

The Impact of Work Ethic On Income

by
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When discussing stratification and income inequality, it is easy to meet with several divergent viewpoints. Sociologists don't always agree on the effects of stratification or income inequality; nor do they always agree on their causes. Barry Bluestone, the Frank L. Boyden Professor of Political Economy at the University of Massachusetts, writes about what he believes are the ten primary causes of income inequality in his article *The Inequality Express* (Finsterbusch 172). I find his explanation of Americans' income diversity lacking, and I believe that there is another area of explanation that should be explored.

While I agree that many of Professor Bluestone's top ten are certainly significant factors, I think he is avoiding the (perhaps) more inherent issue of people's attitude towards the work that gives them their income in the first place. At the heart of a capitalist system, there is the fundamental belief that each participant has the ability to earn an income commensurate with his performance, as opposed to a communist system in which all jobs and workers are treated (read exploited) equally. Therefore, if income inequality is truly becoming more and more prevalent, I feel that we are making a mistake if we ignore the issue of work ethic when deciding on the culprits. I believe that an individual's attitude towards hard work and its effect on success has a certain significant bearing on the amount of money an individual will make. The theory behind this is that in a capitalist system, despite other obstacles, the more internally motivated you are to succeed, the more likely you are to do so. This theory was my motivation for researching these variables in the General Social Surveys conducted by the International Consortium for Political and Social Research. My intention here is not to discount Bluestone's list of contributing factors, but to point out that work ethic is another equally significant factor that should be examined.

In 1993, the General Social Survey included a question that asked the respondent to rate the following statement as "Very important," "Important," "Somewhat important," or "Not at all

important” in terms of how a person’s life will turn out: “Some people use their will power and work harder than others.” When the responses to this statement are cross tabulated with the annual income data from the same survey year, it is possible to determine whether or not there is any correlation between the respondents’ belief in the impact of hard work on success and their individual income.

Table 1 here

Though the available income brackets only give specific ranges up to \$25,000 annually, a pattern can still be seen in the percentage of people who rated the statement each way in the “\$25,000 - above” bracket. Of the people who responded that hard work had no effect on success in life, 40% of them made \$25,000 or more per year, and that percentage continuously rises, peaking at 57.1% with the number of people who responded that hard work is very important. While more specific income ranges in the General Social Survey would allow us to look for other patterns or trends, it would not effect the fact that, overall, more of the people who believe in the importance of hard work make more than \$25,000 per year than people who do not believe. The following graph created from the table above illustrates this as well.

Graph 1 here

Notice the increasing size of the orange blocks representing the \$25,000 – above income bracket.

So, there is in fact a measurable correlation between income and work ethic. Bluestone and other social scientists often seem to focus their criticism on the system and on the power elite

in spite of this. Though these other factors in income inequality are important and deserve to be scrutinized, the issue of work ethic must be seriously examined as well. Had the General Social Survey included this question in more years than 1993 alone, perhaps we would discover a negative trend over time.

In *The Inequality Express*, Bluestone says that income inequality “is embedded in the very nature of laissez-faire market dynamics” (Finsterbusch 176). The trouble with this attitude is that ignoring other significant factors, such as the one I’ve discussed here, is equally laissez-faire. Moreover, it’s being laissez-faire toward a social disease that that may be threatening the fabric of society. By ignoring this to criticize the easy foe of the men at the top, we only give it more time to ingrain itself in our culture. The point is not that this social disease is the lone culprit, but that it is indeed one of them, and it must be examined with the same fervor, and perhaps more because of the *other* harmful effects a lack of work ethic can have on society.

The theory that work ethic increases the likelihood of success is evidenced by this study of income and the belief in the importance of hard work. Though there are many other factors, which sociologists like Bluestone point out (Finsterbusch 172-175), that affect income in this country, a measure of a person’s attitude towards hard work can still be a significant tool for predicting the financial success of a given person—especially if it were to be considered in concert with other factors.

References

- Finsterbusch, Kurt, ed. Sources: Notable Selections in Sociology. Guilford: 1999.
- International Consortium for Political and Social Research. *General Social Survey*. 1993. <http://icpsr.umich.edu/gss> (5 Nov. 2002).

Table 1

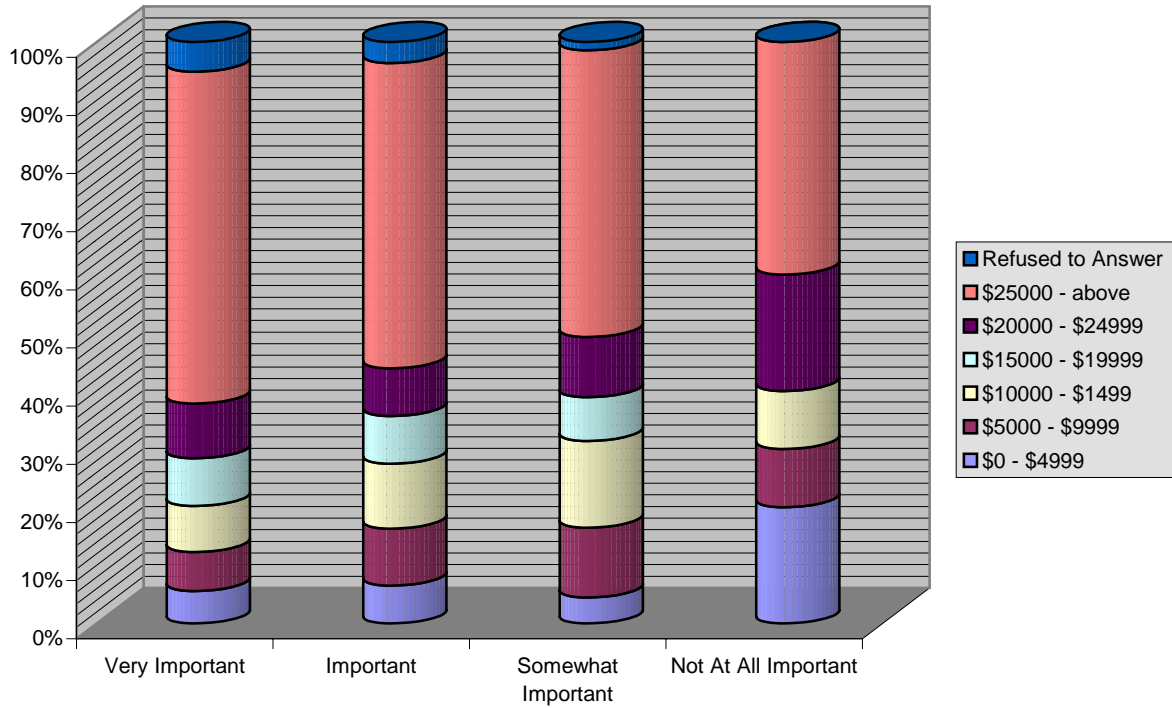
Annual Income & The Belief in the Importance of Hard Work

	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not At All Important
\$0 - \$4999	5.60%	6.50%	4.50%	20.00%
\$5000 - \$9999	6.70%	9.80%	12.00%	10.00%
\$10000 - \$1499	7.90%	11.20%	14.90%	10.00%
\$15000 - \$19999	8.20%	8.20%	7.50%	0.00%
\$20000 - \$24999	9.40%	8.20%	10.40%	20.00%
\$25000 - above	57.10%	52.50%	49.30%	40.00%
Refused to Answer	5.10%	3.60%	1.40%	0.00%

Source: International Consortium for Political and Social Research. *General Social Survey*. 1993.
<http://icpsr.umich.edu/gss> (5 Nov. 2002).

Graph 1

Annual Income As Affected By The Belief In The Impact Of Hard Work On Success



Source: International Consortium for Political and Social Research. *General Social Survey*. 1993.
<http://icpsr.umich.edu/gss> (5 Nov. 2002).