

# Introduction

This edition of the *Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali* (International Journal of Social Sciences) aims to make a contribution to the debate on the economic relevance of a multidimensional approach to people's behavior and performance. In recent years the traditional concept of human capital, focussed on the learning of cognitive skills, has been expanded and enriched at a psychological and sociological level with three important results. The first is the recognition of the economic importance of the so-called non-cognitive skills, such as tenacity or self-respect, whose value is recognized by the market in the same way as the years of formal education have been measured up until now. The second is that for the development of the majority of these psychological traits the early years of life seem to be decisive, just as they are for acquiring a second mother tongue. Activities advantaging very young people appear as irreversible and self-reinforcing investment which feeds itself, becoming a source of potential social difference as of the first years of life. The third result is that the time dynamic of this process brings the role of the family to the forefront, as the main player which traditional educational and care facilities should be serving; the recognition of the family as a social institution may also provide further stimulus to modern growth theory and the search for new economic performance indicators.

This leads on naturally to a further consideration. Being a parent is not a traditionally-recognized professional skill, yet it requires knowledge, information and qualities which are not always already present. In this sense traditional educational figures should take on new responsibilities, interacting with families, i.e. with parents as well as with their offspring. It is clear that the prospective outlined here renders dialogue necessary between different disciplines, particularly economics, psychology and sociology, and this is why in September 2009 the Università Cattolica invited Professor James Heckman, Nobel prizewinner for Economics, to give a *Lectio Magistralis* on these topics. This lecture, which was very favorably received by scholars of the scientific areas involved in these topics, was followed by original specialist contributions, the publication of which in this edition of the Journal permits acquisition of new reflection and results, as well as opening up highly qualified interdisciplinary dialogue.

The collection opens with the text of Professor Heckman's lecture, «Investing in our Young People: Lessons from Economics and Psychology», a non-technical synthesis especially prepared for the occasion of the paper (written with Flavio Cunha) originally submitted; the original, which is also published here, is more technical and analytical and will certainly be more appreciated by economists. Heckman's

contribution, in its original and less technical versions, is followed by sections containing papers by psychologists, economists and sociologists, and one demographics paper. Three papers examine the psychological and family aspect. That by Gian Vittorio Caprara and Eugenia Scabini analyses recent development in psychological debate on the relevant traits for academic success and confirms the importance of the family for the full development of a child's potential. Alessandro Antonietti asks how it is possible to increase the human potential of children, with programs aimed at improving problem-solving and creative ability skills. Cesare Kaneklin tackles the question of the relationship between economics and psychology from the point of view of a firm and the organization of human resources, focusing especially on the problem of change in times of crisis and structural change, like that we are experiencing now.

Four papers examine the economic dimension. Gilberto Antonelli, Roberto Antonietti and Giovanni Guidetti present original results which enable the identification of the relevant variables for explaining firms' propensity to invest in training and provide an innovative econometric analysis permitting identification of the variables to be sustained or influenced in order to increase investment in further skilled training of workers (possibly directly related to improved quality in goods and services). Giuliana Parodi tackles the problem of investment in very young people from a special perspective, i.e. that of disability; analysis of the results obtained confirms the importance of state investment for the disabled, in terms of both results and cost efficiency. Giuseppina Malerba's paper renders available data comparable at international level and raises crucial questions about the organization of family life, if we really intend to pursue the objective of investing in the very young and especially to concentrate our efforts on the first years of life. Menon and Perali present original results, starting from empirical evidence from a specific data base, on young people's attitude to risk, with results which are noteworthy for their precision and the range of actions they present to policy-makers; these results are especially interesting and are a novelty for Italian research. Maurizio Ferrera outlines the theoretical and political framework which has characterized change in welfare policy from social protection to social investment, with special reference to policies for children and those under 18; issues related to the efficiency and fairness of investment in early childhood are tackled on the basis of the most recent results to be found in the literature. Jens Qvortrup provides a different point of view on the reasons for which it is crucial to focus on younger people and children, claiming that the current approach does not consider them as people but rather as forerunners of the coming future, thus paradoxically denying them a time of life which has its own value. The full intellectual recognition of the idea of children as people undergoing change which he suggests, takes us in a new direction, perhaps more demanding but certainly more accurate. To close, Giancarlo Blangiardo, Stefano Montrasio and Stefania Rimoldi provide an illuminating demographic analysis of the Italian context, comparing it with that of the United States, the former experiencing recognized demographic problems the extent of whose economic and social implications public opinion and politicians continue to ignore. The authors confirm that the nation is

going through a phase of increasing demographic and social unbalance, and that paradoxically the decrease in the number of young people does not correspond to an increase in appreciation of the value they represent for society and the job market – rather, the opposite is true.

This collection of valuable essays is, we believe, bound to become a reference point in cultural and political debate, and we hope it will lead to greater understanding, among scholars and public opinion, of the urgency and importance of the issues discussed. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century John Stuart Mill observed how «Rulers and ruling classes are under a necessity of considering the interests and wishes of those who have the suffrage; but those who are excluded, it is in their option whether they will do so or not; and however honestly disposed, they are in general too fully occupied with things which they *must* attend to, to have much room in their thoughts for anything which they can with impunity disregard» (italics in the original). The widespread condition of deep unbalance in the economic and social conditions of families with children under the age of 18, and even more so in their lives, must lead us to reflect on which policies might compensate for or cure this situation of clear injustice, present in all democratic nations, and which for some advanced nations such as Italy might lead on to an impending risk of stagnation.

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