Advocacy and Argumentation in the Public Arena: A Guide for Social Workers

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Whether translating research findings for public consumption, or arguing for a policy position that reflects social work values, social workers engaged in cause advocacy need rhetorical skills. The author draws from the disciplines of linguistics, logic, and communications and provides a framework for making arguments in the public arena. The structure and components of arguments are analyzed, and strategies for choosing persuasive empirical evidence and using values to support an argument are described. The use and misuses of language are discussed. Excerpts from published op-ed pieces are used for illustration.

KEY WORDS: *advocacy; language; policy; rhetoric*

The estate tax suddenly appears in newspaper stories as the “death tax.” School vouchers are renamed “scholarships.” Through a simple change in wording, public debates about social problems take a different turn. Issues get reframed and previously rejected solutions, for better or worse, become more acceptable. For social workers and others engaged in public debates, knowing how to say something can be as important as the content. The art of rhetoric, or “effectively using language in speech or writing,” (*Websters Dictionary*, 1993, p. 570), is an indispensable skill. Whether translating research findings for public consumption or arguing for a policy position that reflects social work values, social workers need a range of rhetorical skills so that our voices can be heard and heeded.

Virtually all social work methods require strong communication skills, but the public nature of cause advocacy, that is, attempts to “effect changes in policies, practices, and laws” (Hepworth & Larsen, 1993, p. 503), requires specific rhetorical skills. There are many forums for cause advocacy. Social workers can testify at a public hearing, lobby public officials, answer questions posed by a reporter, or make presentations to a community organization (Bateman, 2000; Biklen, 1983; Schneider & Lester, 2001). Social workers also draft position papers, testimony, and op-ed pieces. The social work writings, among them Jansson’s (1999) *Becoming an Effective Policy Advocate*, provide excellent tips for

“policy persuasion” (p. 231), including how to diagnose an audience, fine tune a public presentation, or debate an opponent (see also Bateman; Bilken; Schneider & Lester).

This article builds on this knowledge base by borrowing from disciplines less represented in the social work literature, including linguistics, logic, and communications, to provide a step-by-step framework for public argumentation.

DISCOVERING THE FIGURATIVE GROUND

The first step in constructing an argument to resolve a public controversy is to locate its “figurative ground.” As Rybacki and Rybacki (1996) explained: “All argumentation takes place over a piece of figurative ground occupied by existing institutions, ideas, laws, policies, and customs” (p. 18). Similar to constructionism in the social sciences (Best, 1995; Loseke, 1999; Spector & Kitsuse, 1987), it is people’s common and prevailing understanding of the world. It is a collective definition about a social problem as reflected in current policies and beliefs. Locating the figurative ground is a nonjudgmental process; it is not a statement of what is good or bad, but of what is. Arguments start here because of the presumption that the present state of affairs is “natural” and should not be changed without ample and compelling reasons.

Discovering the figurative ground can be a tricky proposition; it requires advocates to temporarily displace their own views (for example that welfare

reform did not work) and figure out the prevailing consensus. Ways to do this include examining public opinion polls, reading editorials and news articles in mainstream papers and identifying the leading experts that are most quoted and credited, and identifying the consensus among politicians.

The figurative ground forms the background and starting point for any policy change. It alerts advocates to their burden of proof and the questions likely to be posed. These questions, referred to as "stock issues" (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1996), are the first barrier to change; if left unanswered by advocates the status quo will persist. Thus, an effective argument may start with a statement of the figurative ground, as demonstrated in this excerpt from a public policy researcher arguing against welfare reform:

There is a groundswell of discontent with the nations' welfare system and the problems of broken or never-formed families. A favored solution, strongly advocated by President Clinton in his State of the Union Message, is to put heads of families to work—work instead of welfare. This is a good idea, but before we plunge, let's look at the record. (Nathan, 1994, p. A17)

THE ROLE OF VALUES

Figurative grounds nearly always involve values. Virtually all of our public discussions have at their heart a disagreement over values. Simply put, "claims about social problems are claims about moralities" (Loseke, 1999, p. 49). Although the language of morality might not be evoked on the surface, it is always lurking underneath, even when the advocate is arguing facts. Making government responsible for its citizens' health care through a universal payer system invokes the values of community and compassion; advocating for mandated work requirements in a welfare program appeals to the values of independence and responsibility.

Advocates should understand the values underlying a social issue as well as they know the facts. Every social problem has its own value constellation and history, and a general framework of values that governs life in the United States. Yankelovich (1994) identified 10 such core values: freedom, equality, opportunity, fairness, achievement, patriotism, American superiority, community, religion, and luck. Loseke (1999) used a slightly different framework, dividing moralities into the categories of re-

ligion, organizational, and humanitarian. Religious morality was most evident in the distant past but has re-emerged in the past few decades. Organizational morality, as its name implies, encompasses beliefs on how things should work on a practical and daily basis. It includes the values of nationalism, capitalism, individualism, family, and concepts of justice and fair play. Humanitarianism is characterized by emotion rather than practicality, focusing on a desire to alleviate pain and suffering.

Often the disagreement is over the hierarchy of values, with audiences or opponents differing over which values are most important. When an advocate's values clash with an opponent's, there are several options. Advocates can shift the order of values and argue that the audience should accept the advocate's priorities. For example, an advocate could argue that welfare benefits should not be terminated after five years because the humanitarian value of protecting children should come before the value of responsibility. Or, as some have expressed it using a religious framework, benefits should not be denied because the sins of the parents should not be visited on the children.

Contrasting one set of values against another can also be effective, as Besharov (1994) did when arguing against orphanages:

Bring back the orphanages! For some, this new Republican slogan brings to mind simpler times of clearer moral values. For others, it conjures up Dickensian portraits of empty stomachs and sadistic caretakers and is a sign of how regressive G.O.P. rule could become A clear eyed view of the numbers shows that for the Republicans, this debate is about political symbols, not realistic programs. (p. A23)

Another option is to assert that the advocate's position maximizes the opponent's values or that the advocate shares these values but has a different way of fulfilling them. As the next example demonstrates, the debate about welfare reform was often framed around values. Two sociology professors writing to oppose welfare reform agreed on the core values of work and responsibility but suggested different ways to satisfy them:

President Clinton has eloquently renewed his promise to "end welfare as we know it." Now, as his aides hammer out legislation to keep that

promise, he needs to insist on policies that truly further the widely shared values he laid out in his State of the Union Message: work and parental responsibility.

What it will take is clear. Jobs must be available to all adults who can work and they must have wages, benefits and protections that are suited for families. (Skocpol & Wilson, 1994, p. A21)

Another approach is to argue that the opponents' solution is not consistent with their own values, as the following social work professor did when arguing against Newt Gingrich's proposal to put poor children in orphanages:

Mr. Gingrich's stance is antithetical to his campaign theme of family values. He wants to remove children to orphanages if their mothers are young, unwed and impoverished. True, such an environment poses developmental risks, but taking children away from their mothers is far from certain to help their development. (Feldman, 1994, p. A 29)

So central are values to the process that advocates should consider addressing the value issue up front and begin their argument with it. This is especially helpful for policy arguments, which invariably involve value preferences because policies are a statement of what should be.

Beginning with a value proposition also permits advocates to fine tune their presentation based on the audience. An argument for universal health care before a business group would start with a value claim that emphasizes worker productivity, such as "healthy workers make more productive workers." In contrast, advocates speaking about universal health care to a religious audience might alter their opening assertion to emphasize humanitarian values as in "a just and compassionate society requires that each citizen have access to adequate health care." A judicious choice of which values to emphasize in an opening presentation permits the advocate to establish a connection with an audience or common ground with an opponent, easing the way for the advocate's specific, and likely more contentious, policy proposal.

In summary, the most compelling factual argument cannot be effective if values are bypassed or given short shrift. Advocates can neutralize the heavy

freight accompanying values in public discussions by showing that they share their opponents' values, that their proposal is a better and more effective way of realizing certain values, or that other equally important values should prevail.

CHOOSING EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Argumentation relies on reason and rationality rather than prejudice to persuade (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1996). Whereas human emotion, including appeals to fear or hatred, invariably seeps into the public discourse, the primary emphasis for advocates is empirical evidence. (This, of course, does not exclude appeals to values). Evidence is often central to public debates because of a cultural emphasis on empiricism and because social problems are viewed as complex phenomena that require dissection by experts.

Advocates are ethically and professionally bound to rely only on evidence that is methodologically sound. But beyond this basic requirement, the most persuasive evidence should be chosen on the basis of the issue, the audience, and the goal.

One consideration is whether the primary evidence should be quantitative, qualitative, or a combination. Personal narratives, or the human interest angle, may be more compelling and convincing than a dry recital of statistics (Best, 1995). Kazoelas (1993), in his study of audiences' reaction to statistics and narratives, found that people were better able to recall qualitative information. Likewise, Gilens (1999), in his study of the photographs used in major news magazines stories about poor people, found that the public is "influenced more by vivid examples than by statistical information, even if the evidentiary value of the statistical information is far higher" (p. 206).

However, Iyengar (1996) found that persuasive personal narratives can backfire. Iyengar compared viewers' reactions to quantitative and qualitative news stories on poverty. He found that they reacted to personal stories by blaming the individual instead of empathizing. In contrast, stories that included facts and statistics about poverty encouraged viewers to emphasize society's role in creating poverty. Similarly, Gilens (1999) found that the use of photographs of African Americans in stories about poverty programs reinforced the public's perception that black people were unwilling to work. Gring-Pemble (2001), in her study of the legislative debates accompanying the passage of

TANF, showed that personal narratives reinforced views of recipients as dysfunctional, feckless, and irresponsible.

Thus, although personal stories can enliven an argument, advocates must choose carefully when using personal narratives, selecting stories that contradict negative views of disenfranchised populations (Lens, 2002a). To round out the picture and give it additional depth and complexity, narratives can be accompanied by quantitative evidence.

USE AND ABUSE OF LANGUAGE

Strong empirical arguments or appeals to values must be couched in effective language to be persuasive. Finding the right words is as important as finding the right evidence. A single word or phrase can encapsulate an ideology, defining the problem and even the solution. For example, renaming the estate tax the death tax made it easier to claim that this long-standing tax was unfair.

Lakeoff (1996), a cognitive and linguistic scientist, studied how ideology can be communicated through the strategic choice of only a few words. He catalogued the words conservatives and liberals use to communicate. Conservatives rely on such terms as individual responsibility, tough love, dependency, deviance, and self-reliance (Lakeoff). In contrast liberals use words like social responsibility, concern, care, help, oppression, and basic human dignity (Lakeoff). Lakeoff contended that a conservative ideology has dominated over the past 25 years because its language has dominated the public discourse (See also de Goede, 1996; Lens, 2002b). As Lakeoff explained:

They have done this by carefully working out their values, comprehending their myths so that they can evoke them with powerful slogans, repeated over and over again, that reinforce those family-morality-policy links, until the connections have come to seem natural to many Americans, including many in the media. (p. 19)

This was fully evident in the public debate over the abolishment of AFDC. Conservative terminology, including such words as "responsibility" and "self-sufficiency," dominated the discussion among Republicans and Democrats alike (Lens, 2002b).

To counter the continuous repetition of conservative words in public discourse, advocates should avoid using the same words and substitute more

liberal ones. For example, when conservatives framed the welfare debate as one of "responsibility," liberals could have countered with a mantra of the words "care," "concern," and "basic human dignity." This would also communicate that liberals did not agree with conservative definitions of the problem, thus redefining the debate. (However, at times using an opponent's language can be effective, for example to demonstrate, as described earlier, that the advocate shares the opponent's values but differs on how to fulfill them.)

"Motifs" or "recurrent thematic elements and figures of speech that encapsulate or highlight" a social problem are also effective in public dialogue (Ibarra & Kitsuse, 1993, p. 43). Catch phrases, such as the "war on poverty" or "crack epidemic" are immediately understood by policymakers and the public. They act as a quick and efficient shorthand for describing a problem, including how widespread it is, what morality it represents, or what practices characterize it. Often one motif feeds off another; the "war on welfare," a derivative of the 1960s slogan "war on poverty," and probably the 1980s phrase "war on drugs," became an alternative ways of describing welfare reform (albeit one that did not appear to gain much currency). Motifs are an easy way to communicate ideology; the war on welfare obviously would not be used by a proponent of welfare reform.

Motifs and other literary devices such as metaphors can make an argument more vivid and memorable, but Orwell (1970) warned against using "worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves" (p. 169). To Orwell a dead metaphor prevented, instead of stimulated, thinking. It also can perpetuate erroneous thinking; the phrase "crack epidemic" gained popularity when crack use was declining (Reinarman & Levine, 1995).

Advocates also should be sensitive to how language can be used to mask ideology. As Orwell (1970) warned, and compellingly demonstrated in 1984, words can distort and obfuscate, especially in the political arena. Reality may be hidden under a veneer of comforting but misleading words. Recently, for example, the *New York Times* reported that Frank Lutz, a Republican party strategist, had urged Republicans under attack for their anti-environmental policies to change not the policy, but instead to use certain words such as "balance,"

“common sense,” “safer,” “cleaner,” and “healthier” to describe it (Lee, 2003).

The challenge for advocates is finding new and vivid ways to express ideas while resisting the current lexicon used to describe policies or social problems. Referring to taxpayer’s money as “community funds,” for example, reframes the issue of government spending from taking away citizen’s money to pooling it for everyone’s benefit. Labeling those who advocate privatization of essential government services as “privateers” implicitly and subtly challenges the common assumption that the private sector is less corrupt than the public, while also emphasizing the self-interest of privateers.

Illustrations, visual imagery, and literary devices that draw the reader or audience in also are useful (Table 1). Depicting orphanages as “Dickensian portraits of empty stomachs and sadistic caretakers” (Besharov, 1994, p. A23) is a vivid example of the power of imagery and the use of the literary device of allusion. However, such devices can detract from the substance of an argument, and if overused, lose their power. This is in effect what Himmelfarb (1995) argued when she began an argument defending orphanages by stating “computers all over the country have been programmed to type

‘Dickensian orphanages’ as with a single stroke of the key” (p. A15).

A well-chosen analogy, however, can make complex issues more understandable, with more fanciful analogies adding a persuasive edge, as demonstrated in the following excerpt from an argument opposing President Bush’s proposal on Medicaid, which involved a complex funding scheme for the states:

And when you read the fine print in the president’s plan, you discover the real dangers. Like a bank making a loan—or, as critics have put it, like a loan shark exploiting a client’s vulnerability—the president would require the states to pay back all of the \$13 billion in the three years that follow the initial seven. (Cohen, 2003, p. A31)

Likewise, a scholar opposing a New York City workfare plan used an analogy to explain labor market dynamics:

The labor market is a giant, fast moving game of musical chairs. People who are skillful, unencumbered and highly motivated are more likely to find a seat, but its crazy to think that these differences explain why everyone isn’t

Table 1: Literary Devices: Definitions and Examples

Literary Device	Definition	Examples
Alliteration	Repeating two or more words that sound alike	Working women on welfare need our support.
Allusion	Using literary, classic or popular references	The Achilles heal of welfare reform is the lack of sufficient well-paying jobs. Only a Scrooge would deny children aid.
Antithesis	Contrasting two opposing ideas	Our poorest citizens should draw from us our greatest generosity. Helping the poor can enrich us all.
Repetition/climax	Repeating words or phrases while building to a high point	The child without food, the family without a home, a nation without a heart.
Personification	Giving human characteristics to non-human things	Let us try and heal the wounds in our health care system by providing a basic level of medical care to all.
Rhetorical questions	Asking a question for effect, not for an answer	Doesn’t everyone deserve a home? Would you want your family to be left without health coverage?
Analogies, metaphors and similes	Finding similarities between normally unlike things. Metaphors usually substitute one thing for another while analogies emphasize shared characteristics	Our welfare system is our safety net. Living without health insurance is like living in a house without a roof.
Dilemmas	Presenting two equally bad options to make the lesser more palatable	We can abolish an admittedly poor system, or we can continue it so needy women and children are clothed, fed, and sheltered.

sitting. The only way to make that happen is to add more chairs. (Harvey, 1994, p. A37)

Lively language is essential, especially in the opening statement. The following example from an NASW editorial demonstrates what to do and what not to do. Its editorial on welfare reform began with the sentence "Poverty is a social problem that is the result of a host of complex reasons and is a problem that cannot be cured with a welfare check or a scolding from the government to get a job" (NASW, 2003). Whereas the first part of the sentence is somewhat bland and communicates very little, the second half is lively and catchy and cuts to the heart of what is wrong with the work requirements.

Advocates should be succinct and brief. As Orwell admonished: "Never use a long word when a short word will do" and "if it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out" (Orwell, 1970, p. 170). Specialized jargon, such as acronyms and abbreviations known primarily among specialists, should be avoided. Only those that have gained widespread and popular use, for example HMO for health maintenance organization, should be used. Everyday English language should be used.

Definitional terms should be clarified using synonyms or descriptive examples, avoiding confusing terms. For example, "universal health care" is a more understandable and inclusive term than "single payer system," which sounds remote and overly bureaucratic. Sometimes a term can be defined by stating what it is not; for example, people who are poor could be described as without a steady source of income; the people who are ill could be described as not well.

Commonly used terms with negative associations, such as welfare mother or welfare dependency, should be avoided. More effective is a description of the population, such as "women and children who need help." A particularly effective approach used by a former federal welfare official and researcher when explaining why welfare reform was not a success was to simply avoid the terms "welfare mother" or "recipient." Instead he asked in an op-ed piece: "How have Americans been doing under the 1996 law? (Edelman, 2002, p. A21). Such an approach is rare in welfare discourse, and powerful because it immediately transforms the outcast "welfare mother" into a member of the community.

The same writer used a similar inclusive device later in his argument by using the second person when providing an example of the gaps in welfare reform. As he explained: "If your job was, for example, a 20-hour position as a school crossing guard for \$107 a week, or if you kept cycling in and out of jobs, you and your children were still threatened with homelessness and hunger" (Edelman, 2002, p. A21). By speaking in the second person the writer created a more personal relationship with the reader, while also closing the gap between people not receiving welfare and those who are.

The rules discussed in this article apply equally to written and oral communications, but there are important distinctions. A more informal style, including the use of colloquialisms and even sentence fragments, can be used when speaking to an audience (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1996). Orwell's rules on brevity and simplicity apply even more to the spoken word, where short and punchy words are very effective. Oral communication can be more repetitive, with the same point reiterated in slightly different ways.

COMPONENTS OF AN ARGUMENT

Effective arguments have their own internal logic, beyond the language, evidence, and values used to construct them. Toulmin (1958), a British logician, classified arguments into three component parts: claims, grounds, and warrants (see also Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik, 1984, and the Toulmin Project at <http://www.unl.edu/speech/comm109/Toulmin/>). All three must be present for an argument to be persuasive.

A *claim* is, simply, the assertion being made, the conclusion reached after a review of the evidence. There are three types of claims: fact, value, and policy. A *fact claim* describes what is or was; a *value claim* judges or evaluates; and a *policy claim* asserts what should be done. All claims should be backed up by grounds. *Grounds* are the evidence or proof that supports the claim and consists of expert observations, statistics, and expert opinion. They include the myriad of studies that social workers and others conduct on various social problems. As discussed in the preceding section, it can be qualitative or quantitative and can include large-scale studies or factual stories about people's experience.

The *warrant* ties the grounds to the claims; it is often an intuitive and sometimes unspoken mental leap of reasoning that makes the claim reasonable

and probable. Its source can be as ethereal as values, customs, and norms or as concrete as legal principles and statutes. For example, the warrant underlying an argument for educational opportunities for welfare recipients is the common knowledge that education is necessary in today's job market.

A unit of argument can be strengthened by using a series or cluster of claims, instead of just one, with each claim able to stand on its own (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1996). The advantage to a cluster argument is that an unpersuasive claim does not affect the force of the other claims. The following is an example of a cluster of claims by two social welfare professors explaining why welfare is not the major cause of single motherhood:

First, single motherhood has been increasing while the value of welfare has been falling. Benefits declined 26% adjusting for inflation, from 1972 to 1992. Second, welfare cannot explain why single motherhood has been increasing among educated women, who are unlikely to ever be on welfare. And, finally, welfare benefits are much lower in the U.S. than in other countries, yet single-mother families are more common here than abroad. (McLanahan & Garfinkel, 1994, p. A27)

Another approach is to use a chain of arguments, which builds on each claim and makes them interdependent (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1996). If one falls, the others do, but the cumulative effect can be powerful.

Arguments also can be strengthened by preemptively responding to an opponent's argument, as Ellwood (1996) did when criticizing welfare reform:

Proponents claim the bills are about work, and the legislation does obligate states to require large number of recipients to work. Fair enough. Serious work requirements are crucial to meaningful change. But it's one thing to write work into legislation, and it's another to get recipients jobs. (p. A19)

Pre-emption should be used judiciously because it can also weaken an advocate's argument by conceding too much at the outset (for example, that work requirements are appropriate) or unduly highlighting an opponent's argument.

Advocates should also avoid universal or absolute claims because even the strongest claims often have exceptions, which likely will be seized upon by an opponent. It does not weaken a claim to use qualifiers such as "many," "most," "sometimes," or "in certain cases" (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1996). Arguing that "most women receiving public assistance want to work," rather than saying all do, helps inculcate the advocate when an opponent responds with a story of a woman unwilling to work. In short, argue as if the claim is generally true, not absolutely true.

CONCLUSION

Learning the art of rhetoric, including argumentation, can help social workers involved in cause advocacy become more effective in the public arena. It can help social workers identify the right arguments to make and avoid the wrong ones. Examples of the latter are not difficult to find in the current politically polarized and contentious climate. Appeals to emotion, ignorance, or fear often are used in lieu of facts. Empirical information is distorted when hasty generalizations are drawn from isolated anecdotes or atypical cases. Personal attacks often are substituted for a thorough discussion of the issues. Appeals to tradition and authority are used to circumvent a fair hearing of new ideas. A planned and deliberate approach to public speaking or writing can help social workers counteract the fallacies that emerge from such tactics, while maximizing the impact of what we have to say. **SW**

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