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Abstract

My chief regret is that Mettler's messages may "fall between two chairs." In striving to reach a wider readership through simple and schematic language, her book does not give serious students of public policy enough empirical and theoretical meat to chew on. (One might call the book a "tasting menu.") At the same time, to Mettler's credit, the book is just not sufficiently folksy and anecdotal to make it a likely candidate for The New York Times's best-seller list. But read it anyway. You will still learn a lot.

Comments

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Differences That Matter: Social Policy and the Working Poor in the United States and Canada. By Dan Zuberi. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006. Pp. ix+230. \$49.95 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).

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Differences That Matter contributes to a growing literature on structural challenges to mobility among the so-called working poor. Dan Zuberi argues that sociologists underplay or ignore the role of policy in shaping social mobility. In contrast, policy is the ground for Zuberi. He uses a cross-national lens to examine how social and labor policies in the United States and Canada affect the work and life experiences of low-income service-sector (hotel) employees in Seattle, Washington, and Vancouver, British Columbia. Zuberi employs survey, participant observation, and in-depth interview methods "to better understand the policy and institutional differences in macro-national-level outcomes . . . from the perspective of the subjective experiences of individuals" (p. 23). This book is ambitious, to be sure, which means that readers will admire the quality of the data and the multilevel analyses and, at the same time, contest some of the interpretations and conclusions. For both reasons, and for its highly accessible presentation, this book is an excellent teaching tool for undergraduate and master's level sociology and policy students.

The book first compares poverty policy in the United States and Canada, with a focus on policy divergence after 1970. Zuberi then describes the two research cities, the matched union and nonunion hotels ($N = 4$) in the two cities, and the sample of employees ($N = 77$) in the house-keeping, maintenance engineering, and guest services departments of the four hotels. Three chapters then describe the impact of national differences in union, health care, and social welfare policies on the workers' subjective experiences. Each chapter begins with an extensive comparison of the two nations' policy regimes and then paints the impact of these policies from the perspective of the hotel employees.

There is no mistaking the passion Zuberi feels for his topic, or his standpoint. In the union chapter, he argues not only that proximate benefits accrue to union membership but also that higher levels of union

coverage in Canada have resulted in stronger labor and social policies overall than those found in the United States. The divergence in union coverage between the United States and Canada after 1970 is attributed to greater barriers to labor organizing in the United States. In both cities, wages are higher in union than in nonunion hotels, although the smaller wage differential in Vancouver is attributed to the “union wage effect,” whereby union-set wages lift others’ wages accordingly. Workers’ perceptions of job security and working conditions parallel the union/non-union wage patterns.

The health-care policy chapter shows higher coverage and per person expenditure in the universal Canadian system than in the mixed public and private system in the United States, but surprisingly small differences in health outcomes (e.g., infant mortality) or health behaviors (e.g., doctor visits). Health outcomes are thought to be influenced by the spiraling cost of care in both cities. Even so, the workers report high levels of financial stress under the U.S. system and virtually none under the Canadian system.

In terms of social welfare policy, many might disagree with the author’s assertion that “little research has been done on how social policy matters in the lives of working-poor families” (p. 86). Not only does most of the sociological research cited in this book address policy impact to at least some extent, but a considerable literature in history, economics, and social welfare also addresses the topic. Zuberi’s surprise at the low take-up of public assistance among the U.S. hotel workers seems unusual given the demography of his sample (mostly partnered couples) and eligibility criteria for public assistance.

The next two chapters extend the policy discussion to public investments in the workers’ cities and neighborhoods. Vancouver is clearly superior to Seattle in this regard, and the author asserts that “quality of life” is affected positively and negatively, respectively. It is not clear, however, whether the hotel workers identify transportation, parks, community recreation, urban redevelopment, education, and safety as “quality of life” issues. Other research finds that low-income families often characterize “quality of life” as meaningful relationships, respected (even if inadequately compensated) work, health of self and family, and faith beliefs, rather than in structural terms. In the words of one of the hotel workers: “I consider I am here [on a class ladder that Zuberi creatively uses as an analytic tool], because first for me is good health, and second I have a work and my family is very important to me. . . . They are doing well and I almost paid my home” (p. 139).

The final chapters return to the earlier argument that structural transformation and lasting social change to reduce poverty and inequality can only take place through unionism, activism, and political action (p. 152). Zuberi’s reform targets in the United States include health care, labor laws, taxes, and investment in community institutions. Canadian reform centers on reinstating progressive tax, employment insurance, health

care, and early childhood education policies that have recently been curtailed. The issue of inadequate wages is raised more actively than earlier, but is lodged primarily in terms of job security rather than in wage dispersion policies in firms.

In all, *Differences That Matter* is extremely well written. However, too much of the discussion of prior research and other scholarly issues is located in the notes. Additionally, of possible analytic as well as substantive importance, the demographic comparisons of the two cities are based on the 1990 U.S. census and comparable Canadian data. While cross-national data matching is difficult, use of up-to-date data would have strengthened and possibly challenged some of the book's findings.

Singly and together, the chapters in *Differences That Matter* graphically illustrate how poverty, mobility, and policy are intertwined, which provides an important perspective for students, in particular, and policy makers more generally. Many will agree with the author's conclusion that "comparing the lives of hotel industry employees in Vancouver and Seattle demonstrates how differences in health policy, labor policy, unemployment policy, and other social policies affect the quality of life and levels of material hardship experienced by hourly hotel employees and their families" (p. 174). Many already concur with the author's position that "poverty can be reduced dramatically in the United States if the political will exists" (p. 13). But the field needs Zuberi's next book to address *why* Canadian policy making diverged from American policy in a more "progressive" direction, as the "why" matters to crafting relevant mechanisms and strategies for change.

The Meanings of Marital Equality. By Scott R. Harris. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. Pp. 193. \$61.50 (cloth); \$21.95 (paper).

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Is it the sociologist's job to identify and explain an inequality that we know is out there? This is the question Scott Harris repeatedly poses in his constructionist treatment of marital equality. Noting the popularity of inequality study in sociology and the predominance of investigations in functionalist and conflict theory traditions, the author maintains that his constructionist analysis is both new and needed in order to "pursue social science or improve the social world" (p. 163). The book largely functions as a critique of inequality scholarship, which he claims is flawed by researchers' unexamined assumption that "inequality is an objective reality" (p. x). In contrast to assumptions about an objective equality, Harris's summary of quantitative research on marital equality argues that the scientific community disagrees about what constitutes equality. Investi-