treats others. One critical distinction he described is what is referred to as the fact-value distinction or the naturalistic fallacy as "(Moore, 1903): The impossibility of deriving a logically necessary statement about what ought to happen from a statement about how things are" (Muers, 2020, para. 15). Muers (2020) further asserts that "a broad-values based approach is also more rational when you consider that circumstances will always change during a term in office" (para. 31).

Birkland (2020) identified three key principles to the policy sciences approach, one of which he calls the value component. This principle says that a problem can only be understood by acknowledging its value components, "or, put another way, the idea that, in a democracy, decisions are made in a political system in which values are as important as neutrally derived facts" (p. 286). He goes on further to say that politics is still the master in the two cultures of politics and analysis. Politics remain the master because elected officials are the ones who are accountable to the public and bring other information like values to the policy process.

Facts and evidence alone are not enough, Bromell (2012) described, for example, determining whether or not the distribution of wealth and income in a society is fair. "That requires explicit critical reflection and political deliberation on values and normative theory because public policymaking almost invariably involves an inter-weaving of information,

interests and ideologies or facts, values and theories of social dynamics and social change” (para. 3).

Canfield-Davis et al (2010) descriptive study highlighted a variety of different legislatures from different states and what factors influenced their decision-making, some of which concluded that personal values and beliefs are two of the primary factors. “Some of the factors that have been shown to influence voting behavior include age, gender, socioeconomic background, religion, legislative seniority, committee membership, party affiliation, staff interest groups, lobbyists, legislators’ constituents, and personal views and values” (p. 56).

Another study, conducted by Rutkow et al (2016) examined factors that encourage or discourage policymaking to prevent childhood obesity. In barriers to implementing legislation addressing childhood obesity, “policy-makers’ beliefs about childhood obesity” was one of the factors listed. This included not just the beliefs about how childhood obesity occurs, but also what role the government should play in trying to mediate its widespread prevalence and prevent its increase in the future (p. 520).

Weible et al (2011) in their articulation of strategies, described four key dimensions that an individual should strive for if they attempt to influence the policy process. They are an awareness of one’s belief system, analytic knowledge, local space and time knowledge, and conditions from other subsystems. Weible et al (2011) defined belief systems as “independent moral configurations ranging from normative values to more instrumental beliefs” (Weible et al, 2011, para. 28).

The aforementioned literature illustrates the importance that a concept like basic human values has on the policymaking process, especially for a complex and multifaceted issue like childhood obesity. Policymakers have their own perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and experiences as

it pertains to childhood obesity which all help shape the way they value and prioritize it as an issue. They must consider a multitude of confounding factors, including the more external and practical elements that influence and impact their decision-making process. A policymaker will attribute some level of importance and value to a child's health, decide on what he or she believes to be the biggest casual factors contributing to the childhood obesity issue, what types of data to collect and how it should be collected, and what results or outcomes are valuable for policy formulation and implementation. The entire policy process from defining the problem to producing policy solutions is a value-laden practice within the political arena. A more in-depth analysis regarding the importance of values will be discussed in the analysis section of this review. "Acknowledging the political nature of the policy process means acknowledging its essential messiness, uncertainties, and conflicts around goal identification, problem definition and instrument choice" (Botterill & Fenna, 2019, p. 153).

Political Ideology

The literature is also limited surrounding political ideology as an influencing factor in policymaker decision-making processes. Some studies make a distinction between core, personal values, whereas others consider ideology to be a factor inherently composed of values. "In essence, ideology is the way values are expressed and debated in political life" (Botterill & Fenna, 2019, p. 118). Carmines and D'Amico (2015) described how political attitudes might better be determined by values and principles rather than ideology. Carmines and D'Amico went further, stating how "relating values to political beliefs show promise in explaining how individuals who lack any political understanding are able to form responses to political objects" (p. 211). Regardless of these distinctions or similarities with values, ideology still plays a role in influencing policymakers. For example, McConnell and Hart (2019) also identified several forms

of policy inaction or potential drivers for inaction. They defined Type II as ideological inaction, which they described as “ideologies and values that can shape purposeful inaction” (McConnell & Hart, 2019, p. 651). The authors go on further and provide an example of this form of inaction, which would include lack of acknowledgement of some moral, social or political imperative. For example, a policymaker may be inactive for childhood obesity legislation because he or she believes it is a matter of individual responsibility, expand government, and infringe on personal liberties.

The evidence is limited concerning ideology and childhood obesity legislation. However, Cohen et al (2000) discussed the influence ideology has had on legislation concerning tobacco control, which is cited by experts as a comparable issue as it relates to public policy discourse. The authors described how much of the controversy surrounding the issue of greater tobacco control has involved ideas about personal freedom. Legislative allies of the tobacco industry successfully utilized “core value” arguments. “The legislation was described, for example, as a “trampling of . . . the liberal ideals on which this country was founded—freedom of choice, personal accountability, limited government” and a “huge defeat for individual freedom” (p. 263). These values mirror some of the same values that create controversy between policymakers and other policy actors concerning childhood obesity policy. Gollust et al (2014) examined the use of research evidence in state policymaking for childhood obesity prevention in Minnesota. One of the non-research-based factors cited by policymakers was “political principles or ideology.” Gollust et al (2014) went on to describe that beyond the evidence, “other types of information including stories, political principles and values and expert beliefs without evidence-were much more likely to be included in policy documents” (p. 1898).

Botterill and Fenna (2019) also described the way that ideology can influence policymakers or other policy actors, by placing issues on the left-right dichotomy, which is unable to capture nuances in peoples thought and assumes a “unidimensional axis of contestation” (p. 116). Newton et al (2016) examined how a public-official’s official duties can be improperly influenced by a variety of factors including ideology. “Ideological conflicts can also occur, for example a more libertarian view that emphasizes individual choice versus a concern with the broader social impact of those choices” (p. 2).

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

The way policymakers are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated and how that motivation relates to their system of values has not been examined extensively. It is a complex phenomenon considering the conflicting and abstract nature of these concepts. Some scholars argue that policymakers will act in ways that are predominantly extrinsically motivated to secure their position in life and in office, or place them in a higher one. This occurs even if significant evidence exists that a particular behavior or product causes harm to the public. Parkhurst (2017) identified several examples to illustrate this point including issues of climate change, the Bush administration and the 2003 Iraq war, pharmaceutical companies, and the tobacco and food industries. Contrary to this, policymakers may at times act purely for the intrinsic motivation they receive from participating in certain legislation because they place a high value on whatever that legislation is addressing, like a child’s quality of life and health equity. Therefore, a policymaker may act to support or oppose childhood obesity legislation depending on their motivations, and in ways that may contradict their basic human values, or the collective values of the constituents they serve. This factor is beyond the scope of this study but was noted for the significant influence it can have on childhood obesity legislation.

There are some notable limitations concerning the aforementioned studies. The primary limitation is due to the abstract and relative nature of values, especially when operationalizing them into practical policy solutions. An abstract and relative concept like basic human values is subject to more than one interpretation and therefore difficult to define, measure, and apply in the polis where controversial social issues are always contestable (Stone, 2012). Other limitations I noted in the literature include methodology, the sample, and conceptual framework or study design. For example, some studies only focused on practical limitations or one specific subjective factor like ideology. This distinction between the objective and subjective elements of the policy process is itself another limitation. The use of evidence-based research or other neutral facts, in order to discover “what works” is an example. Parkhurst (2017) described this limitation, stating that “evidence alone tells us nothing about social desirability of that which is being measured” (p. 18). Other limitations described are cognitive capacity and experience level of policy actors, sample sizes that were too small or from only one geographical location, limited techniques such as audit trails and data triangulation, and bias.

Analysis

While analyzing the literature I identified several themes. Many experts agree that while something like core values is abstract and relative making them subject to more than one interpretation, they are still an essential and integral part of a policymaker’s decision-making process. This is especially true since a policymaker has external or environmental factors to consider like the political, economic, and social climate at the time. These external factors, like the values conveyed by media messages and the values of a policymaker’s constituency, can impact their values and vice versa. Values are such an essential aspect of the policymaking arena that even more objective, concrete information is used to justify why some values should hold a

priority over others (Birkland, 2020; Botterill & Fenna, 2019; Parkhurst, 2017; Stone, 2012; Voigt et al, 2014). For example, proponents of tougher childhood obesity legislation justify their position by citing statistical data of climbing overweight and obesity rates or associated health care costs that depict the issue as a threat to the commonwealth's health equity and safety. Contrary to this, adversaries argue that privacy, security, and other personal freedoms will be sacrificed at the expense of expanding legislation addressing childhood obesity. They support these claims by framing the same facts from a different perspective or by using different data altogether.

Other policy actors or key stakeholders argue that neutral facts and practical barriers or enablers are distinct from the more subjective or abstract elements of the policymaking process however, this distinction creates conflict and is debated among experts. This is because even an objective outcome measured by a numerical scale, for example, can be politicized and sacrifice one value like security or privacy, in exchange for other core values. What this illustrates is, that the way an issue is defined, framed and measured, is also subject to a policymaker's values and corresponding attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies. Policymakers will choose which data to use and has value, how to interpret it, and decide what the best solution(s) are to address the issue in ways that correspond to those values. Lindblom and Woodhouse (1993) summed up some of the issues with rational, analytical policymaking. Three of their points illustrate the misleading and even dangerous consequences of relying on evidence-based research or rational models free of values in the policymaking process. Those points were that these models are fallible, they cannot wholly resolve conflicts of values, and they cannot tell us conclusively which problems to attack.

Another theme experts disagree over is the influence that different motivations have in a policymakers decision-making process and the relationship those motivations have to their

system of values. There is limited evidence surrounding this topic concerning whether the extrinsic and tangible rewards a policymaker receives are more of a priority or if it is their intrinsic motivations and values that guide their behavior. This controversy becomes even more complex in terms of transparency, considering that policymakers will often act in ways that contradict their values for its financial or career incentives. For example, a Pennsylvania legislator might value the health and equity of the children from their district, but be forced to oppose new legislation in order to get reelected, appease their party members, or satisfy stakeholders that contributed significantly to their campaign efforts. While motivation is an internal element cited by the literature, this abstract concept is beyond the scope of this analysis. However, motivation should still be identified as an additional internal factor because of its potential to influence a policymakers core values and their decision-making processes concerning childhood obesity legislation.

Finally, there are more technical or logistical barriers or enablers within the administration and the policy process itself that are cited by policymakers as factors for childhood obesity implementation. However, even these practical barriers or enablers, like the effective timing of a policy proposal or “policy window” and demographic characteristics, can be potentially overcome if the information is disseminated and framed according to the particular policymaker's core values (Botterill & Fenna, 2019; Birkland, 2020). Proper framing and alignment of values can even overcome budgetary constraints, for example, if the policy proposal’s message conveys an enhancement in particular values the policymaker prefers (Rutkow, 2016).

In sum, a policymaker’s basic human values and decision-making processes can be influenced by a variety of internal and external factors, consisting of both subjective and

objective elements. These external and internal factors, at times, will overlap and influence one another considering the relationship between a policymaker and his environment. However, the abstract, relative, and complex nature of a concept like basic human values does not diminish or negate their importance in a policymaker's decision-making process, especially concerning an issue as controversial and multifaceted as childhood obesity legislation. Several theories illustrate this phenomenon and its complexity in the policymaking process. They are Schwartz theory of basic human values, multiple streams framework, advocacy coalition framework, and the narrative policy framework. These theories and their application will be described in the following sections.

Application of theory of Basic Human Values

Schwartz's theory identified a set of motivationally distinct, comprehensive values that can be seen across cultures. This logical system of values can help explain individual behavior, attitudes, and everyday decision-making. Some of the values conflict with one another, whereas others have compatibility. "This coherent structure arises from the social and psychological conflict or congruity between values that people experience when they make every day decisions" (Schwartz, 1992, 2006; Schwartz et al, 2012). This theory is applicable to the literature because it illustrates the importance that values have in influencing human behavior, and how at times they are conflicting. It also makes the distinction between values and attitudes, traits, beliefs, and norms. It could provide a framework for researchers and other policy actors to utilize in order to overcome value conflict that occurs frequently throughout the policymaking process and between policymakers, especially for an issue as controversial as childhood obesity.

Application of the Advocacy Coalition Framework

The advocacy coalition framework, conceptualized by Sabatier (1988), is one theory intended to simplify the policy process. This theory, while placing one of its key principles on a systems-based approach to policy analysis, also specifies a model of the individual, who is bounded by rational limitations and relies on beliefs. The advocacy coalition framework explicitly identifies an individual's beliefs as one of the causal drivers for political behavior. Weible et al (2009) reinforced the importance of ideology as an internal factor by citing liberal and conservative beliefs as examples for this framework. This framework also emphasizes a focus on the interaction of actors from different institutions, which reinforces the importance of cross-sector collaboration described earlier as an external factor of influence. Another external factor of influence echoed by this framework are changes that occur in public opinion, which is described as a dynamic feature. Ultimately, Sabatier did what many other theorists failed to do, which was to link his understanding of the policy process to research emerging from psychology on values. He notes that the structure of belief systems includes the relative priority of various ultimate values, some of which include freedom, security, power, and health. (Botterill & Fenna, 2019).

Application of the Multiple Streams Framework

John Kingdon's (2011) multiple streams framework illustrates the technical complexities of the policy process, and describes three categories of independent and interdependent interacting variables that produce windows of opportunity. These three categories are defined as the problem, policy, and political streams, and apply to agenda-setting. Each stream is composed of characteristics that align with the literature review, which include perceptions of problems,

identification of solutions, and swings in the national mood. (Béland & Howlett, 2016). These streams are independent of each other until a specific point in time when the streams cross and a policy window opens. These windows can open as the result of external factors, and “can be used by particular actors in a policy subsystem in order to advance the engagement of the issues they care about” (p. 222). Birkland (2020) describes the importance of ambiguity to this theory, which is applicable to how values can influence a policymaker and other actors in the policymaking process. “Ambiguity means that no concept in the policy process has a fixed meaning- ideas, symbols, and policies are open to interpretation, and actors in the policy process seek to manipulate ideas around ambiguity to achieve their policy goals” (p. 384). This includes the messages a policy actor chooses to attribute to the issue and its potential solutions. For example, a particular childhood obesity policy proposal may be viewed by some policymakers as an invasion of personal liberty, whereas others see it as the pursuit of greater health equality and transparency (Kingdon, 2014).

Application of Narrative Policy Framework

Deborah Stone (2012) and Birkland (2020) described why the narrative policy framework (2010) applies to this literature analysis. Stone argued that if we think of politics or policymaking that operate in the polis, then we can “understand how political decision-making from a rational economic perspective can seem odd or paradoxical” (pp. 289-291). Rather, the narrative policy framework starts with the assumption that participants in the policy process tell stories. This theory also reinforces the importance of the external factors described earlier, and how policy debates are fought on the terrain of narratives in both formal institutional settings like the legislature, or informal settings like the media (Shanahan et al, 2017). Specifically, one of the core assumptions includes social construction, which refers to the meaning that is created based

on the interpretation of evidence and is filtered through an individual's experience and beliefs. This mirrors the concept of bounded rationality described in the advocacy coalition framework (1988), but from a more subjective perspective. Further, bounded relativity means that while meaning is highly variable, it is not random. Meaning can be bound by contexts, beliefs and values (Jones & Radaelli, 2015).

Ethical Implications

Values and ethics are defined and described differently by experts, some making clear distinctions between the two, whereas others include ethics as the practical application of values linking the two. This makes the identification of ethical implications complex. For example, a policymaker might believe in liberty as a core personal value and apply it to the ethical debate of individual autonomy versus the state as it pertains to childhood obesity legislation. If the policymaker values liberty, they would most likely support individual autonomy and oppose the government's infringement on personal liberties involving the food a child and their primary caregivers choose to consume (Botterill & Fenna, 2019; Carmines & D'Amico, 2015; Schwartz et al, 2013).

Regardless of this complexity, there are still some ethical implications with regard to values and the policymaker's decision-making process concerning childhood obesity. Primarily, they involve the controversy or conflict that can arise when attempting to make a distinction between neutral facts and abstract concepts like values. Neglecting the influence and importance that values have in a policymaker's decision-making process can create confusion or conflict between policymakers, policymakers and the public, and policymakers and other key stakeholders. This can ultimately lead to a lack of transparency, sacrifice other important values or ethical principles, rely on markets as the primary basis for allocation of resources, and cause

greater economic, social, or political harm as a result. Specifically, as it relates to childhood obesity, this could lead to enhancements in certain values like equity and safety and their corresponding ethical principles at the expense of others like security and liberty. It could also lead to a reliance on market models of efficiency that turn commonwealths into categories of numerical data free of values and the corresponding attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that accompany them. The use and framing of certain values by policymakers, as it relates to childhood obesity policy, can also narrow or expand the range of possible solutions and their potential effects. A greater focus on values in the policymaking process can potentially reduce their continued manipulation by policymakers and other policy actors that may serve special interests for their tangible rewards (Birkland, 2020; Botterill & Fenna, 2019; Stone, 2012).

Special interests can interfere with the policy process and influence policymakers' decision-making processes by framing issues and their proposed policy solutions in ways that target certain values. For example, childhood obesity legislation that reduces certain snack foods in schools may be conveyed as an infringement on personal liberties and freedom of choice, whereas other policies can be framed by adversaries as an attack on American values of transparency, and health equity by profiteering politicians (Botterill & Fenna, 2019; Cullerton et al, 2016).

Finally, there are general ethical issues that can arise from childhood obesity if this issue continues to receive a low priority on policymakers' agendas. Voigt (2014) highlighted some of these ethical issues like continued stigmatization, issues of morality concerning the burden a disease like this can have on the individual and their families including its negative psychological effects, physician's prejudice, and constitutional concerns like an infringement on the free market and freedom of choice. Ethical issues can even occur with the way BMI is

defined and measured, considering this measurement has limitations, does not include other determinants of health, and is viewed by some members of the public as an invasion of their child and family's privacy.

Overall, a policymaker's decision-making process can be influenced by their own ethical principles, which can be shaped partly by their core values. Therefore, it is essential to explore the influence that a policymaker's values can have on their decision-making process, and ultimately what ethical issues can arise due to the conflicting value systems that exist between policymakers and other policy actors involved in childhood obesity legislation. "Rationality can be applied in administrative decisions only after relative weights of conflicting values have been fixed" (Botterill & Fenna, 2019, p. 59).

Policy Considerations

Botterill and Fenna (2019) interrogated public policy theory and supported the value perspective for the public policy process. They argue that almost every element of the policymaking process, from citizens opinions on political topics to the construction of party ideologies, are value choices. The policy process, and the decisions policymakers make, are multifaceted and complex, involving multiple external factors, other policy actors, and at times, conflicting values. In order to increase the likelihood that more childhood obesity legislation is proposed, formed, and implemented in the future, a reorientation and focus on the influence values have on a policymaker's decision-making process should be considered more heavily. The argument is that "any public policy framework needs to take account of values and their representation throughout the process of converting citizens' preferences into policy outputs" (p.162). Specifically, what are the value priorities of the policymaker? How do those values align with their constituency and other policy actors? And how can they utilize their values or the

values of the public, to increase the likelihood that more policies addressing childhood obesity make it on the agenda and are eventually implemented? Is there any value conflict between policy actors for a particular proposal? What values can potentially be undermined or sacrificed at the expense of pursuing others? Overall, enhanced awareness of the values at play can contribute to the understanding of policy narratives, agenda-setting, and policy choice. It can also identify areas of political conflict, improving the quality of public policy debate, which would “clarify and articulate the values underpinning policy choices” (Botterill & Fenna, 2019, p. 163). Policy recommendations are, therefore, difficult and unique for this review because the purpose of it was to examine factors that influence the policy process itself, however, some suggestions are still provided and substantiated by the literature:

1. development of accurate and appropriate messages to garner political and public support for more childhood obesity policy
2. dissemination of results and framing of childhood obesity issue(s) that include a values perspective, rather than a pure rationalist model of policy decision-making in search of “what works” (Botterill & Fenna, 2019, p. 73).
3. identifying and describing the link between tangible, practical barriers or enablers to childhood obesity legislation and values for policymakers, their constituencies, and other key stakeholders to enhance transparency and establish clear objectives.
4. development of policy solutions and alternatives to address childhood obesity in the state of Pennsylvania that align with values and contain tangible, measurable objectives that reflect those values.

5. development of policy solutions and alternatives that target childhood obesity in Pennsylvania as a “health” issue, incorporating multiple goals to enhance potential outcomes and political support
6. incorporating applicable value theories and policy analysis like Schwartz’s theory of basic human values, that can aid in identifying values that may be sacrificed or unintentionally undermined for a particular childhood obesity policy.

Summary

Childhood obesity in the United States and specifically in the state of Pennsylvania continues to negatively impact children’s health and the economy. More public policy addressing the issue will be needed, considering the complexity of the disease and the multiple factors leading to its prevalence. This includes both individual behavioral factors and environmental factors. There is evidence demonstrating the positive effects that legislation can have on the childhood obesity problem, yet it continues to receive little to no attention on the Pennsylvania legislature’s agenda when compared to other issues. The reasons for this are not well understood and have focused primarily on the more external, objective, and tangible barriers or enablers, rather than the abstract and subjective elements of the individual policymaker. Basic human values for example, are either implied within the policymaking process concerning childhood obesity legislation, or neglected entirely. Shifting the focus, or placing a greater emphasis on the subjective elements that influence a policymaker’s decision-making process, may make childhood obesity a priority for future legislative efforts. Specifically, framing the issue and the dissemination of results by aligning core values of the multiple policy actors including the public, the media, and other key stakeholders, can potentially increase the likelihood that future childhood obesity legislation will be passed and implemented effectively.

It is also essential to include theories that apply not only to basic human values but also to the study of public policy and its processes. This is especially true considering that practical barriers to policy implementation will always exist, regardless of an individual's value system. The theories frequently cited in the literature that apply are the Schwartz theory of basic human values, The advocacy coalition framework, The multiple streams framework, and the narrative policy framework. These theories help partly describe the influence that abstract concepts like values can have in the policymaking process, how the policymaking process involves ample subjective and objective overlap, and how practical barriers or limitations can be potentially overcome with strategic timing.

The importance of creating a more comprehensive and accurate dialogue around how subjective elements, like basic human values, can influence the policymaking process is summed up accurately by Botterill and Fenna (2019) in the following passage:

A political values perspective suggests identifying values conflicts within particular policy controversies has the potential to assist in developing better policy solutions that are more likely to work for all affected stakeholders, as well as providing a common theme for descriptive policy studies" (p.159).

About the Author

John Volpe currently works as an executive for his family-owned insurance company which provides an essential service to governmental entities throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. He completed his Bachelor of Science degree from Marywood University and received a master of science from the University of Pittsburgh. He also holds seven different certifications in health and physical activity. John also helped develop a mobile application for social gatherings and events and continues to provide marketing strategies and consultation to a local political commentary show. He has worked on a few political campaigns, one of which included a candidacy for state Senate. His experience and education in both the political arena and health and wellness led to his passion for public policy aimed at preventing and reducing childhood obesity. He and his family continue to support their community and other philanthropic causes including an annual scholarship awarded to a senior at the University of Scranton in history or political science from Lackawanna County. Volpe seeks to find new and

innovative ways of improving children's health by aiding in the formation and implementation of legislation that can help reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity, mitigate or reduce its negative effects and improve their overall quality of life.

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