Cornell University
ILR School

ILRReview

Volume 57 | Number 3 Article 86

April 2004

Understanding Poverty

Sheldon H. Danziger

Robert H. Haveman

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/ilrreview

Understanding Poverty

This book review is available in ILRReview: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/ilrreview/vol57/iss3/86

ers actually using gender strategically. Instead, male managers and co-workers tend to dominate the "multiple and simultaneous struggles over power and desire" (p. 25) that define gender. Salzinger's research suggests, nonetheless, that gender may be an important basis for labor resistance strategies. As she points out in her conclusion, if labor control strategies are imbued with gendered meanings, then contradicting those gendered meanings could undermine labor control.

Salzinger's research raises questions about the relationship between labor market conditions and the relative importance of gendered labor control mechanisms. Salzinger argues that it was managerial efforts to reconcile the increasingly tight female labor market with the persistent notion of "productive femininity" that produced the widely varying shop-floor gender practices. This suggests that her findings were historically contingent on the *maquiladora* boom in the early 1980s and the concomitant tightened female labor market on Mexico's northern border. In the context of a loose labor market, managers may have relied less on gendered labor control mechanisms to secure docile workers than Salzinger found during the early 1990s. Female workers may have initially been docile not because women were naturally passive and obedient, but rather because all workers in a loose labor market tend to be quiescent. Salzinger could have explored this hypothesis by examining whether Panoptimex managers were able to maintain a quiescent, productive work force in the earlier loose labor market conditions with less reliance on gendered labor control tactics. If they were, then the earlier generation of feminist analysts criticized by Salzinger may have been justified in focusing on hiring as the process whereby gender operated in the global assembly line at the time.

Nonetheless, this engaging study teaches us about labor control mechanisms, what gender has to do with them, and the capacity of gender to acquire both durable and malleable meanings. It will undoubtedly become a favorite in undergraduate gender courses as well as an indispensable reference for serious scholars of gender in the global economy.

Leslie C. Gates

Assistant Professor of Sociology
Binghamton University

Understanding Poverty. Edited by Sheldon H. Danziger and Robert H. Haveman. Cambridge, Mass.: Russell Sage Foundation and Harvard University Press, 2001. 566 pp. ISBN 0-674-00767-0, $55.00 (cloth); 0-674-00876-6, $24.95 (paper).

Understanding Poverty is the fifth in a series of volumes on poverty in the United States that, starting in 1975, have been published under the auspices of the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin. Each volume has reviewed trends in poverty up to the current time, and the most recent ones have also contained chapters by leading scholars in the field analyzing different aspects of the poverty problem. This book, like the previous ones in the series, contains much valuable information and is a must-buy for those interested in research on U.S. poverty.

The editors note in their introduction that poverty is currently low on the nation's priority list of problems that need attention, as was true at the time of publication of the previous two volumes (1986 and 1994). As indicated by the book's title, Danziger and Haveman's response to that neglect is to focus explicitly on "understanding" poverty, in contrast to "fighting" or "confronting" it—the concerns of the previous two volumes. Today, two years after publication of the present volume, poverty remains near the bottom of the nation's agenda.

Four of the chapters lay out the central findings. Gary Burtless and Timothy Smeeding chart trends in poverty by several measures, but focusing on three: the official U.S. government poverty definition, and two alternatives that capture some of the recommendations for change made by the National Research Council (Constance F. Citro and Robert T. Michael, *Measuring Poverty: A New Approach* [Washington: National Academy Press, 1995]). By all definitions that can be measured consistently over the entire period, the poverty rate declined drastically in the 1960s and early 1970s, and afterward had either no trend (though with cyclical movements) or a slightly upward trend, depending on the price index used. The official rate stood at 12.7% of persons in 1998. The only factor that has the potential to make a difference is the treatment of medical expenses, which, under some definitions, lowers the poverty rate substantially (but this can be calculated only for a few recent years). The authors emphasize that a major factor in the lack of progress in reducing poverty has been the increasing inequality of income in the United States over the past two or three decades.

Maria Cancian and Deborah Reed examine how changes in family structure have affected progress in reducing poverty. They find that the increasing percentage of single-mother families and related declines in two-parent households have been the most important impediments to progress, although the increase in female labor force participation has moderated their effects to some extent. Richard Freeman finds evidence that the poverty rate has become less sensitive to changes in economic growth and the unemployment rate. He forecasts that improvements to growth in the future will have less impact than in the past because the poor are now disproportionately composed of the disabled, retirees, and unskilled immigrants, groups largely unaffected by labor market opportunities; he also predicts that any rise in unemployment will increase poverty because it will reduce employment among those with minimal access to government transfers. John Karl Scholz and Kara Levine examine trends in spending on means-tested and social insurance programs and find that total cash transfers have slowly risen over time, as expenditure declines for single mother programs like AFDC-TANF have been outweighed by increases in the Earned Income Tax Credit, but that major growth has occurred in Medicaid, Supplementary Security Income, and Food Stamp spending, which has led to large increases in overall spending. While this upward trend in expenditures would ordinarily be expected to reduce poverty, it has been overmatched by rising inequality and the increasing atomization of households.

Other important topics covered in the volume are trends in U.S. poverty compared to those in other countries (Smeeding, Lee Rainwater, and Burtless); whether poverty is permanent or transitory, and how it affects children (Mary Corcoran); changes in recent welfare reform policies (Ladonna Pavetti); trends in health policies for the non-elderly poor (John Mullahy and Barbara Wolfe); and human capital programs (Lynn Karoly). Three rarely examined subjects that receive attention are housing discrimination and poverty (John Yinger), membership theories of poverty (Steven Durlauf), and community revitalization (Ronald Ferguson).

The last three chapters contain brief final thoughts by three authors. Glenn Loury argues that finer distinctions are needed to capture different concepts of poverty, not all of which are easily quantifiable, and that racial differences need special attention. David Harris discusses whether the high-tech revolution could affect discrimination. Finally, Jane Waldfogel discusses various possible poverty-related factors that are not treated in the other chapters.

Robert A. Moffitt

Professor of Economics
Johns Hopkins University

Company Doctor: Risk, Responsibility, and Corporate Professionalism. By Elaine Draper. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003. 328 pp. ISBN 0-87145-249-8, $39.95 (cloth).

Doctors have long been regarded as the ideal type of the autonomous professional. As Eliot Freidson observed in *Profession of Medicine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), doctors, unlike other workers, have traditionally possessed a great deal of autonomy because they have been relatively free, within the privacy of their consulting rooms, to give patients sound medical advice, unfettered by the constraints of organizational requirements. Since the 1960s, however, medical practice has been transformed from the ideal of physician as solo practitioner to the doctor as employee in some form of group practice or organizational setting. Within this context, many social scientists argue that doctors, like practitioners in other occupations before them, are increasingly becoming deprofessionalized and captives of their employing organizations. Elaine Draper's *The Company Doctor: Risk, Responsibility, and Corporate Professionalism* is a welcome addition to this important debate about the role of medicine in a corporate America increasingly preoccupied with the bottom line.

Company doctors have been regarded as standing on the lowest rungs of the medical profession, because it is not always apparent whether they are their patients' allies or their employers' agents of social control. To their credit, corporate physicians have worked hard to improve their professional image. The American Occupational and Environmental Medical Association's code of ethics, for instance, requires corporate physicians to "accord the highest priority to the health and safety of the individual." Spurred by federal funding for health and safety in the 1970s, medical schools greatly expanded physician training in occupational and environmental medicine, and since the 1980s the occupation has increasingly attracted a new breed of physician committed to, and trained in, public health and disease preven-