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Challenge the "Success" of Welfare Reform

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### *The Promise of Welfare Reform.* Keith M. Kilty and Elizabeth Segal.

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## Book Notes

Keith M. Kilty & Elizabeth Segal, *The Promise of Welfare Reform*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 2006. \$34.96 papercover.

When President Bill Clinton signed the personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act at the behest of the Republican Congress in 1996, different claims about the future direction of income support in the United States were made. Proponents of "welfare reform" (as this legislative and initiative is known) were optimistic that poor people who were previously dependent on welfare would now enter regular wage employment, become self-sufficient and realize the American dream. On the other hand, critics predicted that because the country's welfare safety net had been largely dismantled, poverty would increase.

More than a decade later, considerable evidence has been mustered to support both points of view. Because the welfare rolls have declined by almost 60% since 1996, advocates of welfare reform have claimed that the legislation has achieved its aims. On the other hand, there is a good deal of evidence to show that many families previously receiving social assistance remain in poverty and continue to struggle to make ends meet.

This book does not seek specifically to test these claims, but it does provide an eclectic collection of chapters that address many aspects of the new welfare-to-work program and examines the wider political, economic and cultural context in which these changes evolved. The book's 23 chapters are divided into five parts which deal respectively with: the context of welfare reform; the effects of welfare reform on poverty; implications for families, marriage and domestic violence; the racial dynamics of welfare reform; and possible future directions. The editors have brought together a number of leading authorities

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on poverty and social welfare policy in the United States, and while many of them deal with issues that have been previously documented in the literature, others are concerned with particularly interesting or neglected issues. For example, the role of social conservatives and religious fundamentalists in shaping the welfare to work program and injecting traditional beliefs into American social welfare policy makes for fascinating reading. Several chapters deal with the racial dynamics of welfare reform as they affect minority and immigrant communities. Since race is a consistent theme in American social welfare policy, these chapters make a useful contribution in explicating the issues. Another unusual chapter deals with micro-enterprise and emphasizes the way these programs reflect efforts to marketize social welfare policy in the United States.

The welfare reform initiatives adopted in the United States in the 1990s have been widely reported internationally, and unfortunately, many of these reports present a simplistic and optimistic account of the changes that have taken place. The book's many insightful chapters provide a more nuanced and thoughtful analysis which will be helpful to anyone interested in whether welfare-to-work programs can make a positive contribution to social development. While there are many lessons to be learned from the American experience of welfare reform, the book reveals that it has been very problematic and should not be widely emulated.

James Forte. *Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Models, Metaphors, and Maps for Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Practice*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole, 2007. \$67.95 papercover.

It has become something of a cliché to say that social workers are ignorant of theory and disinterested in the subject. While it is true that many social workers prefer to rely on their personal skills and experience when engaging in professional practice, this is not true of all practitioners and, indeed, many do not always recognize that they do, in fact, apply theoretical ideas in their everyday work. Nevertheless, it is clear that