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Do the Poor Want to Work? A Social-Psychological Study of Work Orientations. By Leonard Goodwin. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1972. Pp. 178. \$6.50 cloth, \$2.50 paper.

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BOOK REVIEWS

DO THE POOR WANT TO WORK? A SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF WORK ORIENTATIONS. By Leonard Goodwin. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1972. Pp. 178. \$6.50 cloth, \$2.50 paper.

Most successful Americans would agree that a steady job is a good thing, providing not only money but self-respect and a purpose in life. Dismayed by the failure of thousands of poor people to hold steady jobs, they often assume that the poor stay on welfare because they don't like to work—in short, because they are lazy. This assumption colors several aspects of federal welfare programs, yet few have asked whether it is a valid guide for policymakers. The title of a recently published study by Leonard Goodwin gets to the point: **DO THE POOR WANT TO WORK?**

This question has a direct bearing on governmental efforts to reduce poverty and unemployment through work-training programs aimed at replacing welfare with “workfare,” and on proposals to institute some form of guaranteed annual income. Goodwin notes that work-training programs will fail if the poor have little interest in work, while a guaranteed income might induce them to leave the work force. If, on the other hand, poor people do want to work, a guaranteed subsistence income wouldn't discourage them from working, and the current difficulties of work-training programs would have to be explained by something other than the psychology of the poor.

Goodwin, a member of Brookings' Governmental Studies staff, has sought answers to questions underlying what is generally called the “welfare mess.” Do poor people have outlooks on work basically different from those of regularly employed persons? Do poor mothers really prefer to stay on welfare rather than work to support their families? Is there a caste system or “culture of poverty” that distinguishes poor from middle-class families?

In his search for the link between a person's psychological makeup and his performance in the job market, Goodwin measured what he calls “work orientations”—psychological attributes reflected in questionnaire items that cluster together statistically and have psychological meaning. Four of these orientations are particularly important. *Life aspirations* are derived from questionnaire items such as “having a nice place to live” and “having a regular

job" rated on a four-point scale ranging from "best way of life" to "worst way of life." Other major orientations are the *work ethic*, or degree to which a person identifies his self-esteem with work; *lack of confidence*, or belief that "luck" or "knowing the right people" determines success; and *acceptability of welfare* as a source of income.

During the course of Goodwin's study, the work orientations questionnaire was administered to more than 2,000 poor people—black and white, male and female, young and adult—in Baltimore and at five other places across the country. They included long- and short-term welfare mothers and their teen-age sons, male teenagers in a poor all-black community near the District of Columbia, and more than a thousand welfare recipients enrolled in the federally supported Work Incentive Program (WIN).

Goodwin compared their responses with those of some 2,000 people having steady employment, including 500 black families who had succeeded at work and 175 white middle-class families living in the same Baltimore neighborhoods as the successful black families. The picture that emerged differs sharply from the stereotyped view of the poor.

- Welfare recipients, whatever their race or time spent on welfare, have essentially the same work ethic and life aspirations as do employed middle-class people.

- Teen-age welfare boys from fatherless homes maintain a strong work ethic even though they have been on welfare almost their entire lives. The widespread belief that welfare weakens the work ethic of young men is not borne out.

- Welfare mothers have a significant influence on their sons' orientations, contributing to high life aspirations and a strong work ethic. Middle-class parents have a negligible influence, probably because their children's work orientations are shaped by institutions outside the family.

- Black persons are much less confident of their ability to succeed at work than are whites. Surprisingly, blacks who have moved up out of the ghetto are as insecure as black welfare recipients; whites, on the other hand, are confident of their ability to succeed even if they are on welfare.

- Poor people with the strongest work ethic show the greatest lack of confidence, suggesting that persons who most closely identify their self-esteem with work suffer the greatest loss of confidence when they fail.

- Willingness to accept welfare follows economic rather than racial lines. Whether black or white, the poor interviewed for the

study showed greater acceptance of welfare than did affluent blacks and whites. None of the poor groups saw welfare as a threat to their life goals or work ethic.

Especially significant were the results of part of the study focusing on women in the WIN program. First, Goodwin found that the black mothers who most readily accepted welfare when they entered WIN were the least likely to work after leaving the program. Despite their high life aspirations and work ethic, they tended to give up on work effort and to go on welfare. According to Goodwin, this doesn't happen because they reject the significance of work but because they have failed repeatedly at work and find welfare an acceptable alternative. Second, Goodwin discovered that mothers who leave the WIN program without getting a job—who fail again in the work world—find welfare more acceptable than they did when they entered training. Together, these insights suggest that the WIN program may actually reduce the employability of many participants.

If, as Goodwin contends, poor people of all ages and races identify their self-esteem with work as strongly as do the nonpoor, why aren't they working and moving out of poverty? Why are welfare rolls increasing rather than decreasing?

This paradox would be readily explained if the poor who were interviewed for the study gave the answers they thought middle-class interviewers wanted to hear, but Goodwin used statistical methods to adjust the data for bias of that kind. In his view the most plausible explanation is that a person's work activity is determined more by his beliefs and intentions than by his goals. Black women on welfare may have work as a goal, yet go on accepting welfare because they have failed at work and believe they would fail if they tried again.

Neither a caste system nor the culture of poverty thesis can satisfactorily account for these findings. Goodwin offers a different interpretation that emphasizes unequal opportunity—the fact that American society restricts but does not completely bar advancement for blacks. Since blacks have to work in situations less favorable to advancement than those affecting whites, they show a high level of insecurity whether they are on welfare or have managed to move out of the ghetto. Lack of equal opportunity more than anything else may explain the growth of welfare rolls.

Goodwin's study has several implications for public policy. For example, it is commonly argued that welfare benefits should be tied to a work requirement because work is psychologically good for welfare mothers and provides a model for their children.

But even long-term welfare mothers and their teen-age sons already have a strong work ethic and don't need to be taught the importance of work. Goodwin contends that what they need is a chance to experience success in jobs that pay enough to support them.

The current WIN program has failed, Goodwin says, in the sense that most participants end up without jobs. He points out that a work requirement for welfare mothers could mean pushing more of them through WIN even though 80 per cent of them would not obtain jobs in the open market, or it could mean forcing them to fill the lowest-paid jobs in American society. Either course would increase their psychological dependence on welfare and discourage further work effort. On the other hand, Goodwin believes that welfare mothers and their children could be publicly supported at a decent level without damaging their work ethic, provided that support were given in a way that conveyed no social stigma or implication of failure.

Important though it is, Goodwin views income as only one factor in a family's escape from poverty. His data on successful black families suggest the psychological stress of rising from the lower to the middle class, and not every poor person may want or be able to manage it. Hence an increase in income of a few hundred dollars a year might raise a family above some economically defined poverty line, but it would be unlikely to generate a burst of hope and confidence. Economic measurements may show many persons rising above poverty because of government welfare payments, while socially and economically the urban ghettos remain unchanged.

Goodwin emphasizes that this is not a criticism of economic analysis or of proposals for guaranteeing income to the poor, but a basis for moving beyond the common belief that a guaranteed income would impair work incentives. His study suggests that the plight of the poor cannot be attributed to deviant goals or a deviant psychology, and that the poor are no more likely to settle for a poverty-level income and stop working than are middle-class people.

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