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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 7
Issue 2 *March*

Article 2

March 1980

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Recommended Citation

Toomey, Beverly G. (1980) "Work Ethic and Work Incentives: Values and Income Maintenance Reform," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.1402>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol7/iss2/2>

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WORK ETHIC AND WORK INCENTIVES:
VALUES AND INCOME MAINTENANCE REFORM*

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ABSTRACT

Although the American belief system surrounding the concept of work has been analyzed and challenged by social scientists seeking solutions to the problem of poverty, the strength of the work ethic philosophy is still evident in public resistance to welfare reform which would support adequate income maintenance and government efforts at job creation. This paper discusses the relationship between the work ethic philosophy, job creation programming and welfare reform. It reviews relevant theoretical and empirical literature and identifies some misconceptions which continue to hamper policy formulation and program development in welfare reform.

Introduction

During the last few years, policy makers have persisted in efforts to develop an income maintenance system which is adequate to meet the needs of all poor people in America. A full employment program has been a concurrent effort. The progress of both of these programs has been impeded by people's assumptions about human nature, work incentive and poverty. Reviewing the relevant literature, this paper will explore people's views of reasons for poverty, the relationship between poverty and work, work incentive, unemployment, and publicly subsidized income

*Presented at the 1979 annual meeting of The Society for the Study of Social Problems, Boston, Mass., August 24-27, 1979.

programs. First, it will briefly review the philosophical and historical development of the American work ethic; next, the theoretical explanations of why people work. It will report empirical evidence related to these issues and present implication for social policy. The goal of the paper is to examine unemployment, its causes and its relationship to income maintenance to try to influence public policy favoring adequate income provision programs.

The view of income supplements to the poor that distinguishes between the "worthy" and "unworthy" dates back to the English Poor Law where the 1349 Statute on Laborers "forbade private alms-giving to able-bodied poor."¹ The distinction of worthiness was and continues to be made on the basis of the following general beliefs:

1. All employable persons should work to support themselves and their families.
2. Only unemployables should receive public support.
3. If support is given to persons who are able to work, it will encourage laziness and unemployment and will probably influence others who do work to quit and live on the dole.
4. Anyone who wants to work can find work.

Social disapproval and stigma deriving from these assumptions have been built into income support programs to discourage pauperism and unemployment, both of which have been considered costly and immoral.

The question is then, who are the unemployable? From earliest social definitions, the unemployable, those considered the worthy poor, have been those too young or too old to work, and those too physically or mentally handicapped to work. More recently, the definition of unemployable has been extended to include women with child care responsibilities and, the latest addition has been prime-aged men (18-54) who are fathers and unable to find and/or hold a job. These last two definitions of unemployables do not carry strong public support. In fact, a substantial number of Americans question supporting all women who are heads of households with child-care responsibilities and a vast majority recoil at the idea of income supplements to unemployed men viewed as able-bodied, but not eligible for unemployment compensation.

In 1977, 65 percent of the more than 11 million people on AFDC and general assistance were AFDC children; 7 percent were persons qualified for general assistance; and less than 1 percent were able-bodied unemployed fathers. Even though able-bodied, prime-aged males constituted less than one percent of this welfare population, this paper will concentrate on a study of these individuals. The reason is that attitudes toward these men affect the size and scope, i.e., the adequacy level, of the total income maintenance support system in this country. Fear that

these men and others of similar circumstance will free-load is one major barrier to the passage of a program adequate for the other 99 percent of the people on welfare. The belief that welfare recipients really do not want to work also blocks the movement to develop jobs through government sponsored full employment programs such as the Humphrey-Hawkins legislation.

The American distaste for welfare is supported by a strong belief in a work ethic which fosters the idea that all people who want to work can find a job. Recently, high unemployment figures have threatened this philosophy but, since most middle Americans are not touched by the joblessness, the belief system remains intact.

The Work Ethic

Work can be defined in many ways. It will suffice in the context of this paper to view work as "an instrumental activity designed to procure the means of subsistence."³

It is well known that the American work ethic derives from a combination of religious and social values. Christianity and particularly Martin Luther established the idea of work as a "calling" or service to God, Calvin added the sanction for accumulation of wealth through the concept of predestination, and the Puritans brought this philosophy to the new world. In Colonial America, "Those who did not work did not eat and were considered to be lacking in the grace of God."⁴ Work was necessary for survival. It was encouraged. The rise of capitalism and the industrial revolution gave greater emphasis to economic gain as the major motivator for labor and reduced the intrinsic value of work. The machine age brought differentiation of tasks and the division of labor with the practice of assigning different statuses to different kinds of work.

Most recently, in the current affluent society, work has come to be valued for the symbols of wealth it provides. Money earned allows a person to acquire the goods and services which are symbolic of status and success. In addition to this instrumental value, money itself has taken on a symbolic meaning as a measure of the quality and quantity of an individual's work.

Why Do People Work?

What does work mean to human beings? First and foremost, most writers⁵ from capitalistic societies acknowledge man works primarily, although not solely, for economic reasons. Maslow's work on hierarchy of needs gives some order to the motivations and affirms that basic needs of food and shelter come first.⁶ Other reasons which have been defined are: 1) to affirm his identity; 2) to avoid boredom; 3) to give pattern to his time; 4) for a sense of mastery, creativity and self-esteem; 5) to achieve respect from others; and 6) to have an opportunity for social contacts. But, Neff concludes man's "motivation to work is largely a

function of culture, and that it varies according to the socialization process through which cultured norms are internalized." The American is socialized to norms that direct every able-bodied man to provide for himself and his family by work. This value is so strong that even persons with inherited wealth have social pressure on them to be productive, to do some kind of work.

Given the strong commitment to the work ethic in this country and the factors which compel people to work, why do some NOT work? There are two basic approaches to the discussion of this question. On the one hand, the person who does not work can be examined to see how he differs from those who do work. This method looks for defects and deficiencies in the person that can account for his unemployability. The danger in the use of this method is the probability that it will fall into victim blaming. The alternative is to look at the social structure to evaluate the availability of jobs, disincentives to work and pressures in society which keep certain jobs at low pay, low status levels.

Taking the first approach, Neff, in his book Work and Human Behavior, discusses the ability to work. He assumes people desire to work unless their ability to do so is impaired. This ability is comprised of the obvious physical capacities of health and strength, sufficient mental capacity and the not so often recognized, psychological attribute of the work personality. This attribute consists of an individual's ability to deal with time, travel and personal interaction demands of the work situation. Given this understanding of human motivation for work, Neff's corrective actions for those who do not work are aimed at diagnosis and treatment of the personality problems through therapy and training.

Defining unemployment as curable by training was the philosophy of the War on Poverty, manpower and education programs. Substantial amounts of money were expended in an attempt to educate, presumably deficient, poor people out of their poverty state. The efforts to eliminate unemployment and poverty by curing the "diseased" poor must be re-evaluated. "These attempts to change the poor so they can fit into the system have not created a society which is more equal in 1970 than it was in 1960, before these social service strategies were implemented."⁸ Economist Robert Levine agrees we should "...put little stress on education because we don't know how to make education work on the poor..."⁹

It is helpful for this analysis that the critics of these programs are constructive. Not only do they decry the failure of these "victim blaming and curing" strategies, they point the way to changing the structure. A second perspective they suggest for examining the problems of the unemployed is to seek causes, not in the individuals, but in the system in which the individual must function.

Finding the "Suitable Job"

One of the most obvious reasons people do not work is that they cannot find a suitable job. There are at least three possible interpretations of that statement. First, it can mean there are simply not enough

jobs in a particular community. The Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act recognizes this as a major cause of unemployment. Also critics Moynihan and Levine have cited the failure of the government to create jobs as the reason Manpower and Development Training Act programs have not worked.¹⁰ Levine noted a need for massive job creation efforts if manpower programs are ever to be successful and Moynihan said in reference to the 1960's manpower efforts that "a key and faulty decision on the part of the Task Force (OEO) and the President was the rejection of a proposal for a five-cent cigarette tax, the proceeds to be earmarked for job creation programs among the poor."¹¹

Second, "suitable job" can also mean there are not enough jobs at the skill level of the unemployed. To explore this problem, a study (Schiller, 1974) analyzed the classified ads in the Sunday Washington Post and found of more than 2,500 full-time, non-sales listings only 183 required no education or experience minimum.¹² An additional 171 jobs required only modest credentials. A check two weeks after the ad showed 85 percent of the no credential jobs and 94 percent of the modest credential jobs were filled. Indications were that most of them were filled within two days. This is evidence that when low skill jobs are available people take them.

The deficiency in the availability of low skill jobs has been identified by a number of planners as a critical problem. They have suggested federal programs for pollution control and environmental protection projects as likely areas for job creation at the lower skill levels; however, a stumbling block in the path of such development is the substantial cost of the program.

A third interpretation a "suitable job" may mean that jobs are not available which pay enough to support a family even at meager levels provided by welfare assistance. Many jobs open to the hard-core unemployed have pay scales below the national minimum wage and poverty levels. Although this is a strong disincentive to work, many workers hold these jobs. This, in itself, appears to be evidence of the work ethic held by the poor. Even acknowledging the strong stigma attached to welfare, it seems irrational to expect a person to take a job which pays well below the poverty level when more can be obtained from a welfare payment. (Not including benefits-in-kind.) That the general public supports this idea is sad, but it is more significant that leaders in government also suggest it. Former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Elliot Richardson, is quoted by Goodwin as saying that the poor should take jobs at well below the minimum wage, for the work experience it would provide them.¹³ When Secretary Richardson was challenged on this point, he said we had more than seven million such jobs in the United States in 1970. The problem is that rather than recognize the inequity of the wage structure, Richardson insisted it was in the workers' best interest to labor for well below poverty level earnings. To support a claim like this, the middle class often uses the "dignity of labor" or "bootstraps" philosophies. Morality and individualism are cited to justify what appears to many to be exploitation of the poor. It suggests the needs of business are being

avored over the needs of the poor. Legislators incorporate coercive work requirements into income support programs rather than encourage employment by developing jobs which pay a living wage. The Task Force on Work states the issue clearly:¹⁴

Income policy should strive for maintenance of some minimum standard of living. Its concern should be for anyone who is below that standard, for whatever reason he may be in need. But the thrust of the argument here is that a decent satisfying job with adequate pay would be the incentive, (emphasis my own) and none other would be required. Instead of building a welfare strategy with so called work incentives, we need to have a work strategy which does not penalize people who want to work. If work itself were refurbished and made the incentive, neither coercion nor pressure on existing welfare recipients - who are in no position to resist - would be needed.

The above facts suggest that the failure of policy makers and legislators to reduce unemployment and raise welfare payments is complicated by a desire to maintain a cheap labor supply. If more jobs which pay at least the minimum wage are created by government, many private industries which depend on cheap labor may not be able to find necessary manpower. The same loss of labor resources might occur if adequate income supports were implemented. The fear of reduced cheap labor supply then, is one of the forces countering the development of an adequate welfare system.

The business community claims that many companies would be forced out of business if they were required to pay higher wages either to compete with government sponsored minimum wage paying jobs or a more adequate welfare system.

It is obvious that the economy would not benefit from forcing private companies into bankruptcy. Therefore, government policy has been stymied by the conflict between business health through low labor costs and adequate supports to the poor who generally make up this labor market for business.

Critics of the poor claim the hard-core unemployed will not accept low status jobs. Fein, however, points out that jobs considered demeaning are generally refused not because of their status but because they are extremely low paying. He contends it is the low pay that is demeaning and cites the fact that there is competition for garbage collector jobs in New York and other cities where the pay approaches a living wage.¹⁵

Wachtel's conceptualization of an individual's employability summarizes the discussion. He writes that employability is dependent on four

categories of variables:

1. personal characteristics he cannot control, e.g., age, race, sex, family status, and region of socialization.
2. personal characteristics over which he has some control, e.g., education, skill level, health, region of employment and motivation.
3. industry characteristics, e.g., profit rates, technology, product competition, unionization, and government controls of industry.
4. local labor market characteristics, e.g., labor demand, unemployment rate, wage scale, and rate of growth.¹⁶

It is obvious that very few of these variables are within the control of the individual. The structural constraints of the labor market seem to have greater impact on the employment situation of prime-aged males than their personal, physical or psychological attributes. Thus, solutions to the unemployment problem might reasonably be sought in the employment structure.

What is the Evidence?

To this point, the review has focused on the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the American work ethic and its relationship to employment/income maintenance policy. Next, the tested knowledge, the available empirical evidence, will be examined. A number of studies relevant to the discussion of work will be presented. These include research assessing the attitudes of the poor and the unemployed toward work, social experiments of the impact of income maintenance plans on both the working and unemployed, and attitudes of the "middle class" concerning the values of the unemployed and the poor.

The first group of studies tests the strength of the work ethic in America today and looks for the differences in acceptance between the rich and poor and the employed and unemployed. Empirical research over the last 15 years by Havinghurst, 1954; Morse and Weiss, 1955; and Tausky, 1969, confirms that work is of central importance to all Americans and that the acceptance of the work ethic is strong among the employed.¹⁷ Additional studies have attempted to measure the differences between the employed and the unemployed on commitment to the work ethic and the meaning of work. These studies reveal that those classified as hard-core unemployed, both black and white, seem to have the same commitment to work as the more affluent employed workers.¹⁸ (Ireland, Moles, and O'Shea, 1969; Kaplan and Tausky, 1972; Goodale, 1973; Goodwin, 1972). These studies include both white and blue collar workers, lower and middle class persons, white and black, and both male and female adults and their teenage sons. While showing both poor and non-poor as valuing work, the studies report different reasons for work commitment. The hard-core

unemployed and lower class men reported money as the primary reward of work, whereas regularly employed workers mentioned pride in work and the kind of activity in the work as more rewarding.¹⁹ Kaplan and Tausky found that in addition to money, the hard-core unemployed most often indicated that work conferred respectability and was a measure of the social worth of a man. This study demonstrates that the unemployed value employment as the key to respectability as their working counterparts do.

Further evidence of support for the work ethic is Goodwin's study of the work attitudes of children. He reported that teen-aged sons without a working parent in the home had as strong a work commitment as teens with working parents.²⁰ This is not supportive of theories which hypothesize modeling and identification with a working parent are essential for a child to learn the work ethic.²¹

While the studies cited indicate that the unemployed value work, many still question whether persons receiving adequate income supports would seek better employment or continue to work if payments are made to supplement poverty level wages. A major study the Office of Economic Opportunity funded, New Jersey Income Maintenance Experiment, was designed to test the belief that people will not work if they receive adequate income support and will discontinue work if their low wages are supplemented. The study examined the differential behavior of members of urban, male-headed families assigned to eight different work incentive groups and a control group. Although this study is controversial, the results revealed little difference between various levels of marginal tax rate and guaranteed support affecting the amount of money each family earned. The project reports there was no substantial withdrawal from work by experimental groups. It found a small but not significant difference between experimental and control groups on the number of hours worked but not the amount of money earned for each family. In most cases, the reduction in hours worked for families receiving supplements was the result of a child or wife leaving the work force, not the male head of the household.²² While other OEO studies have shown that women receiving supplements work 10 to 15 percent less than women not receiving them,²³ it appears men's work rates are not substantially affected by supplements.

Although a reduction in worked hours per family is important since it would result in a reduced labor supply, it is not evidence that heads of families would leave employment and sit idle on a guaranteed income. In fact, the study showed that male heads of supplemented families progressed to higher levels of employment. It reported a greater increase in hourly rate for the experimental group than the controls; the experimental group rate went up 45 cents per hour while the controls only increased by 24 cents.²⁴ "In the end, there is a distinct absence of evidence for a sharp disincentive for male family heads; there is probably some for the poorest stratum but the evidence is weak as to precise magnitude or nature."²⁵ Although results are not conclusive, this empirical evidence does contradict basic tenets of the work ethic philosophy. These studies may help to change attitudes which block income support and work development policies. While acknowledging the mixed results of the New Jersey study, it

is suggested that additional experiments of this type are needed to aid in economic planning and policy formulation.²⁶

The American Belief System

The literature search did not reveal any studies which support the popular misconception that the unemployed poor are less committed to work than their counterparts who have succeeded in obtaining employment.²⁷ Nevertheless, David Macarov has noted:²⁸

It seems to be a firm part of the American belief system that if people - especially poor people - are given enough money on which to live, they will refuse to work to achieve more, no matter what the inducement. This view is based on no empirical evidence, aside from isolated anecdotes; it is consistent with no theory of human behavior; and is inconsistent with its (own) logic.

Although research does not support this public belief, it persists. VanTil, reporting on a study of what American adults believe about the causes of poverty and the values of the poor said, "over two-thirds of a sample of American adults agreed with the statement that 'many people getting welfare are not honest about their need.'"²⁹ Further, only one-third of the sample felt that "failure of society to provide good schools" and "prejudice and discrimination against Negroes" were very important causes of poverty.³⁰ Also demonstrating the lack of information of the middle class, Rytena, Form and Perse reported that the well-off associated wealth with favorable characteristics and poverty with inadequate personality traits.³¹

Goodwin found that middle class respondents in his study³²

deny the work ethic is strong among the poor, fundamentally misunderstood how high work ethic leads to increased feelings of insecurity and mistakenly project for the poor a strong identification with welfare income and with income from quasi-illegal sources.

Goodwin explains:³³

There is little opportunity for middle class persons to be confronted with data challenging these projections about the psychology of the poor, much less to be confronted with poor people who can indicate how instrumental blockages are preventing them from fulfilling their positive orientations.

Thus, one can conclude that while the evidence is that the poor desire to work and get many of the same satisfactions from work as the non-poor, the overwhelming opinion of the influential middle class is that those who do not work are lazy and deficient.

Implications for Social Policy

Unless a great deal more evidence can be produced and brought to bear on public opinion, it is likely that income maintenance programs will continue to be stymied by the conflicting goals of adequacy and target efficiency, and the concern for preserving work incentives. The solution as suggested by the Humphrey-Hawkins legislation may be in changing the employment structure with emphasis on job creation.

The American economic system, largely a laissez-faire operation until recent times, is now, more than ever, in need of controls. Economist Robert Heilbroner contends this need is generated by the increase in the growth of scientific and technological forces in the economic system.³⁴ Both the cause and solution for many social problems, these forces must be controlled from outside the market system in order to serve and preserve the economic stability. The idea that the economy can be self-regulatory is no longer viable. The government exercises control in the allocation of community resources and makes decisions articulating interests of various groups in society. Policy coordinating various parts of the economy appears necessary as well to deal with major social issues including the income maintenance/unemployment problem discussed here.

While transfer programs are certainly necessary, the chief means of reducing poverty in America in the past 50 years has been the increased output-to-population ratio with a portion of that growth accruing to the poor.³⁵ It has been recommended that this strategy be continued to try to further increase growth and distribute a larger portion of the growth to the poor. However, in the current economy plagued with inflation, growth is being carefully manipulated. Even though some are challenging the widely accepted economic relationship between inflation, growth and full employment, government policy is cautious about stimulating growth. And even if growth can be accomplished in this environment, the redistribution will encounter resistance because it means a smaller portion of the growth will go to the non-poor who are feeling the intense pressure of inflation.

Policy which supports continued economic growth and a reduction of unemployment through job creation programs such as the CETA are steps which make less myopic welfare reform possible. These programs will remove many of those capable of working from welfare roles. With fewer unemployed persons (particularly those society feels should work) policy makers may feel less pressure to focus on punitive work requirements and income tests characteristic of welfare programs and begin to develop universal programs which offer more humane, less stigmatizing welfare in a more easily administered form. Garfinkel makes a strong argument for this course of action.³⁶ Perhaps the time is right for this course of action.

Conclusions

The ability of this society to provide its citizens with opportunities to obtain a comfortable living is a major American problem. As a humane society, the country's goal should be to develop a social structure which provides job opportunities for all its employable members and an adequate income maintenance system for those not able to provide for themselves through employment. When every able-bodied man has the opportunity for work, one of the largest barriers to the universal income support system will be gone.* Only after society has settled its problems with unemployment will it be willing to provide an adequate, non-categorical, non-coercive income support system.

Thus, the real question facing this society is whether a humane people will continue to allow their great wealth to be distributed on a basis which leaves one-sixth of its people in poverty relying on the rhetoric of the work ethic to justify the inequity.

*There would still be the issue of able-bodied women, heads of households, receiving supports but a similar job creation program would be a solution if society resolved its dilemma concerning the value of the mother-child relationship and the need for the mother to support her child.

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