



2007

Differences that Matter: Social Policy and the Working Poor in the United States and Canada. Dan Zuberi.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2007) "*Differences that Matter: Social Policy and the Working Poor in the United States and Canada.* Dan Zuberi.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 34 : Iss. 2 , Article 25.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol34/iss2/25>

This Book Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



adoption of the DSM is a necessary precursor for expanding drug markets. Psychostimulants such as Adderall (dextroamphetamine), for example, once considered to involve too many risks to justify medical benefit, have enjoyed renewed medical legitimacy with the "discovery" of adult ADHD. While this is certainly of interest, the book does not, in any similar fashion, utilize the center-periphery paradigm for the psychoanalytic tradition imported from the capitals of Europe. This may be the book's major shortcoming.

Lakoff makes comparisons on many occasions with North American psychiatry, but fails to examine one of the more important contributions of the U.S. mental health system, namely, the consumer's movement. Such socio-political activity is dependent upon a high degree of congruence between the self-described identities of consumers and the description of them by mental health professionals. The absence of a comparable movement in Argentina may be due, in part, to the fact that a narrow Lacanian view does not afford such congruence, especially among the Indians and *mestizos* who live in large numbers outside of Buenos Aires. On balance, Lakoff's book is much more than another narrative about globalization and its discontents, and is worthwhile reading for anyone interested in psychiatry, Latino mental health, mental health policy, or the impact of globalization on national identities.

Peter Manoleas, University of California at Berkeley

Dan Zuberi, *Differences that Matter: Social Policy and the Working Poor in the United States and Canada*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006. \$ 49.95 hardcover, \$ 18.95 papercover.

Although welfare to work has been widely claimed as a highly successful social policy innovation, most former welfare recipients have joined the ranks of working poor and the belief that they are well on the way to self-sufficiency and success has been challenged. Many scholars believe that wider social policy interventions that address the problems of low-wage work are urgently needed. Although this interesting book is not primarily concerned with welfare to work, its comparative

account of the lives and experiences of low paid hotel workers in Seattle and Vancouver provides powerful insights into the way social policies and programs mitigate low wage work and improve the quality of life of low income families.

The book is based on a rigorous qualitative study of low paid workers in two hotels in each city. The hotels are owned by large international firms and the workers shared many demographic and other characteristics. The study paid particular attention to the way that government programs in each city subsidized low-wage work or otherwise provided a climate in which the quality of life of low paid workers was enhanced. It also focused on the extent of unionization and the way unionization contributed to the well-being of workers.

The study showed that there were clear differences in the way social policy and Canada and the United States affected the lives of low paid hotel workers. The workers in Canada clearly benefitted from unionization, the county's national health service and public transport facilities. In addition, urban planning and related services in Vancouver created a sense of security and community in the neighborhoods where the hotel workers resided. Although the author is careful not to caricature the situation in Seattle, the hotel workers clearly struggled with health care. Inadequate public transportation also posed a major challenge. Although wages were somewhat higher in the Seattle hotels, the differences were not great and the Seattle hotel workers generally reported higher health care and transportation costs. Generally, educational opportunities for the children of low income workers in Vancouver were superior to those in Seattle.

The author's central argument is that social policies play a major role in affecting the well-being of low income working people. While conventional means-tested programs made a negligible contribution, government policies and programs directed at health care, educational opportunities and neighborhood quality were critical in mitigating the negative circumstances in which many low paid workers found themselves. The fact that there were significant differences in the impact of social policies and programs on low-wage work in Canada and United States has major implications. The study challenges the widespread belief that government social policies are

ineffective or harmful and that government efforts to address the low wage problems associated with globalization will inevitably fail. Similarly, the idea that all industrial countries are gradually experiencing a neoliberal convergence based on American approaches is also questioned. The author is to be commended for producing a lively, interesting and ingenious comparative analysis which deserves to be widely read.