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WHITE YOUTH FROM LOW-INCOME RURAL FAMILIES--ACHIEVEMENT
MILIEU AND AGRIBUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES.

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THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN POTENTIAL AND ACTUAL DEVELOPMENT
OF RURAL YOUTH IS RELATED TO THEIR SOCIAL BACKGROUND.
EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN AGRIBUSINESS ARE AVAILABLE FOR
RURAL YOUTH, BUT THOSE FROM LOW-INCOME AREAS DO NOT
PARTICIPATE. SPECIFIC PROGRAMS AIMED AT SHIFTING VALUE
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ABSTRACT

The gap between the actual and potential development of low-income rural white youth is related to their complex social background. The theoretical position held in this paper is that the essence of youths' background can best be understood as a subculture. When viewed in this perspective, action programs must be geared to changing the subcultural values of the low-income rural white youth, plus providing them with social mechanisms to facilitate higher educational aspirations and higher occupational aspirations.

The social backgrounds of these youth are characterized by low-income parents, traditionalistic farming experiences, low material levels of living, low educational and occupational achievements on the part of adults around them, and so on. Homogeneity of their communities is so great that the experiences of most members of their peer groups is similar to their own. Accordingly, the youths' educational and occupational aspirations are lower than those of other nonfarm youth.

An occupational concept of agribusiness is explained. While opportunities in farming are diminishing, opportunities in farm supplying and processing-distributing are many. Evidence shows that farm youth most often desire to enter farm-related work. Some evidence suggests that a farm background facilitates adjustment in agribusiness. Consequently, the task of changing subcultural values to an appreciation for opportunities in agribusiness is recommended for action programs designed to up-grade the employment opportunities of white youth from low-income areas.

INTRODUCTION

The contrast between the actual development and the potential of youth is a complex phenomenon intricately related to many factors of their growth in a social matrix of family, peer group, and other community processes. According to their socio-economic background, some youth are judged favorably and most likely to succeed, while others are less favorably looked upon and are considered less apt to succeed in contemporary social and economic life. It is the purpose of this paper to deal with low-income rural white youth concerning first their particular subcultural situation, and, second, specific programs to improve their social position.

A THEORETICAL POSITION 1/

Social order in a large, urbanized society is contingent upon widespread acceptance of many basic values or cultural universals. Ubiquitous acceptance of basic values is not completely required, however, and in fact is rarely achieved. Consequently, while most youth and adults conform to dominant national goals and to normative means for achieving them, there remain groups and categories of people who may not perceive the goals at all, or, if they do perceive the goals, either reject them or else do not have the means to achieve them. Rejectors of the goals often constitute subcultures within the larger society. Low-income rural people typically constitute such a subcultural group.

When viewed from the vantage point of the dominant societal cultural system, subcultural groups with their "different" traditions and institutions often appear maladjusted. Members of subcultural groups, however, may be perfectly adjusted within the framework of their own institutional life. To the extent, therefore, that members of dominant and subcultural systems interact with each other, they often experience the frustration of blocked communications, conflicts of values, interests, and understanding. The ideological conflict often reaches deeply into the organization and thoughts of dominant and subcultural systems. This is illustrated by the existence of educational structures in urbanized society where compulsory school attendance extricates, as it were, farm youth from the farms for school attendance. The very notions of "low-income white rural youth," "underdeveloped countries," and "preliterate" are intellectual images projected by the acceptors of the dominant sociocultural system. Expressions like "materialists," or "city slickers" are images of urbanized culture articulated by more ideationally oriented, often low-income rural individuals.

The arrangement of occupations in a hierarchy ranked according to such criteria as prestige or income (and in which the occupations are generally seen apart from individuals who fill particular work positions) is one of the major characteristics of urbanized society. Numerous studies of occupational prestige show that white collar occupations rank above blue collar occupations, professional occupations are more prestigious than nonprofessional occupations, and skilled work is ranked higher than unskilled work. An individual's perception of this social structure can be illustrated by inquiry concerning his occupational aspirations for future years or by investigation of the occupational aspirations of his children.

The validity of this occupational hierarchy is binding whether subcultural people perceive it or not. That is, the understanding that certain types of work are highly desirable is an important factor in the decision of an individual to go into a particular occupation when he enters the labor force. The significance of such an occupational hierarchy in regard to low-income rural people pertains to the extent to which their occupational aspiration level encompasses work types at the skilled level or higher. If the perception of occupational opportunity for a subcultural group lies in the range of occupations in which the number of positions is diminishing, or for which automation is a serious threat to future employment, then such a group represents a focal point of concern for the present and future organization of the labor force.

Public elementary schools, secondary schools, and special adult vocational training constitute other examples of specific structures in urbanized society which serve dominant as well as subcultural groups. One of the important characteristics of the broad educational curriculum is its vocational nature. In some cases, occupational training is for both agricultural and nonagricultural careers. In both cases, training is dominated by a scientific ideology, and even students who study vocational agriculture are socialized to be scientific rather than traditionalistic farmers. The school, therefore, is a social mechanism for preparing young people to accept occupational opportunities which correspond to dominant social values.

This paper purports to examine the relationship between the social background of low-income rural white youth and the development and nature of their educational and occupational aspirations and achievements. Finally, the authors wish to indicate the part which agribusiness can play in the future social adjustment and occupational experiences of low-income rural youth.

BACKGROUND, ASPIRATIONS, AND ACHIEVEMENTS

SOCIAL BACKGROUND

The impact and resulting changes of the technological and social revolution in agriculture has not been proportionately experienced throughout all rural areas. People in the low-income agricultural sector have not been able to respond to the same pressures of urbanization because they lack both the material and social resources required to capitalize on agricultural innovations. These social and material deficiencies are transmitted to the youth of low-income farmers. The resulting problem for society involves the adjustment of youth as they migrate from the farm and are required to live in a new context of cultural and institutional patterns in urbanized society.

The material and social costs required to live in the on-going dominant society typically cannot be afforded by low-income farmers. First of all, they are disadvantaged economically in terms of the larger society. Not only does their household command a low annual family income, but their purchasing power is further limited due to a higher dependency ratio in rural than in urban areas. ^{2/} At midcentury the dependency ratio for rural and urban areas was 75.1 and 54.7, respectively. This means that the working age group on farms shares disproportionately in the costs of providing commodities for more people

in one household. 3/ According to their low incomes, this category of farmers has not shared equally in advances in agricultural techniques. Present day farm policies are also insufficient for meeting the problems of low-income farmers; regardless of how high price support or stabilization programs are, low-income farmers have so little to sell that few can hope to achieve even a modest level of living from their agricultural enterprise. 4/

The living facilities of farmers in economic classes V and VI are generally inferior to those of farmers in economic classes I through IV. This situation is particularly true of farm houses on class VI farms, where two-thirds of family money income was less than \$1,000 in the 1950's. 5/ In the South nearly one-third of such dwellings have been classified as dilapidated. Telephone service occurred infrequently. Less than 15 percent of dwellings on economic class VI farms had piped running water, or used gas or electricity for the purposes of cooking. Lighting by electricity occurred in only 60 percent of the dwellings.

Low-income farmers have less formal education than the rest of the rural population, or the nation as a whole. Low-income farmers are scaled below community averages in prestige ratings. This fact is significant in connection with the social distance that occurs between differentially prestiged groups. Finally, with the exception of church membership, low-income farmers are less likely to participate in community activities and organizations.

The characteristics outlined above reflect the general family and living conditions faced by low-income rural youth. Such conditions set social and economic limits upon the educational and occupational opportunities as well as the range of values and goals which individuals may internalize during their life. Moreover, in such an environment the range of occupational types is especially limited. There will be few, if any, white collar workers represented and, consequently, youth in these areas may not develop any attitude, desire, or motivation for striving to achieve occupational success in white collar jobs. The lack of alternative occupational opportunities from which to choose is reinforced by a second factor, namely, that of educational opportunities in the low-income areas.

Where education is less valued as an intrinsic good in and of itself, the school system is limited in its role of communicating occupational and social adjustment alternatives to youth. Moreover, in low-income areas youths' peer group experiences exist in terms of social class homogeneity, a factor which minimizes youths' introduction to different values and traditions. Therefore, youths' behavior exhibits greater conformity to the cultural values of their own subcultural reference groups. This conformity is reflected in the educational and occupational aspirations of low-income rural youth.

EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Differences between the educational attainment and the educational aspirations of rural youth are significant. For example, 30 percent of rural youth in a recent study did not aspire to education beyond high school. On the other hand, only 18 percent of small town youth and 12 percent of urban youth did not aspire to education beyond high school. Less than half of the farm youth, 47 percent,

aspired to college, while more than two-thirds of small town youth and over 80 percent of urban youth aspired to attend college. When only farm youth were considered, of those who planned to farm, 61 percent did not aspire to education beyond high school. On the other hand, of farm youth who did not plan to farm, only 19 percent did not aspire to education beyond the high school level. 6/

Other studies have indicated that the socio-economic status of the family has considerable influence upon the desires of students to seek more education. Values of formal education held by the parents of youth are important factors in the motivation of youth to aspire to higher levels of formal education. Where these values are lacking, as in low-income farm families, the youth involved do not perceive education as a dominant value in American culture and, consequently, are not motivated to attain it.

Not only are lower income rural youth reported to have lower educational aspirations but their attainment is also lower than youth from more advantaged farm families. Several characteristics of the families of dropouts bear upon this problem. The fathers of dropouts are more likely to be farm laborers than owners or operators. The parents of dropouts themselves have low educational achievement records. These factors are significant in that educational values are transmitted to youth in much the same proportions as the educational achievement of the parents. Parents of dropouts in contrast to parents of non-dropouts participate less in the activities of the schools attended by their children. 7/

In general, therefore, it may be said that the educational aspiration and attainment experience of low-income youth conforms to their subcultural heritage. This behavior is part of the national problem of communicating the value of formal education. Most action programs experience greatest difficulty at this point, primarily for the reason that much time is needed for important values to be internalized by the individual. But until rural youth perceive and accept the value for higher education in general, they will not be motivated to pursue it as an important life goal.

OCCUPATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The argument taken in this paper is that low-income backgrounds influence the personal and social development of the youth by providing a limited social and cultural environment. In this limited environment youth are not able to choose from among a wide range of occupations. The alternatives available to them, moreover, are limited according to the educational and other requisite qualifications necessary for entry into skilled or higher jobs. Unless an individual is able to come into social contact with an occupation, he does not easily learn to internalize the roles of the occupation. He will learn more easily the roles of occupations performed by persons in his own cultural subgroup.

In general, rural low-income youth have lower occupational aspirations than urban youth. A recent study indicated that 43 percent of farm youth aspired to occupations of low prestige while only 19 percent aspired to occupational levels of high prestige. In contrast, slightly over one-fourth of urban youth aspired to occupations of low prestige and 46 percent aspired to occupations of high prestige. 8/ The sons of low-income farmers, who resided on the

poorest lands, whose farm houses were noted as poor, and whose socio-economic scores were low, were most often limited in occupational opportunities to farming, unskilled, and semiskilled positions in the labor force. The converse was also true. Children of farm operators and owners more often entered work in professional, managerial, or clerical occupations. 9/ In light of the changing distribution of workers in the labor force reflected in the increasing numbers in professions and other white collar jobs, and the decreasing number of jobs below the level of skilled workers because of automation, youth from low-income backgrounds with their social and educational inadequacies must seriously face the problem of a growing lack of opportunities in the labor force.

The aspiration level of low-income youth in general coincides with their occupational achievement. A considerable body of data has been accumulated which indicates that farm reared youth are less successful in the urban labor market than urban reared youth. 10/ Lower prestige occupations and occupations requiring manual labor are much more frequently entered by farm and rural reared youth. The occupational experience of low-income youth who migrate to urban centers is in line with their occupational aspirations. Empirical evidence as late as the early 1950's showed that farm-reared employed males, compared with nonfarm reared males, were disproportionately working in skilled, semiskilled, and unskilled jobs. In contrast, nonfarm reared males are disproportionately employed in professional and semi-professional work. In spite of this differential employment pattern, it was reported that "...nothing in the data supports an implication of any inherent lack of the farm reared to fill higher status positions." 11/

Recent research has indicated that occupational decision making is a choice process which extends over many years of the individual's life. The choice process is embedded in the social values and personality derivatives of socialization. This particular insight is important because it removes the possibility of suggesting that if low-income rural youth are placed in an urban environment, they would be able to succeed or at least choose occupations which correspond with their expressed interests. Occupational choices are the product of many years of socialization and learning, reflecting one's values and those of one's reference groups.

At present about 10 percent of farm boys who entered the labor force may expect to enter farming successfully. A further 17 percent decline of farmers and farm workers is expected during the present decade. 12/ Not only can fewer farm boys enter farming, but in the second place, the changing composition of the labor force indicates that the kinds of nonfarm occupations which low-income farm youth most likely will enter are decreasing or are increasing only slightly, much less than other occupational categories. In addition, low-income rural youth will have to compete for these positions with town and city youth. Systematic recruitment into the work world is far from an accomplished fact for either rural or urban youth.

The prospects for the adjustment of low-income rural youth may be looked at from two points. One is the need for vocational training and education necessary to provide rural low-income youth with the prerequisite skills and information whereby they will be enabled to enter the labor market at positions

bove the unskilled level. The second and more positive position is that of counseling low-income rural youth to become aware of a wider range of occupations and to plan for occupations that are consistent with their background and orientation. For instance it is estimated that rural youth consider only 10 to 12 occupational alternatives while urban youth consider only approximately 16 occupations. 13/

One of the most rational and efficient ways to accomplish these ends and to utilize effectively the manpower resources of rural youth is to recruit them into agribusiness. Surveys have shown that in some areas over 30 percent of the rural boys planned to work in fields closely related to agriculture. More of the rural youth desired farm related than non farm related employment. Agribusiness jobs are one answer to such occupational aspirations.

ADJUSTMENT AND OPPORTUNITIES IN AGRIBUSINESS

The notion of adjustment is recent, dating from approximately 1910. 14/ As it relates to this category of youth, adjustment is largely a matter of helping persons who are reared and trained in a rural subcultural environment find adequate, gratifying, and productive lives in urban settings. The proposition expressed here is that youth socialized in rural areas can adjust more quickly to city-located jobs which are farm rather than nonfarm oriented; i.e., those in agribusiness. Opportunities in agribusiness are manifold, and currently they are filled disproportionately by city youth. City youth are acceptable, indeed encouraged to enter agribusiness. Nevertheless, the interest of rural youth will be served by facilitating and encouraging their employment in agribusiness. 15/

OCCUPATIONAL CONCEPT OF AGRIBUSINESS

Agribusiness workers are subsumed into three major categories -- food and fiber producers, suppliers, and processor-distributors. 16/ Most of the producers are farmers and farm laborers. The greatest increases in employment opportunities are in the supplier and processor-distributor areas.

Agribusiness occupations are a heterogeneous lot, ranging, for example, from cattle ranchers to the doctor of science doing research in cotton chemistry. 17/ In spite of this heterogeneity a common idiom of work expression binds them in an integrated occupational structure.

Certain characteristics of agribusiness work bind together diverse categories of workers. For example, many vocabulary words will be used in common by agribusiness workers such as rice farmers, county agents, experiment station researchers, secretaries in agricultural extension offices, farm machinery salesmen, and food processors and distributors. The researcher must be able to communicate sufficiently in the farmer's language that his findings may be utilized, and similarly the farmer must be sufficiently oriented to the researcher's enterprise to use the research findings to further his systematic business operations.

Quantity and quality of social interaction are other indexes of the integration among agribusiness workers. Agricultural engineers must have sufficient interaction and sufficient conversancy with the daily operations in the farming enterprise to design equipment that will be immediately apropos and acceptable.

Assembly lineworkers, by contrast, might be physically involved in constructing the machinery designed by the engineers but need little or no social interaction with the persons who utilize the equipment they construct. The engineers, therefore, who design agricultural equipment are more integrated into agribusiness than the assembly-line workers.

The technology of agribusiness occupations does not require farming as part of the socialization experience. However, the social and psychological factors related to the meaning of work already are familiar to most persons reared in a rural environment. The normative and symbol system of agriculture must be conscientiously learned by the agribusiness employees who have had rural socialization experiences. In short, such an employee must gain both a technological competence in his field and an appreciation of rural ways of life to function in his agribusiness work milieu. Farm and small town rural youth who compete for agribusiness occupations need only to gain the technological competence.

ROLE ORIENTATION AND OCCUPATIONAL ADJUSTMENT POTENTIALS

Occupational role stresses are widely known. They have been identified in the marginality of druggists, between the business and the professional worlds, the dual reference groups of labor or union leaders, the declining roles of the vocational agricultural teacher, etc. 18/ Occupational role stress also occurs among agribusiness workers who have nonfarm backgrounds, as for example, the scientists employed by the United States Department of Agriculture who find it hard to identify with the Department. They manifest stronger career commitments with their discipline or profession than with agribusiness. The following quotations by professional chemists employed in a USDA Regional Research Laboratory illustrate the situation.

I don't identify with the farmers. We are a long way from the farmers. We are workers with the commodities (i.e., of agriculture), but it's a long way off.

No direct commitment to agriculture. I am exposed to agricultural ideas, so I realize their importance, but my identification is primarily to chemistry as a scientific discipline. I am a chemist working for the Southern Regional Research Laboratory. 19/

Furthermore, USDA scientists who find applied research of little challenge are those who least often identify with farming or agribusiness. For this category of individuals, contacts with farmers, suppliers, and processors is a necessary evil. The writing of popular reports and delivering of popular lectures are viewed as intrusions on the worker's professional and scientific time.

These types of role stresses theoretically can be minimized by training and recruiting youth from farm and small town backgrounds into agribusiness. Their socialization will have equipped them with a favorable orientation to work designed to promote the food and fiber industry.

AGRIBUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

There are many opportunities in agribusiness. Millions of skilled and semiskilled employees work in businesses which supply farmers or process and distribute food and fiber goods. The need for agricultural scientists is particularly great. College and graduate study are typically required to qualify as a scientist, but this is consistent with the higher educational and occupational aspirations of many rural youth who want to leave rural areas. Youth from low-income rural areas, however, must be made more conversant with the dominant success drives of the middle classes. They must be oriented to the dominant societal goals, and the means for achieving these goals.

Agribusiness opportunities range from scientist to salesman, depending on the individual's qualifications, and high qualifications are to be encouraged. It is asserted that a farm background gives the agribusiness employee an advantage: "A farm background gives you a head start toward most jobs in the feed industry,"^{20/} and "A farm background, plus study in college, means a running start toward plenty of good agricultural positions."^{21/}

Science plays a key role in agribusiness today, yet agriculture science positions go unfilled. In recent years the Nation's land-grant colleges have graduated about half the number of students needed to fill agribusiness positions. Recruitment brochures, film strips, slides, tapes, and other communication tools have been used to acquaint youth with these opportunities and to encourage them to accept such positions.

SOME EXAMPLES OF AGRIBUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

College-trained soil scientists are employed in both agricultural-related and nonagricultural-related positions. Soil scientists have played a major role in clay mineralogy. They work as researchers, teachers, and practitioners.^{22/}

Opportunities in forestry research have expanded vastly during the past twenty years. Subject areas for research now include fire prevention, soil and water resources, recreation, fish and wild life, and timber and range management. Accordingly, research careers have been upgraded. In past years the highest positions were awarded to research administrators. More recently this has changed. Now some of the highest paid professionals in the forest service are researchers, rather than administrators. Basic research, in addition to applied research, has precipitated the development of a research career ladder with attractive positions for individuals who prefer to remain in scientific investigation.^{23/}

Expanding career opportunities are found in many home economic and dietetics areas. These, along with home agent positions, are of primary interest to women. Foreign agricultural assignments also offer many opportunities both to youth and adults. The International Farm Youth Exchange is particularly valuable to the older young people.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

Employment and adjustment opportunities await today's rural youth in agribusiness. Youth from low-income rural areas, however, do not participate as frequently in these opportunities as those from high-income rural areas. To the extent that their social organization is subcultural, their failure to aspire to the agribusiness opportunities can be explained more by their differential goal systems than by their lack of ability. Theoretically, if these low-income white youth are to participate in the greater opportunities, then their subcultural value orientations must be changed.

Maintenance of goal, value, and behavioral systems in many subcultural groups is primarily imposed by the larger society, often in the form of discrimination or segregation, as in the case of religious and ethnic subcultural groups. In the case of the low-income rural people, static conditions are primarily imposed from within the subcultural organization. There is little overt discrimination against them. Consequently the development of social mechanisms to bring opportunities closer to them is insufficient in terms of action programs. Specific programs aimed at shifting their value orientations are needed, after which specific educational and training programs will have meaning.

FOOTNOTES

1. This theoretical position was first developed for a Southern regional study of low-income people. It was formally presented under the title "Adjustments of Low-Income Rural People in Urbanized Society," at the S-44 Technical Committee Meeting, Atlanta, Georgia, October, 1963. See also Taylor S-44 paper.
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