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Jo Ann Schneider, Social Capital and Welfare Reform: Organizations, Congregations, and Communities. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, 445 pp.

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Book reviews

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The aim of the book is to provide “evidence-based recommendations” to increase welfare policy efficiency by taking into account the role played by social capital. Schneider aims to clarify with her book, the role of a particular form of capital for individuals and institutions in conjunction with other forms of capital. The book has very much an American perspective, but many considerations on the relationship between communities and government support in the creation of social capital could be applied in a European context, especially at the local level.

In the introductory chapter, the definitions of a successful “Welfare Reform” and “Social Capital” are introduced by the author: “Welfare reform policy will succeed only where it recognizes that the diversity of programs is the real strength of contracting with the for-profit and non profit sector. Government also needs to realize that individual institutions are capable of effectively serving a portion of the public assistance to population only because they arise out of one sector of the local community” [p. 3]. “Social capital refers to the social relationship and patterns of reciprocal, enforceable trust that enable people and institutions to gain access to such resources as social services, jobs, and government contracts” [p. 5].

The research has been developed mainly through ethnographic methodology based on ten years of work at community level in three different areas of United States (Philadelphia-Pennsylvania, Milwaukee, Kenosha-Wisconsin). Philadelphia and Milwaukee are big cities with a mixed ethnic background; Kenosha is a small city, consisting of a largely Caucasian population. The ethnographic studies were carried out using mainly participant observations, qualitative interviews (people, policy makers, community workers, etc.), the analysis of documents (mainly governmental sources), and U.S. Census data. In some chapters qualitative research has been combined with secondary data to give a full picture of social welfare reform and social capital.

The first part of the book starts from the assumption that the importance of social capital concept means having a vision of society organized in networks of individuals. Those networks are correlated formally or informally among them and institutions. For this reason, for a welfare reform to be successful it has to take all of them into account. This part provides a general outlook on this matter, through the description of institutions and organizations which constitutes welfare system (the federal state, the local government system, the social service organizations, the social service systems) and the analysis of labor market and family policies, where all those institutions play a fundamental role.

Chapter 2, “The Federal State Policy Context for Welfare Reform,” explores the services provided by the federal government, highlighting the interplay between the federal and the local level from an historical perspective. Chapter 3, “Local Government System,” outlines the nature of local government programs exploring TANF implemen-

tation initiatives. Chapter 4, “Social Service Organisations,” shifts the focus from public institutions to private institutions (for-profit, non profit), describing the nature of these organizations. Chapter 5, “Social Service Systems,” describes how organizations, even if they don’t have governmental funding, respond to regulation that shape their way of providing services. Chapter 6, “Labor market and individual career paths,” describes family strategies in the labor market to show how paths and individual trajectories are modified by macro-decisions. Chapter 7, “Family Survival strategies and Social Capital,” “looks at the ways human, economic, cultural, and social capital combine to influence family survival strategies” [p. 164]. Chapter 8, “Comparisons among worker types,” compares the role of bridging and social capital for different categories of workers. The conclusion of this first part is that people are able to use social capital provided by organizations mostly when their characteristics matches the ones of the other network participants: “People are most likely to use organizations as source of social capital and community when their cultural capital matches that of other participants. Although an organization’s recruitment strategies and program design play a role, its central over the outcomes is mediated through participant behavior” [p. 236].

The second part of the book looks more closely at the connections between the different parts constituting the American welfare system and the context in which they operate. Chapter 9, “Social Service Agency use and Social Capital,” explores the different way in which families use their social service agencies to meet multiple goals. The chapter concludes that people are most likely to use an organization as a source of social capital if their cultural capital matches that of other participants. Chapter 10, “Agencies and Social Capital,” examines internal agencies to see how different kinds of social capital smooth service provisions after welfare reforms. Agencies are mediators for the government and families, becoming an instrument of social capital creation: “Families use social service agencies to meet a range of instrumental and social needs. Government increasingly turns to agencies as partners in implementing social welfare policy. In both cases, agencies become mediating structures providing centers to implement policy, develop community, foster social capital, and access resources” [p. 239]. Chapter 11, “Faith Communities and Social Capital,” sees how faith communities, under normal conditions, help members of small communities develop close networks, and therefore, bonding social capital. The basic idea driving people working within such communities is to contribute to the creation of an initial network to integrate marginal members of society: “They assume that low-income families lack connections and appropriate values to succeed in jobs and that churches can help them to develop the resources that will lead them to self-sufficiency” [Schneider, 2006: 264]. Chapter 12, “Faith, Works, and Community. Connections Among non Profits, Government, and Congregations,” focuses on how non-profit organizations, congregations and local governments connect to support families in need, and how these collaborations can have positive and negative impacts and which are the key factors for success. Chapter 13, “Advocacy and Social Capital,” analyses the theoretical positions and judgments of the connection between communities and social capital. This chapter concludes the second part, presenting the pragmatic vision of the author: the only possible reform of welfare that will foster the creation of social capital has to be gradual and based at local level.

In her conclusion, Schneider connects all the main arguments of the book demonstrating that social capital can make a difference in the rapid adjustment of welfare programs, helping policy makers to meet citizens needs: “Social Capital makes a difference on all levels. Government that develops trust-based relationships with local service develops more sensitive strategies and is able to more quickly adjust programs to meet unanticipated situations” [p. 357].

Social capital has to be built also in the communities without forgetting the government role in the struggle against inequalities. Only in this way can institutions become closer to the individuals by fostering trust in policy making: “Paying attention to structural inequities and consciously building bridging social capital with these communities may eventually foster opportunities for a better quality of life and more trust in the political process by currently disenfranchised communities” [p. 373].

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