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WELFARE LEGISLATION AND AMERICAN POVERTY TRAPS:
IRONIES AND CHARACTERISTICS

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ABSTRACT

We argue that legislative attempts to establish bureaucratic programs to eradicate American poverty will invariably result in ironic inconsistencies that will doom such programs to only limited or partial success. As an illustration, we examine the ironic history of the AFDC program as it has been legislated to deal with American poverty. Three sociological accounts for the ironies of welfare programming are then drawn together. One account suggests that undue concern over the work ethic has overridden more direct concern for the deprecating living conditions of the poor. A second account suggests that poverty is so functionally beneficial to a number of vested interest groups in society that serious attempts to eradicate it are unlikely. The third explanation, which we ourselves develop, suggests that ironic inconsistencies arise in legislated welfare programs because the roots of poverty are inherent in the very institutions of our society that provide the supportive groundwork upon which legislative activity as a conservative political process operates. Without social restructuring of these institutions on a revolutionary scale, therefore, only ironically ineffective governmental programs that do not seriously threaten the institutional foundations of American poverty (and, therefore, do not threaten American legislative politics) are likely to be enacted. This third explanation rests upon a 'social structural - social psychological' model of the roots of American poverty. We develop this model in detail by identifying the key structural features in American society that produce "poverty traps" into which individuals with selected social psychological characteristics are ensnared.

INTRODUCTION

The plety with which we express our concern for those among us living in poverty, as well as our concern for controlling any actions they may take against our vested interests, are facts of great irony that have been frequently noted (e.g., Piven and Cloward; Feagin; Mandell; Trattner; Goroff). The intent of the original legislation creating the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC) has likewise reflected these ironic concerns (see Bell, Handler and Hollingsworth).

In particular, it was feared that the quality of life for children in father-absent families was so low as to constitute an "unsuitable home" environment in which careers of delinquency and crime would be spawned. Two factors seemed most salient in reducing the quality of life for these children: a lack of material support at levels typically deemed desirable in homes with a working parent, and mothers who were unfit to rear children in accordance with middle-class mores. In assuring that the latter factor was not detracting from the quality of life for these children, mothers were expected to prove their moral integrity before aid was to be provided to them for the care of their children. Furthermore, since model, middle-class mothers were expected to stay at home to ensure that their children's behaviors remained within moral bounds, AFDC mothers likewise were expected to refrain from entering the labor market so that they, too, could provide constant home supervision of their children's moral conduct. While concern over the moral character of the AFDC mother as a role model for the children remains presently unabated, the more important issue has been the problem of providing material support to these families at levels sufficiently adequate as to improve the quality of life for the children and hopefully, thereby, to keep them from potential lives of crime and other forms of deviance.

The ironic juxtaposition of such concerns in welfare programming is the situation we wish to account for in this essay. As an illustration, we shall first outline the ironic history of efforts to legislate a social program of assistance to deprived children in America. We shall then draw together three sociological accounts for why such ironic programs arise through the legislative process.

A RECOUNTING OF THE IRONIC HISTORY OF AFDC LEGISLATION

Prior to the early years of the twentieth century, social responsibility for meeting needs of impoverished children was largely in the hands of private charitable organizations.¹ For the most part, however, such assistance was inadequate, and the poor were forced to provide for themselves by whatever means were available. Urban blight, pestilence, filth, and exploitation were conditions only too familiar to the destitute.

In 1909, the Conference on the Care of Dependent Children was called by President Theodore Roosevelt to address and evaluate the plight of impoverished children. Upon conclusion, the conferees urged that public programs be instituted to provide financial assistance so that all children might enjoy the benefits and amenities associated with a stable home life. This recommendation led to the precursor of AFDC: the Mothers' Pension programs. Although federal funds were not appropriated, by the end of the 1920's a number of states had enacted some form of Mothers' Pension. Essentially, the enactments called upon the states to provide mothers with financial assistance to maintain "suitable homes," in exchange for which mothers would prove themselves proper and fit parents of their children.

The general trend set by Mothers' Pensions was continued when, on June 8, 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt convened the Committee on Economic Security. On January 17, 1935, the Committee submitted its recommendations to the President which included a proposal for the establishment of a grants-in-aid program for needy dependent children. Based on the Committee's recommendations and after extensive deliberation and protracted debate, the Social Security Act was passed, joining the efforts of federal and state levels in providing assistance to indigent children within the confines of their own homes. Originally termed Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), the program was established alongside two other categorical programs by the 1935 Social Security Act.² ADC called for the provision of financial assistance to needy children under 16 years of age "who have been deprived of parental support or care by reason of the death, continued absence from the home, or physical or mental incapacity of a parent," provided that such children were living at home with any one of several appropriately designated relatives (United States Code Annotated:§606[a]). The primary concern of ADC was to provide the means that would allow impoverished and dependent children to reap the benefits of a suitable home environment so that they might be less likely to engage in anti-social behavior.

Although the broad outlines of the original Aid to Dependent Children program remained intact until recently, noteworthy additions and amendments have been incorporated which, in some areas, substantially altered the initial legislation.

In the 1939 Amendments to the Social Security Act, merit system selection became required. Thus, government employees were to be selected based solely upon merit, rather than political affiliation. This amendment was included with the hope that greater employee professionalization would thereby be introduced to the ADC program. More importantly, however, the amendments raised ADC's age of eligibility from age 16 to age 18. Also, the federal maximum portion of funding was raised from one-third to one-half.

The next significant amendment came in 1956 which added social services to the ADC program. A concern for the totality of the family became infused within the Act

by enabling each state to furnish financial assistance and other services...to needy dependent children and the parents or relatives with whom they are living to help maintain and strengthen family life and to help such parents or relatives to attain the maximum self-support and personal independence consistent with the maintenance of continuing parental care and protection (United States Code Annotated:§601).

Assistance was extended in 1961 to instances in which the cause of need and dependency of a child was due to the unemployment of the father. The significance of the unemployment amendment was that it reduced the likelihood that an unemployed father would abandon his family, thereby qualifying them for ADC benefits. However, the amendment was made optional so that states were free to adopt or reject the provision of such aid. States that so opted were required to conform to federal guidelines.

In 1962, Congress attempted to encourage the states to extend their social services and to create new ones by increasing to 75 percent the amount of federal funds that would become available for specified services and activities. Moreover, definitions of need and dependency were extended to cover children who have been placed in foster family homes or child care institutions as a result of court determinations. Also incorporated with the 1962 Amendments was the change in title from "Aid to Dependent Children (ADC)" to "Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)."

The definition of dependent children was further broadened when, in 1964, persons between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one became eligible for AFDC, provided that they were students pursuing courses of study leading to gainful employment.

In 1967 two economically-related provisions to the AFDC program were introduced. The first of the two provisions established emergency assistance for dependent children. Specifically, financial, medical, and other assistance were, henceforth, to be provided promptly to any needy child under twenty-one who otherwise would face destitution. Adoption of an emergency assistance plan, was, however, made optional for each state. The second provision was incorporated to reflect cost of living increases. States were now required to update their maximums in accordance with current inflation rates.

Growing concern over rising welfare costs and a general indignation over so-called indolent "third generation welfare families" led Congress also in 1967 to institute a work incentive program (called WIN). Administered by the United States Department of Labor, WIN required as a federal condition of AFDC eligibility that all recipients (excepting those individuals who qualified for one of the six specified exemptions) "register for manpower services, training and employment" (United States Code Annotated:§602 [a] [19]). Failure to cooperate with the WIN program could result in the suspension or denial of assistance to the re-

calcitrant individual. To serve as a positive work incentive, AFDC instituted the "30 + 1/3 rule," whereby the initial \$30 of one's earned income (some earned income is exempted from this rule), plus one-third of the remainder was to be disregarded in computing need. In addition, reasonable expenses incurred during the course of employment were to be taken into account in determining available resources.

In 1972, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (now the Department of Health and Human Services) extended the category of qualifying relatives by including "persons of preceding generations as denoted by prefixes of grand, great, or great-great" (Code of Federal Regulations: §233.90 [c][1][v][1]). In addition, HEW gave the states the option to include unborn children as eligible for AFDC.

As AFDC and welfare programs in general came under increasing attack for promoting immorality and encouraging "welfare chiselers," Congress began to respond accordingly. Thus, a condition of eligibility as of 1975 required applicants and recipients to cooperate with state authorities in establishing the paternity of illegitimate children for the ultimate purpose of obtaining child-support payments from the putative father.

Since 1975 and until recently, relatively few amendments to AFDC have been enacted. Subsequent amendments have either been relatively inconsequential or have been added to the existing legislation to reflect changes in technology, intergovernmental relations, or other such trends.³

Viewed from an historical perspective, then, three overriding characteristics of the AFDC program are evident. During the initial years of Aid to Families with Dependent Children, a particular emphasis was placed on instilling and promoting parochial conceptions of morality among less fortunate fatherless families. Mothers entered into a reciprocal agreement whereby they would receive state monies in exchange for remaining at home in order to provide a proper home environment and to inculcate basic middle-class cultural values to the young.

During the postwar years, and continuing into the mid-1960's, expenditures for AFDC increased tremendously. Coupled with this, however, was the growing conviction among many that money alone would not suffice in totally eradicating poverty. Hence, mandatory social services were instituted to more closely monitor and control the behavior of AFDC recipients.

Disillusioned by an unpopular war, faced with internal civil strife, and suffering from growing economic woes, Americans, during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, vented their frustrations in a number of directions, one of which was toward AFDC. Under the burden of increasing welfare costs, the undercurrent of stereotypic beliefs that welfare recipients are freeloading, chiseling, immoral "breeders" became more pronounced and new calls for a "workfare" society arose. Recent years, then, have witnessed an erosion of the commitment to and concern over the plight of impoverished children, concomitant with an increasing

concern that the person responsible for the dependent children (the mother, in most cases) work outside the home so that the family, presumably, could become self-supportive.

THREE ACCOUNTS FOR THE IRONIC
INCONSISTENCIES OF WELFARE PROGRAMMING

As we have noted, from its inception the AFDC program has been a program filled with ironies. While the welfare and potential delinquency of disadvantaged children were putatively the central concerns of the program, benefits are allotted at a rate that deliberately keeps the children in a lifestyle below the poverty level.⁴ Presumably, this is done to provide a work incentive for the mother--that is, by hopefully making it obvious to the mother that the basic material sustenance of her children is not going to be met by AFDC at a level at least comparable to working-class families, she will not be tempted to become an unscrupulous, indolent ward of the state. Oddly, then, it is the morality of the mothers, rather than those of the children, that seem to have drawn the preponderant concern of the program in political rhetoric. Yet, as Handler and Hollingsworth have estimated, fewer than 15% of AFDC mothers (and perhaps no more than 5%) would likely earn enough money to exceed the poverty level at the type of full time job they could reasonably hope to obtain (see also Goodwin: 114; Toomey; Ballou). Furthermore, the job training, Work Incentive Program (WIN), which most people would concede has from the very beginning been insufficiently funded for fair evaluation, excludes most AFDC mothers for a variety of reasons (including the continuing contradictory concern that mothers should be home caring for, and supervising the moral conduct of, their children).

If the material needs of children from father-absent homes were solely dependent on AFDC support, the quality of life for these children would be miserable indeed. Fortunately, the massive, multi-faceted welfare bureaucracy--the authority of which is disjointed and contested between several levels of government (federal, state and local)--has been providing for some of these needs through separate, sometimes overlapping and conflicting, assistance programs, such as Medicaid, foodstamps, Headstart, state subsidized education, summer jobs, aid for housing and for advanced education, and job training. Unfortunately, however, persons eligible for these benefits are often unaware of their existence or do not fully take advantage of them (Guida West).

Why would legislative attempts to create welfare programs result in such ironic treatment of the poor? We would like to draw together three partially compatible lines of sociological reasoning that could account for the ironic conduct of welfare programs: (1) the legislative process reflects conflicting social values in our society, which have resulted in a situation in which concern for the material welfare of the poor is over-ridden by a totally undue, moral preoccupation with whether the poor are conforming to the American work ethic; (2) the legislative process reflects the vested interests of diverse social groups in America who profit by keeping the poor impoverished; and (3) the legislative process is grounded in and serves to reaffirm the basic structural features of the institutions of our society, which themselves provide

the roots of American poverty in the form of 'poverty traps' into which persons with selected social psychological characteristics are ensnared.

A. The Effects of the Work Ethic. Owing to the great emphasis in our culture on individualism, it has often been noted that our morality is keyed to a work ethic (e.g., Weber; Sennett and Cobb; Huber and Form; Feagin). Put simply, the work ethic prescribes that an "upright" adult in our society is a person who is able to provide for his or her own material needs, and those of his or her family, by gainful employment. When one is not able to do so, one is stigmatized--in effect, one is seen as being less than a fully functioning human (Goffman; Matza). Sennett and Cobb and Waxman note that it is this stigma, this moral taint, that plays a key role in producing recurrent cycles of poverty across generations by reinforcing one's feelings of hopelessness, unworthiness, incapacity, and dependency on others.

It would be ironic, therefore, that such individuals as AFDC mothers would both be impugned in our culture to be morally inferior for not having obtained through their own efforts the material comforts of working class life for their children and, at the same time, be expected to remain in the home as a role model of moral virtue in the nurturant supervision of their children. It would be ironic indeed if these two views were both pushed equally to their logical extremes, placing the AFDC mothers in an impossible, moral, double bind, but they are not. Rather, a recessionary economy with an expanding tax bite has apparently led us out of economic self-interest to forget whatever concern we may have had for the potential enhancement that may be brought to the quality of life for these unfortunate children by a nurturant, supervising mother in the home; our attention has turned instead with self-righteous indignation to the failure of the mothers of these children to live up to the ideal of the American work ethic by providing for their material sustenance on their own.

Hence, we have seen in recent years a growing demand for more stringent work requirements and job training. This mushrooming interest in "workfare" can be seen in the WIN program legislated in 1967, in the controversies surrounding Nixon's ill-fated Family Assistance Plan (FAP, see Moynihan), in Carter's unsuccessful proposal for a Program for Better Jobs and Income (PRJI) and in the counter-proposals to Carter's plan by Representative Al Ullman, Representative James C. Corman, and Senators Howard H. Baker, Jr. and Henry L. Bellmon (see Weil; Sanger). Carter's proposals of 1978, in particular, would have phased out AFDC altogether for a more uniform system of assistance keyed to work programs (see in this regard the critique by Meiselman).

It could be, then, that in the self-interested piety of the middle-class outcry against the rising costs in an inflationary economy of the provision of material sustenance to those in poverty and in the moral zeal with which we enforce the work ethic for AFDC mothers, our concern over the quality of life for the children in father-absent homes has simply been forgotten.

Incredibly, the current moral zeal for workfare itself is misdirected, since Goodwin's data indicate that AFDC mothers and sons are

as committed to the work ethic as are non-welfare individuals. The stigma of being accused of deviation from the work ethic leads, as Goodwin's data also suggest, to a lessening in one's confidence in approaching the labor market. Any decrease of concern for the quality of life of father-absent children that is made to champion the American work ethic, then, is both ill-founded and counter-productive.

B. The Functions of Poverty. While suggestions can be found in many sources that the continuance of poverty among one or more groups of people in a society may have beneficial effects for other groups in the same society, Gans has offered the most detailed listing of such functions. In order to emphasize here how large an array of social factions there may be who profit from the continuance of poverty in our midst, we will briefly summarize Gans' four basic types of functions of poverty: economic, social, cultural, and political.

(1) Economic functions the poor serve for others are fourfold: (a) by being "unable to be unwilling" to take on undesirable jobs, they provide a ready labor force for the demeaning jobs of our economy; (b) they also "subsidize" a higher standard of living for the rest of society by working for low wages, by paying regressive state and local taxes for programs that disproportionately benefit others, and by serving as "guinea pigs" for experimental medical procedures that others will more likely be able to afford when perfected; (c) furthermore, their continued existence both justifies vast labor markets for such middle-class jobs as are found in welfare bureaucracies, poverty research institutes, and social control and protection agencies (such as police departments, which single out the poor more often for arrest, and the national armed forces into which the poor are disproportionately recruited) and they serve as clientele for such smaller enterprises as pawn shops, faith healers and evangelical ministeries; and finally, (d) they extend the economic potential of the marketplace by purchasing goods and services that others do not want (e.g., second-hand items, rundown living accommodations and incompetent legal or medical care).

(2) Gans suggested that the poor serve six "social" function for others: (a) by being easy to monitor and prosecute for normative violations, they serve as public reminders of the cherished norms of our society; (b) those poor who are physically or mentally disabled permit others to feel both spiritual fulfillment through charitable acts and greater appreciation of their relatively better health (i.e., "there but for the grace of God go I"); (c) the non-poor gain vicarious pleasure in their fantasizing about the uninhibited lives they believe the poor to lead--particularly with regard to sex and alcoholic libation; (d) by leading lives more materially deprived than those of members of the working class, the poor serve as references against which the working class may feel fortunate and relatively satisfied--despite being exploited in turn by higher classes; and (e) inequitable treatment of the poor has provided avenues of upward mobility for some persons (e.g., slum lords and high-priced inner city grocers).

(3) Two "cultural" functions are served by the poor according to Gans: (a) they provide the cheap labor for the construction of monuments, transportation and communication systems that are evidence of

"civilization," as well as provide the surplus capital that permits upper classes to patronize the "'high' culture" of art and intellect; and (b) their "'low' culture," e.g., music, dance, art, folk heroes, infuses new vitality into the "'high' culture."

(4) Finally, Gans regards three "political" functions to be served by the poor: (a) the poor serve as symbolic flags to be waved and banded about by parties of the right and left in their political rhetoric; (b) they are pawns that can be manipulated and exploited with impunity in such political skirmishes as those involving urban renewal, industrial expansion, and foreign wars; and (c) they help stabilize the political order by their failure to participate in political decision-making (indeed, they at times in the past have been disallowed from such participation).

It is clear from this extensive list of functions that the continuance of poverty in America can be a very profitable and beneficial situation for extensive sectors of our society. As the largest group of welfare recipients, families on AFDC could fulfill most, if not all, of the functions that Gans outlined provided that two conditions held: (i) the financial assistance provided by AFDC be sufficiently low as to keep recipient families in deprived living conditions and (ii) members of these families be required to work. Both conditions, as we have noted, constitute the ironic drift of the AFDC program from the fulfillment of its original intent.

So long as many groups (most of us, in fact) have a self-interested stake in the continuance of poverty, no matter how unconscious these interests may be, it would be difficult to imagine a serious, consistent, legislative effort to eradicate the deprecating conditions of life for children on AFDC. If Gans' depiction of the functional conditions of poverty is correct, the determination of the AFDC program to keep financial support at or below the poverty level--and certainly far below what most would consider a subsistence level for possessing the standard amenities of middle-class life--would not be surprising. The emphasis on work requirements for AFDC mothers likewise would not be surprising, since they are needed for such semi- and unskilled jobs as waitress, cleaning lady, and babysitter. Furthermore, the low pay that these mothers earn (Handler and Hollingsworth's [p. 140] data for Wisconsin showed that the average paycheck for the 22.3% of AFDC mothers who were working was \$37.05 per week) ensures that there is no danger that they or their children will escape from poverty.

C. American Poverty Traps: A Social Structural - Social Psychological Model We should like to propose yet a third point of view that regards deprecating living conditions in our society as being created and sustained in part through the structural features of our fundamental social institutions. From this point of view, society is seen as including in its social structural matrix poverty traps that ensnare people into temporary or enduring conditions of economic and social depravity and frustrate efforts by the poor themselves or by others in their behalf that might allow them to escape from their impoverishment.

In particular, legislative efforts to eradicate poverty are doomed to failure because, to be successful, they would have to threaten the very social structural foundations from which the legislative process itself derives. Being essentially a conservative political process, however, which tends to reaffirm existing social institutions, it is likely that legislative directives will always result in welfare programs that approach the problems of poverty in inadequate and ironically inconsistent ways. Thus, only a revolutionary restructuring of the institutions of our society would likely remove its present socially structured poverty traps.

If we are to improve the quality of life for poor children in America, we would have to seek out and remove the social structural conditions of poverty traps. Obviously, not everyone falls into these structural traps, however. An outline of the key social psychological characteristics of those persons likely to be caught in a poverty trap as well as a classification of the structural features of the traps that appear in our society would therefore be of much service. Consequently we shall develop here a 'social structural - social psychological' model⁵ of American poverty by outlining the key social structural features of the poverty traps in America and the social psychological characteristics of individuals likely to be ensnared by them.

1. Social Structural Features of American Poverty Traps

A. The Family. Among the various structural arrangements that set up poverty traps is that of the American family. Since AFDC was originally instituted to administer to the needs of children in poor, father-absent families, it is appropriate that we consider the family structure first. As presently constituted, the American nuclear family is composed of a married couple and their offspring who are expected to establish a neolocal residence isolating them from relatives and friends. Such structural features have worked to the detriment of women, for ultimately it is the female who has had to shoulder the major responsibility for child-care and upkeep of the home. The present family structure requires that females undertake these obligations without the assistance that would otherwise be available in the earlier extended family structure (Walum; Holmstrom).

The woman in the father-absent family faces even more severe difficulties than is normally true of other women. Not only are such women responsible for the maintenance of the home and child-care, they must also act as heads of households. Given the tremendous responsibilities facing the women in father-absent families, it is not surprising that many of them are unable to lift themselves, and concomitantly their children, from poverty levels. Indeed, the nuclear composition of the family sets up a poverty trap that serves to prevent the impoverished mother from improving her social position and that of her children. Unfortunately, alternative structural arrangements that would facilitate the employment of such women--such as more flexible working hours and adequate child-care facilities-- are very limited (Holmstrom; see also Roth). Until the structure of the family is such that the viable em-

ployment of impoverished mothers is facilitated the AFDC problem is unlikely to be improved, and these women and children will continue to become ensnared by this poverty trap.

B. Government Bureaucracy. In line with Gans' observations, it should be noted that the government bureaucracy that administers programs such as AFDC contains within it the essential structural features for a poverty trap--for without poor clients large numbers of bureaucratic jobs and federal prerequisites would not continue. Billions of dollars are allocated for poverty-related programs each year, and a good bit of this money merely provides an affluent lifestyle for a bureaucratic army of middle-class employees--all of whom are dependent in a very fundamental way on the perpetuation of a class of poor individuals (Moynihan; Schiller; Goroff).

Tarantino and Becker, for example, have estimated that as much as a fifth of the total welfare expenditure is earmarked for bureaucratic operations alone. Furthermore, bureaucrats are not the only ones profiting from poverty, for in 1970 the Office of Economic Opportunity alone awarded a total of 128 contracts in the amount of \$56,746,275 for purposes of evaluation, consultation and technical assistance (Tarantino and Becker:32). It is interesting to note that 16 of the companies awarded the multimillion dollar OEO contracts employed 35 former anti-poverty officials (Tarantino and Becker:32).

So long as the structural arrangement of a welfare state are set up to benefit the middle-class in such a fundamental way, those in poverty remain trapped there.

C. The Economy. The structure of economic relations has long been identified as the central cause of poverty (e.g., Marx). More specifically, the control of resources by a corps of elites has served to restrict access to the affluent lifestyles of middle and upper classes. The unequal control over the distribution of resources in society is an economically structured trap that ensnares some segments of the population into deprecating conditions and serves to prevent them from escaping. Hence, some observers have reached the conclusion that the only means of eliminating poverty is through the overthrow of the elites and a redistribution of resources.

In addition to the problem of elite control over the market place, another facet of economic structural relations of interest here concerns discrimination in the 'free' labor market. Specifically, certain members of society, i.e., racial minority groups, women, and the very old and young, suffer extensive occupational discrimination. Not accorded equal opportunity to compete in the labor market, these individuals are more likely to end up in poverty. Thus, as was noted earlier, although many mothers of AFDC children do indeed work, the jobs they are able to obtain are largely menial and poorly compensated (Handler and Hollingworth).

With regard to occupational discrimination, Reich, Gordon and Edwards have noted its operation in the dual labor market phenomenon in the American economy. In contrast to the primary labor market, the

secondary labor market (which incorporates the jobs in which most welfare mothers are engaged) may be distinguished by its "crowding" effect. In accord with traditional economic theory, this crowding of individuals in the secondary labor market serves to reduce wages, since the labor supply is greater than the demand. Likewise, the primary market is characterized by a scarcity of labor which naturally serves to increase wages within the primary market. Reich, Gordon and Edwards, however, also note that specific occupational impediments to entrance into the more lucrative primary market by certain individuals have been deliberately constructed. Not surprisingly, the most vulnerable to such impediments are women, the aged, and minorities. Unless these basic economic processes are changed, poverty will continue to persist among these persons. We have seen some federally enforced efforts in this direction in terms of tokenism, quotaism and other forms of affirmative action.

D. Education. During the 1960's concern for the plight of the poor led to a re-examination of the educational structure. Many were convinced that a lack of adequate education and training prevented the disadvantaged from improving their condition. Hence, the War Against Poverty, which was waged on a number of fronts, instituted programs such as Head Start and Upward Bound precisely to rectify the educational problem facing the poor. Whether a greater level of education and training will substantially help the poor is a subject of great dispute, however (Coleman; Jencks et al., a, b).

Still, it seems clear that irrespective of whatever might be learned in schools, the prestige of one's educational credentials can open or shut occupational doors. Thus, elite schools continue to provide the credentials for a life of privilege primarily to children of the already privileged (Domhoff), while the provisions made for the education of children from underprivileged families are smaller and smaller at each increasing level of educational credentials. Those sufficiently disadvantaged from the very beginning tend to end up with low prestige educational credentials and, hence, are effectively prevented from competing for middle-class jobs--in effect, the structure of American education traps many into lives of poverty and lower living standards. Judiciary-enforced busing was undertaken to circumvent this trap, but operates only for the lowest levels of educational credentials. Indeed, given the current credential inflation (Berg), the effort, though laudible, has been insufficient.

E. Political Resources. Recent years have witnessed a number of power movements, e.g., the Black Power Movement, the Women's Liberation Movement, and the Native American Movement, among others. Observers of the political maelstrom have argued that the poor are unlikely to be given due attention until they have formed a power coalition to lobby for change. AFDC mothers have apparently begun to heed such arguments by organizing themselves and issuing demands and ultimatums. Through the Welfare Rights Organization, such women have used court cases, injunctions, boycotts, and demonstrations to demand and obtain redress of their situation and to alert an unaware public to the plight of impoverished dependents. This movement has been a modest step toward defusing a poverty trap that is structurally enforced by the weakness of the pol-

itical organization of the poor vis-á-vis other interest groups. To the degree that the Welfare Rights Organization becomes more effective, we believe that the poor stand a chance of escaping at least one poverty trap that has held them in depraved conditions.

F. Sexual, Racial and Ethnic Barriers. We would like to summarize here the impact of the several structural features noted above on certain segments of the population, most notably women and racial and ethnic minorities. Taken together, these features have the tendency to imprison both women and racial and ethnic minorities into poverty traps. We suggest that the social structure acts differently to relegate to poverty persons with particular sexual, racial and ethnic attributes. This selection process rests not only on overt discrimination based on these attributes, but also on institutionalized sexism and racism (e.g., Bullock and Rodgers) based on associated attributes, such as low skill levels, low self-esteem, passivity, docility and dependence, among others. These associated attributes are disproportionately found among women and minorities and may be circularly traced, in part, or perhaps in whole (the data are inadequate to say which), back to the socialization process in which the social structural features differentially act initially on persons in accordance with their overt sexual, ethnic and racial attributes to instill these attributes within them. Whether overt or institutionalized, the effect of this discrimination can be seen working in all of the structural traps we have mentioned and need only be briefly summarized here.

First, with regard to the family, it was noted above that the nuclear structure of the family institution works to the detriment of women. Since women continue to be expected to shoulder the ultimate responsibility for child-care and home maintenance, it is more difficult for them to obtain and retain good-paying jobs. Consequently, they are nearly forced to remain at the hearth, either dependent upon the income of the husband or in a state of poverty. (Recent trends in delayed marriage and child-bearing have served to release many women from this trap.) Second, both minorities and women have also been frustrated in their attempts to influence the governmental and political structures. Although both groups have obtained the franchise to vote and have formed political activist groups, the two are notoriously underrepresented in influential government and political positions, both elective and appointed (Lepper; Lynn; Bullock; and Rodgers; Githens and Prestage). Perhaps the most important structural feature that has operated to the detriment of racial minorities and women has been the economic structure, more specifically, the occupational sub-structure. Indeed, women and minorities (particularly Native Americans, Chicanos, and Blacks) have suffered, and continue to suffer, systematic occupational discrimination throughout the occupational process: recruitment, selection, promotion, and termination (e.g., Huber and Chalfant; Goodwin; Schiller). Finally, the educational substructure has been organized in such a fashion as to disproportionately push women and racial minorities into the poverty trap. Thus, at the lower levels of educational institutions such individuals are socialized to be docile, passive, resigned, and dependent (Kemer; Bruner). Moreover, at higher levels of education, specifically at the undergraduate and graduate college levels, women and minorities suffer further discrimination in admissions and support

(Harris; Almquist and Angrist; Frazier and Sadlek).

Since the above structural components operate in unison, women and racial and ethnic minorities are confronted with massive and monolithic obstacles which essentially prevent their efforts at improvement and which, instead, push them into a poverty trap. (We wish to emphasize that other individuals are not necessarily immune from falling victim to poverty traps. Others may be entrapped as well, provided that they possess certain social psychological attributes or fall victim to certain situational circumstances to be discussed in the following section.) The social structure, then, traps women and other minorities more often in poverty and works to prevent them from escaping. Efforts aimed at ending the victimization of these people would be doomed to failure unless radical and extensive reformulation of American social structures are undertaken.

2. Social Psychological Features of American Poverty Traps.

Those features of American poverty that in fact draw the most attention in welfare programming concern social psychological characteristics that lead certain individuals to fall into the traps of poverty set by the structural features of our society as described above. It could be argued that those persons who fall into the structural traps of poverty have particular individual, social psychological characteristics that would account for why they fall into the trap while others do not. In effect, there may be something peculiar about them that is a codeterminant, if not the major determinant, of their unfortunate state of affairs. As should become obvious in our discussion of them, these social psychological factors are only analytically separable from the structural features of poverty traps. In some cases, the social psychological factors are derived from the structural features and are difficult to separate from them empirically. We propose three basic types of such social psychological factors: cultural expectations, psychological and social skills, and immediate social contingencies.

A. Cultural Expectations. Cultural expectations include all values and beliefs that push certain individuals possessing these expectations into a poverty trap. These values and beliefs are often assumed to be perpetuated in a subculture of poverty and include the following.

(1) Low expectations for education and employment would lead individuals in a society such as ours, keyed to a credential inflation (see Berg) and an occupational hierarchy to which differential incomes accrue, to fall into a marginal status of deprecating conditions.

As noted above, the value conflict account concerning the American work ethic suggests that there is a popular stereotype of the welfare recipient as being indolent and as having little desire to be otherwise. Hence, the increasing attention given to "workfare" for AFDC recipients is aimed, in part, toward forcing them, presumably against their will, to take a new interest in job training and employment. This stereotype, is, of course, false (see Goodwin).

Still, those who do not value education or employment would be prime prey for a poverty trap in American society. It is probably not coincidental, therefore, that Mizruchi found that those who tend to value education for its own sake also tend to be in the middle-class; members of the lower-class tend not to value education for its own sake. Once again, while it is debatable whether education provides one with the skills needed for higher paying jobs, there can be no question that the credentials acquired from educational institutions are needed to obtain those jobs. Those who hold low educational and occupational expectations, and behave accordingly, therefore, are unlikely to get the better paying jobs.

(2) Expectations for early marriage and childbearing, as well as for large families, would burden people at a time in their lives when they should be making their greatest effort to train for jobs and gain promotions within the occupational hierarchy. Such early financial demands would virtually ensure that people would be forced to take whatever jobs are available, regardless of the low-paying nature of such jobs or of the extremely limited opportunities they may provide for promotion.

While any of us might fall into the poverty trap for this reason, it has been documented that persons in the lower-class tend to marry earlier and bear more children (see Nye and Berardo). The added structural problem of a lack of transgenerational financial support in lower-class families gives such persons with early financial burdens an even higher probability of falling into the poverty trap. Our stereotype of the poor as profligate in their marital commitments and procreation indicates the popular importance imputed to this social psychological characteristic. AFDC mothers in particular are believed to be immature in marital affairs and irresponsible in child-bearing. Hence, there was an early emphasis in the ADC program on "midnight raids" to detect boyfriends, on birth control counseling, and on such disincentives for further procreation as exclusion of support for illegitimate children (see Bell) and limits on the number of children to be supported per family (obviously no concern was shown for material aid to such dependent, albeit illegitimate, children).

(3) Low expectations for the quality of one's life would make one a more passive captive of a poverty trap. One need not have low aspirations, nor be satisfied with one's life in order to have little expectation that one's life will realistically improve. Mizruchi, for example, noted that while the lower class wanted to get ahead in life as much as other classes, they tended to believe that they, personally, were not going to get ahead (see also Goodwin). Such passivity and frustrated acceptance of one's lot in life are the sort of social psychological characteristics that Sennett and Cobb regard as the "hidden injuries of class."

Handler and Hollingsworth were particularly struck by the low expectations for welfare support shown by their Wisconsin sample of AFDC mothers. Though the grants they received were miserly and the actual social services provided almost non-existent, the majority expressed sa-

tisfaction with their AFDC assistance (they would have desired greater financial assistance, but the important point is that most said that they received more money than they had expected).

This passive acceptance of low standards of living ensures that AFDC mothers and others in the poverty trap remain there and is a much debated issue in welfare programming under the rubric of "dependency" (see Weil). By not demanding more and by not taking advantage of other forms of assistance that are available (Guida West), those in poverty stand little chance of escaping from poverty. Our stereotype of care-free, non-self-respecting welfare recipients, who would allow themselves to "live like animals" (James West) highlights our concern for this social psychological characteristic. Hence, the poor are chastised for not attempting to improve their own lives and are given pep talks and "offers they cannot refuse" (i.e., financial assistance tied to work requirements) to induce them to take the initiative in job training and job hunting.

B. Psychological and Social Skills. Persons who have deficiencies in certain psychological and social skills ⁶ might be more likely than others to be ensnared by poverty traps (see, for example, Allen).

Marx, as we know, regarded society as divisible into two factions: those who controlled the means of production and those who were controlled, and thereby alienated, by the means of production. Sennett and Cobb's sensitive analysis of our society suggested that individuals are indeed aligned along classes in accordance with their "badges of ability" --their publically acclaimed skills and knowledge--in a word, their competence. Such social and psychological competencies that an individual may possess and that are needed in our society for skirting poverty traps are what we wish to identify here.

(1) Those who possess inadequate cognitive skills for a society with a highly developed technology would soon find themselves partly drifting and partly shoved into the lowest paying sector of society. The cognitive skills subsumed under the rubric of "intelligence" are much attended to in our society via such measuring instruments as I.Q. tests, college placement tests, and occupational entry tests (e.g., the Civil Service Exam). While the exact nature of these skills is subject to debate, and are probably culturally influenced (in addition to whatever role genetic determination may play), they nonetheless occupy an important role in stratifying society.

At the extremes of retardation and other mental disorders we see persons who are incarcerated as permanent captives ("wards") of society. Those who were freed or "released" in the anti-institutionalization movement of community mental health generally ended up in ghettos near hospitals, health centers, and adult-care organizations, or simply became social control problems for police.

Less extreme are those cognitive deficiencies that bar a larger portion of the population from technical and professional training--the mobility escalators of our society--and result in their early departure from our schools. With the inflation of credentials needed for occupa-

tional entry (Berg), the marketability of these people has steadily eroded. In general, they end up in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, the pay from which ensures the deprecating quality of their lives.

Though our stereotype of the poor does not always emphasize mental disorder and ignorance, our programmatic concern for remedial education testifies to our awareness of the importance that such deficiencies may have in preventing a person from becoming self-supportive in our society. Thus, the current movement to equalize educational settings is undertaken, in part, to provide environments more conducive to the improvement of cognitive skills among children of the poor.

(2) Often confounded in most measures of cognitive skills are language skills. While those who lack the capacity for vocalization or hearing are obviously disadvantaged in social interactions, the much greater number of persons in our society who read and write with difficulty or who speak non-standard American English are almost as severely disadvantaged in our competitive labor market and, no doubt, therefore are prone to falling into poverty traps. The language of the immigrant or of the person born in a subculture of our society puts him or her at a distinct disadvantage in our schools and in competition over jobs and promotions. The common stereotype would suggest that immigrants and American minorities who tend to use non-standard American English are overrepresented among those in poverty, and this is in fact true.

In a society that depends upon rapid communications, the structural trap is set for the demotion to marginal status of all those whose language skills are 'deficient' by WASP middle-class standards. To the best of our knowledge, no explicit attention has been given to the remediation of language skills by AFDC, though grants for education and the Head Start program are at least in part aimed at assisting the disadvantaged in improving their language skills.

(3) Closely connected with language skills are interpersonal skills. In particular, the flexibility with which one is able to construct or assume new social roles would have to be an important asset in social settings growing ever more (functionally) "differentiated" (Durrkheim) or ever more "other-directed" (Riesman et al.). In a society of rapidly changing technology and increasing human aggregation and interaction, those who possess limited ability to adapt to new situations or multitudinous social contacts would soon find themselves falling behind others in the race for economic resources and likely ending up in a poverty trap.

Bernstein (a, b,) has noted, for example, that lower-class language exhibits a lack of flexibility in contrast to that of the middle-class. He argues that lower-class children are, therefore, at a distinct disadvantage in a society that rewards those who are capable of learning to assume new situationally-defined roles rapidly. Likewise, Kohn has noted that the lower-class tends to emphasize manners and behavioral compliance to immediate rules, while the middle-class tends to emphasize an inner development of independent decision-making that can be used in a variety of settings. Sennett and Cobb poignantly highlight the belief in such an "inner life" that non-lower class people are assumed to have

and that allows them to be freer in their actions and in their upward mobility.

It is easy to characterize the poor as "animals" (James West), to dehumanize them and ignore them, so long as they do not seem quite like us in possessing an "inner life", as is evidenced par excellence by middle-class standards for role-flexibility in interpersonal relations. Our stereotype of the poor highlights our belief in their social incompetence vis-à-vis middle-class standards, and this may in fact be true. As far as we can see, the only concern shown through AFDC for such a potential social psychological deficiency lies in the counseling of the mothers in methods to cope with the exigencies of child and home care and with the labor market. Other projects such as Head Start also assume, in part, that the interpersonal skills of the poor will be deficient unless "compensatory" education is provided.

(4) Health care skills affect the quality of our lives in rather obvious ways. Malnourishment and organic disorder brought on by sub-standard hygienic practices would place any of us at a disadvantage in education, job training and the competitive labor market and, consequently, make us likely prey for poverty traps. The population density, squalor, and crime rates among urban poor present them with ample structural conditions that are detrimental to their health. Home deficiencies in such items of material sustenance as food, heating, personal health care items, and so on, at levels one would find in the middle class, likewise add to the hygienic depravity of the poor. If such persons also possess inadequate health care skills, their chances of escaping the poverty trap are reduced. While AFDC only provides counseling for hygienic practices, Medicaid is available, and is much used and needed by AFDC recipients.

C. Immediate Social Contingencies. Even if none of the cultural expectations, or deficiencies in any of the psychological and social skills described above apply, several immediate life contingencies could force a person or family into a poverty trap.

(1) Health problems due to congenital defects, accidents, epidemics, hereditary disorders, or an assortment of other unexpected factors (independent of health care skills) could occur to anyone and make them easy prey for our socially structured poverty traps. It is for this reason that health insurance is such a popular consumer item among persons who can afford it. For those who cannot, Medicare has been designed to assist the elderly with health care problems, while Medicaid was set up to provide for the medical needs of a broad range of the poor, including AFDC mothers and their dependents. Also a special categorical aid program has been established for the permanently and totally disabled. In general, the modest support provided by these aid programs does little to alleviate the deprecating conditions of such unfortunate people. For the most part, such people fall into the economically structured trap in our society that determines the worth of a person and the quality of a person's life by whether the person is healthy enough to be able to sell himself or herself as a laborer.

(2) Closely connected to the problems of health are those of pregnancy. All women who become pregnant soon realize the burdens that such a state places on their employment and career advancement. Indeed, until the recent passage of suitable antidiscrimination laws, women could expect to be fired from their jobs as soon as their pregnancy was discovered. The resultant financial hardship this wrought made it likely that they could become ensnared in a poverty trap. This possibility was especially likely for women with unwed pregnancies. The importance of these contingencies on one's chances to fall into (or be pushed into) poverty and to remain there are highlighted by the aforementioned strong concern of AFDC for birth control and the reluctance to support illegitimate children.

(3) Another contingency likely to lead one into a poverty trap is the loss of a financial supporter, due to illness, injury, death, or desertion. The primary purpose of AFDC is to meet the needs of children faced with such a contingency. A war or economic depression could force many of us into such a poverty trap. It is the dependency relationship built into the present American family structure that makes this contingency possible. Therefore, a liberalizing of dependency relations would be necessary to avoid it.

(4) Natural disasters may force large numbers of families into a poverty trap for short or long periods of time. The fact that those in society who can afford to do so generally insure their property against such a contingency, indicates the concern we feel for the important role of disasters in putting people in poverty traps.

(5) Finally, growing old in our society is a contingency that causes many people to lose their jobs and face poverty traps. Recent figures, for example, show that about 20% of all welfare recipients are 65 or older. Of course, this figure no doubt underrepresents the numbers of elderly in poverty, since many who need assistance do not request it for a variety of reasons, including pride and being uninformed of its availability. The implementation of programs such as Social Security and Medicare indicate our recognition of the role of aging as a contingency that ensnares in a poverty trap ordinary people such as ourselves.

To summarize, a wide array of cultural expectations, psychological and social skills, and immediate social contingencies may account for why some individuals find themselves in poverty traps while others do not. Most efforts made on behalf of welfare recipients are directed toward these individual-centered, social psychological features. While these efforts are somewhat misguided in their focus on assisting the victims of poverty traps, rather than disarming the traps themselves, in lieu of changes in the types of broad scale social structural features we noted in the previous section such assistance to the victims should certainly continue.

4. Summary

We have presented three sociological accounts for why the legislative creation of social welfare programs tends to result in ironically inconsistent and inadequate consequences. One line of reasoning suggests that an undue moral concern that the poor conform to the work ethic overrides a more direct concern over alleviating their deprecating living conditions. Another line of reasoning suggests that the continuance of poverty is functionally useful to a large array of vested interest groups who could not wholeheartedly seek its eradication. Finally our own 'social structural- social psychological' model suggests that the roots of American poverty reside in the very structural features of the institutions of our society. Being a conservative political process, legislative activities are too interdependent with the very institutions that provide the structural elements of poverty traps to be able to devise welfare programs that effectively challenge the roots of poverty.

These three accounts are obviously not incompatible, though we have not attempted a systematic interweaving of them here and would like to see future work dedicated to this end. There are several reasons why we developed the 'social structural-social psychological' model and for why we prefer it to the other two, however.

First, neither the value conflict explanation based on the work ethic nor Gans' functional explanation attempts, as our model does, to comprehensively identify both structural and social psychological variables.

Second, Gans' functional model yields itself too easily to an interpretation of the continuance of poverty as being the result of conscious, willful acts on the part of vested interest groups. With Gans himself, however, we believe that conscious willfulness in the continuance of poverty is not pervasive. By deemphasizing functions in favor of a more straightforward classification of social structural features, our own model has the advantage of not easily lending itself to this sort of misinterpretation.

Finally, the value conflict explanation provides an account for why legislated welfare programs are ineffective, but does not provide an explanation for why the poor are poor. Our model provides an account for both phenomena. Also in comparing the value conflict account to our own model, we should note that we did not include failure to hold the work ethic in our classification of key cultural expectations leading to poverty. We excluded it because, as those in the tradition of the value conflict account readily document, failure to subscribe to the work ethic is exceedingly rare and consequently could not be a very common social psychological factor leading to poverty. We did include, however, the more prevalent social psychological factor of low expectations for education and employment.

What we may have lost in detail in assembling these accounts, we tried to compensate for in the comprehensiveness of the theoretical model we developed. We hope, in particular, that in sketching the social structural-social psychological model of the roots of poverty we will have strengthened the present theoretical foundation for the study of poverty by sociologists, social workers and social psychologists. We look forward to further refinements of this model.

FOOTNOTES

1. The discussion that follows draws from Bell and La France.
2. The other two programs established with the original Social Security Act included Old Age Assistance and Aid to the Blind. Other programs have since been added.
3. At the time that we are writing this article, the impact that the Reagan administration will have on AFDC has yet to be seen. At present, no block grants have been formally proposed to replace AFDC, though eligibility requirements are to be tightened.
4. For example, in their 1967 survey of Wisconsin's AFDC programs, which are considered somewhat liberal compared to those of many states, Handler and Hollingsworth noted that the liquid assets of applicant families could not exceed \$500 (p. 75) in order for them to receive an AFDC grant, while the average grant size estimated per annum for a family of four was only \$2,207 (p.93)
5. cf., Holman's recent 'structural-adaptive' model.
6. Evidence for the prevalence of such 'psychological' characteristics of the poor as present time orientation, impulsiveness, and immaturity are extremely mixed (Holman, p. 80-100). Furthermore, these characteristics are more likely to be an outcome of the conditions of poverty rather than prerequisites for falling into the structural traps we identified. Consequently, we have not included them among our key social psychological variables.

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