

Chapter Seven

"I Want What Everybody Wants": Goals, Values, and Work in the Lives of New Hope Families

Thomas S. Weisner,
Hirokazu Yoshikawa, Edward D. Lowe,
and Faye Carter

IN THE FIRST part of this book, we considered New Hope mothers' experiences of work over time and the associations between those experiences and their children's development. In the second part, we turn to the relationship between work and family. Since the 1950s, aspects of the work-family interface have been considered important mechanisms that link parental employment to children's schooling and social development (Hoffman 1961). In part 2, we examine work and family from relatively understudied perspectives—goals and values, household budgeting and what earnings buy for children, and marriage and relationships. In this chapter, we consider an important—and even controversial—characteristic that mattered to the work pathways in particular and to women's family lives more generally: parents' goals and values for their work and family life.

We show that goals in fact did influence work trajectories, holding other influences constant. Women who reported higher educational goals for themselves at twenty-four months, for example, experienced greater wage growth between the twenty-four- and sixty-month follow-ups. We also show that goals and values were quite widely shared across the sample, rather than differing dramatically for women in the different employment pathways. How these broadly shared goals are put into practice is what appears

to matter most in how goals influence women's membership in one of the five employment groups. A close examination using ethnographic evidence shows that the effective *deployment* of goals (turning them into specific plans and tactics for improving income and balancing work and family) is the characteristic that differed across the women in the various employment clusters. Wage growth and growth in work hours, for instance, are associated with a pattern of making more strategic and concrete plans linked to one's goals. For women engaged in highly unstable and sporadic patterns of work, in contrast, short-term goals are thwarted by events, even as women remain hopeful that they are on the way to achieving their long-term goals of family and job stability and higher income. The patterning of goals and plans differed among the mothers in the different employment clusters, largely in the quality of the specificity of goals linked to their plans and in some women's practice of taking intermediate, modest steps to find and keep jobs that met their goals.

Then we turn to how the mothers in the sample talked about their work goals and families. They spoke in very instrumental ways ("I want to get a GED so I can improve my income from jobs"), but also in playful and ironic ways, such as spinning fantasies, making humorous commentaries, and critiquing the system. They also talked about potential goals and values that, at least so far in their lives, had not been realized.

GOALS, VALUES, PLANS, AND INTENTIONS

Values are our generalized understandings about what is good in life. Achieving economic success and being a spiritual person are values. Goals are the directions we decide to take in order to live life according to those values. Obtaining a certain job with benefits and high wages or planning to take the family to church each week are goals associated with those values. Plans and intentions are the chains of specific actions linked to goals that are valued and meaningful for a person in a particular cultural community (Weisner 2001, 2002; Weisner et al. 2005). In this view, positive change could occur in the lives of the women and families in our sample if they held values that were consistent with their goals and that could be turned into specific plans and intentions.

The women in our study talked about their values related to work and planned tactics and strategies to try to reach their goals. For some of them, goals and planning proceeded in proactive, linear ways. For example, Leora (from the full-time-wage-growth cluster) held a position as a payroll manager for a hospital at the beginning of the ethnography. She then spent three months unemployed before taking a better position in payroll at a bank, which offered her better pay and benefits. She strategized about how she could get benefits and, more importantly, get into a place with upward

mobility and some kind of career ladder. Wendy (also in the full-time-wage-growth cluster) held a position as a machinist early in our study. She was unemployed for four months after getting married and then spent three months working part- and full-time as a telemarketer. For the final two years of the ethnographic study, she provided in-home day care, work that offered her autonomy and higher wages—and met her goals. By the end of the ethnography, Wendy was running her own day care center and trying to get her own building and increase enrollment. Maria (stable employment cluster) was a teacher in a day care center as the ethnography began. She continued to provide child care throughout the ethnographic portion of the study, and her wages increased over time. She got her GED and did other training for a job in day care, but her goals—less hassle in her job and more autonomy—were yet to be met by the end of the study. These women were active agents who made decisions about work, parenting, and family adaptation in response to the constant changes in their personal circumstances, their social and resource network, their child care needs, and their work contexts. Proactive, rational planning to attain goals in a linear fashion was one kind of goal direction we saw.

But there were other ways in which parents' values and goals had meaning for them yet were not so instrumental. Many of the women were consistently thwarted in their job goals; they would attempt to reset and redeploy those goals in order to confront their difficulties and get back on track, although many of them were reactive, reflexive, and angry in response to those difficulties. These mothers discussed their values not only in instrumental terms of achieving their goals but also in emotionally charged critiques of the world of work, fantasies about what might have been, and ironic comments on the world and their own often thwarted efforts to attain their goals. These projective and reflexive ways of discussing their goals and plans reflected their long-term experiences and their beliefs about work, family, and the fairness of the economy.

Both of these ways of talking about goals—instrumental and projective/reactive—involved agency, which women brought to their work and family situations. Whether they were more instrumental or more reactive, they incorporated their goals, plans, and values into their thought and behavior in their work and family lives. Since these working-poor parents were engaged in chains of both proactive and reactive decisions and choices, their goals and values certainly had the potential to influence their work trajectories, even in the resource-poor contexts and difficult job markets they faced.

GOALS AND STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS

Some have confused a focus on the values and goals of individuals with blaming those individuals for their circumstances (Valentine 1968). But

taking seriously the values and goals of the poor does not preclude the study of the structural and institutional constraints that they face. Dividing their goals from their circumstances is not a useful analytic approach. To the contrary, goals, values, and agency are of self-evident importance to working-poor mothers, just as they are for all social and cultural actors in every community. In fact, taking cultural goals seriously in understanding employment does not preclude the consideration of other factors but rather complements them, and such an analysis is an integral part of a holistic understanding of these women's lives. Considering values and goals as an influence on employment trajectories is also entirely consistent with recognizing that poverty is embedded in the structural conditions of low-wage work, dangerous neighborhoods, class and race discrimination, poor educational backgrounds, and so forth; this recognition is essential for a multivariate view of human behavior in context. Parents strategize and change their work lives in the context of structural circumstances, and they use their goals and values to help make decisions and understand what is happening.

There is good reason for both theory and empirical evidence to consider structure (low-resource communities and labor market conditions), goals (intentions to seek more stable work, higher wages, more education, closer families), and agency (locally rational choices to work toward goals and reflexively adapt and change) as jointly influencing employment trajectories and family circumstances. Several recent studies using data from experimental welfare policy demonstrations, for example, have found that parents' goals at baseline (for pursuing work and education) not only predict later employment but also interact with employment policies to influence earnings, income, and their own well-being (Yoshikawa et al. 2003).

Furthermore, as the ethnographic data on families in our volume amply show, there is enormous variation of all kinds (age, family and household circumstances, ethnicity, life experiences) in the low-income people we portray, as well as in their employment clusters. As Rebecca Blank writes in *It Takes a Nation* (1997, xv): "Poverty" is not synonymous with "single mothers and their children on welfare"; in fact, the majority of the poor are in other types of households and have traditionally had little access to direct cash assistance. . . . The poor are an extremely heterogeneous group of persons."

Knowledge about work and family always exists in a specific local context. The New Hope mothers, using local or bounded rationality, took into account the diversity of their complex environments and multiple and often conflicting goals. Yet with all that diversity and local or contextual rationality, many of these mothers had values and goals that are widely shared by all Americans. Tiffany, quoted in the title to this chapter, said, "I want what everyone wants—a steady job, a house, a husband, and a family."

With regard specifically to work commitment among the poor, our data, covering three years of close ethnographic work with low-income families, generally support the view of Katherine Newman (1999, 61) in her study of low-wage food service workers in Harlem, New York, that the great majority of the nation's working poor continue to "seek their salvation" in the labor market, in spite of all the difficulties that entails. Similarly, Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein (1997, 230), in their study comparing the income generation and budgeting strategies of low-wage working mothers to those of welfare-reliant mothers, found that, "all else equal, almost all mothers said they would rather work than rely on welfare. They believed work had important psychological benefits and welfare imposed stigma costs." Belief in the necessity of work was nearly universal among the women in the New Hope sample as well. Variations in their work goals were accounted for by the pull of *other* goals (to be with their children, to improve their poor health, to further their training and education, to find a partner to assist them), as well as by other life experiences and, in some cases, health limitations. These mothers had a very rich set of goals and personal beliefs about work in their lives, and typically quite reasonable goals for stable work. It was the vagaries of the low-wage job market—not any lack of goals and values—that led to their work struggles and the thwarting of their goals.

THE VALUES OF HARD WORK AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY

A General Commitment to Work Goals and Values

Values and goals like Tiffany's (who wants what everybody wants) were widely shared among most of the women in our study. In the sixty-month survey, respondents were asked about a number of personal, interpersonal, and family circumstances that might have influenced their *desire* or *ability* to work for pay in the preceding year. Included among these was a question that specifically addressed values regarding work by asking how three factors influenced their desire or ability to work: feeling good about oneself for bringing home a paycheck; wanting to be a successful role model for one's kids; and feeling good about oneself for hard work and doing a good job. Each respondent was asked to rate these items on a five-point scale from "a big *negative* influence" (1) to "little or no influence" (3) to "a big *positive* influence" (5).

Overwhelmingly, the respondents reported that these three items were a big positive influence on their desire and ability to work for pay. A higher-than-expected 79 percent (based on a chi-square test with standardized residual = .3) reported that feeling good about hard work was a big positive

influence, with an additional 13 percent reporting that it was a small positive influence (standardized residual = .1). Eighty-two percent reported that being a role model for the kids was a big positive influence, with an additional 8 percent reporting that it had a small positive influence. Results of a chi-square analysis indicate that there was a higher-than-expected positive influence of being a role model (standardized residual = .2) and a higher-than-expected small positive influence (standardized residual = -.1). Seventy-four percent reported that feeling good about bringing home a paycheck was a big positive influence, and 12 percent reported that it was a small positive influence. Both proportions are what we would expect according to a chi-square test (standardized residuals = .1 and .0, respectively).

These data suggest that the virtues of work, at least as represented by these three items, were important for nearly all of the members of the sixty-month survey sample. Ninety-two percent reported that feeling good about hard work or a job well done was a positive influence, and 86 percent felt that bringing home a paycheck was a positive influence. With so little variation in the pattern of response, the values associated with the virtues of working for pay cannot really predict employment characteristics at sixty months.

Conflicts Between Work, Family, and Care Values and Goals

Although the women in our study nearly universally valued work, there were other values they broadly shared that, if pursued actively, could conflict with and even contradict their values and, by extension, their ability to work for pay. Of particular interest were those values associated with being personally responsible for the care and well-being of their children and the management of their household. Values can and do conflict with each other when parents are faced with very difficult choices and an often unforgiving job market.

These values regarding care and family and their complicating influence on many women's desire or ability to work for pay are reflected in the same set of sixty-month survey items already discussed. The New Hope mothers were asked three questions that capture the extent to which their concerns over the management of their household and their concerns over the well-being of their children may have influenced their desire or ability to work for pay: To what extent did they feel "stressed when there is too much to do in too little time"? How concerned were they "that work will disrupt family life"? And to what extent were they concerned "that [their] absence from home could be harmful to [their] kids"?

Overall, a substantial group of women reported that these concerns were a negative influence on their desire or ability to work for pay. Forty-five per-

cent reported that feeling stressed was a negative influence (24 percent reported it as a small negative influence, and 21 percent reported it as a big negative influence, both of which are higher-than-expected proportions according to a chi-square test; standardized residuals = .2 and .3, respectively). Thirty-six percent reported that their concern that work would disrupt family life was a negative influence (an expected 20 percent reported that it was a small negative influence (standardized residual = .1 based on a chi-square test), and a higher-than-expected 16 percent reported that it was a big negative influence (standardized residual = .3)). Forty-six percent reported that their concern that their absence from home would be harmful to their children had a negative influence (25 percent reported a small negative influence, and 21 percent reported a big negative influence; of which both proportions are higher than expected based on a chi-square test; standardized residuals = .2 and .4, respectively). In prior work on an earnings-supplement program in Minnesota, concerns about being absent from home were in fact associated with lower work effort over a subsequent three-year period (Yoshikawa et al. 2003).

These data suggest that, for some women in our sample, their concerns for the well-being of their children and the management of their household negatively affected their desire or ability to work for pay, even when work was a positive value and a goal they did want to implement. But putting a high value on family could lead to paying *more* attention to the goal of getting and keeping jobs, as well as to paying less attention to that goal. Supporting a family often *meant* working, even though it produced conflicts, hardships, and strain for so many. Parents said that they had to work in order to sustain their families and households, and so their narratives often were about the blend of work and family and the ways in which they monitored and cared for their children in spite of having to work. Family and work goals may be analytically separable in survey responses, but from the points of view of these parents, they were linked in practice.

The Negative Impact on Work and Earnings of Balancing Work and Family Goals

Did these concerns actually affect these women's work for pay? Work is necessary, but it also can produce conflict, in the form of work-family trade-offs that may lead to fewer work hours or less income. To examine this possibility, we created an index variable from the three items dealing with concerns over the management of the household and the well-being of the children; we then correlated this variable with some of the characteristics of each woman's current or most recent job (such as job duration, hourly wage, weekly hours, and wage growth between the twenty-four-month and sixty-

month surveys). To create the index variable, we added together each respondent's values on the three items. The resulting index had a value between zero (no influence or only positive influences) and six (only big negative influences on all three questions).

Using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with a comprehensive set of covariates entered into the equation,¹ we found that the index of concerns for home management and the well-being of children was in fact associated with lower wages ($b = -\$0.25$, $\beta = -.16$, $p < .01$) and lower weekly hours ($b = -.54$, $\beta = -.13$, $p < .05$) at the sixty-month point. The measure also predicted significantly lower estimates of total income for the fifth year, based on administrative records of reported employment earnings, food stamps, and estimated earned income tax credit (EITC) receipt ($b = -\$705.85$, $\beta = -.14$, $p < .01$).

Summary

The women in our sample overwhelmingly endorsed the mainstream American values associated with hard work and economic self-sufficiency. In fact, so little variation exists in our measures of this value that it cannot possibly predict the variation in these women's employment characteristics. Rather, our evidence supports the view that many women find the two mainstream American values associated with parental work (valuing paid work, if necessary, to support the household financially, and valuing unpaid work to manage the household duties and care for the children) very difficult to jointly put into practice. Even though most of the women in the study greatly valued paid work, the higher their level of concern over work's effects on the well-being of their children and household, the lower their pay and hours. The difference in income can be considerable for a low-income working parent. According to the estimate derived from our regression analysis, women who scored six points on the influences of family concerns on the desire to work for pay index (recall that this means that respondents reported big negative influences on all three questions) would have \$2,100 less annual income than women who scored three points, controlling for other demographic and baseline characteristics.

THE GOALS OF NHES MOTHERS FOR WORK AND FAMILY ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

Goals as Reported on the Survey

When the participants in our study had the opportunity, in an open-ended format, to discuss the important goals and plans they had set for them-

Table 7.1 Goals That Respondents Reported Pursuing at the Twenty-Four-Month Follow-up

	Number of Respondents	
Educational goals	214	55%
Complete or continue education	202	52
Upgrade job skills	20	5
Learn to speak English	5	1
Job goals	165	43
Obtain specific or better job	134	35
Start or improve own business	37	10
Have more flexible work schedule	1	0
Financial goals	122	32
Buy a house	63	16
Improve housing situation	36	9
Improve financial situation	33	9
Buy a car or other costly item	16	4
Family goals	63	16
Provide for family	37	10
Children to do well	19	5
Get married or have baby	8	2
More time with spouse or children	1	0
Personal goals	39	10
General personal growth	29	8
Solve an immediate problem	6	2
Volunteer or be a role model	3	1
Control weight	2	1

Source: Authors' compilation.

Note: N = 386. Number of respondents varies owing to missing data for the wage-change measures.

selves at the time of the twenty-four-month survey, many mentioned getting a GED or finishing a twenty-four-month or four-year college degree program. Others mentioned getting a new and better-paying job or a promotion from their current employer. Others described financial goals, like getting their bills under control, saving more for their retirement, or improving their family's financial condition. Still others mentioned goals like helping their children do better in school. The various goals were coded into five categories: educational, job, financial, family, and personal (see table 7.1).

The most common goals mentioned were educational goals related to completing or continuing an educational training program (52 percent of respondents). The second most frequent set of specific goals (35 percent) was job-related: obtaining a specific job (such as working in a hospital) or a better job (such as gaining a permanent position with better pay and benefits). The third most frequently mentioned set of goals was financial: buying a house (more rarely a car) or improving their current living or financial situation (32 percent). Fourth were family goals, such as being a provider or making sure that their children do well in life (16 percent). Finally, about 10 percent described more personal goals, such as becoming more organized, getting off of probation, being a better role model in the community, or losing some weight. Since personal goals, though important, were only rarely mentioned in the survey context, we did not examine these further. For the analyses that follow, we focus on educational goals, job goals, financial goals, and family goals.

Were Goals Related to Personal Characteristics or to Employment Clusters and Work Outcomes?

Since there was a reasonable amount of variation in the goals mentioned by the NHES mothers, we wondered whether particular kinds of goals might be related either to personal and household characteristics (age, ethnicity, and so on) or to particular patterns of work (the employment clusters). We found that only rarely did demographic or household variables predict that respondents would mention particular goals. Using logistic regression, we did find that people younger than twenty-five were 2.6 times more likely to mention education goals than respondents over the age of thirty-five ($p < .05$). But no other demographic characteristics were associated with the likelihood of mentioning any of the four major goals. Furthermore, none of the five employment clusters (calculated between baseline and the twenty-four-month follow-up) were significantly associated with the mention of particular goals.

In the survey methodology, however, respondents were asked about their goals in the form of questions, not about the past, but about their directions and plans for the future. Thus, we can determine whether the goals mentioned at twenty-four months predicted the relevant job and family characteristics at sixty months.

Rather specific and measurable ends were associated with the general goals that respondents described at twenty-four months: improving one's education and training, ostensibly to improve one's employment opportunities; getting a new or better job; improving the household standard of living or finances; and better providing for the family and making sure the

children were on a positive track in life. To see the degree to which these goals led to related outcomes, we used OLS regression to examine the relationship between these twenty-four-month goals and sixty-month outcomes such as education, specific job characteristics, and family financial characteristics. These analyses controlled for a comprehensive set of baseline covariates.

Goals at Twenty-four Months and Job Characteristics at Sixty Months

We began by examining the relationship between the goals measured at the twenty-four-month follow-up to a host of employment characteristics at sixty months and the change between the two follow-ups. The particular job characteristics at sixty months that we included as dependent variables in our models were hourly wage for the current or most recent job; wage change between the last job at twenty-four months and the current or most recent job at sixty months; current or most recent job duration, hours, and number of benefits (paid sick days, paid vacation, health insurance, and/or a pension plan); and change in the number of benefits between the last job at twenty-four months and the sixty-month reference job.

In general, we would expect that job improvement goals would have the greatest impact on work characteristics. But educational goals could also be of some benefit, since greater levels of education can improve an individual's marketability on the job market and improve his or her chance of getting better employment than would be the case at a lower level of education.

We used OLS regression to test the relationship between these variables and the goals at twenty-four months (coded in the survey simply as present or absent). We included the standard set of baseline controls, as well as the analogous twenty-four-month measure to the dependent variable at sixty months. Finally, we included all four goal categories as variables in the same model so that we could be sure that the association of any particular goal with the dependent variable was independent of associations with other goals. The results of these analyses are summarized in tables 7.2 and 7.3.

What we found with regard to job characteristics only partly confirmed our expectations. Those who were pursuing *educational* goals had greater levels of wage growth than those who did not mention pursuing educational goals.² Those who reported pursuing family goals had jobs with better *benefits* than those who did not report pursuing family goals at twenty-four months. However, our expectations for job improvement goals were flatly contradicted: those goals were associated with *lower* hourly

Table 7.2 OLS Regression Coefficients Predicting Job Characteristics at Sixty Months from Stated Goals

	Hourly wage	Wage change between two and five years	Job duration	Weekly hours	Job benefits	Benefits change between two and five years
Education Goals	Ns.	0.98 (0.50) [†]	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.
Job Improvement Goals	-0.72 (0.36) [*]	-1.10 (0.47) [*]	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.
Financial Goals	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.
Family Goals	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.	0.41 (0.24) [†]
Other Family Goals	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.	0.08
N	281	318	291	286	295	317
Adjusted R ²	.25	0.14	0.08 ^{***}	0.22	0.10	0.39
		0.17 ^{***}	0.17 ^{***}	0.04 [†]	0.23	0.35 ^{***}

Note: Coefficients are presented as unstandardized (standard error) with standardized coefficient on the second line. All models include DV

(dependent variable) at twenty-four months and these measures at baseline: age; education (high school degree, GED, or better); ethnicity (African-American, Hispanic); single-adult with children in household; three or more children; youngest child age two years or younger; ever worked full-time; receiving AFDC, general assistance, food stamps, or Medicaid; income in the past year under \$5,000; access to a car; in an AFDC household as a child; New Hope experiment. "Ns." is not statistically significant.

*p < .10; [†]p < .05; ^{***}p < .001

Table 7.3 OLS Regression Predicting Personal and Family Characteristics at Sixty Months from Stated Goals

	Financial worry	Happiness with standard of living	Worsened housing condition between two and five years	Total income change between three and five years	Highest grade
Education Goals	Ns.	Ns.	-0.23 (0.11) [*]	Ns.	Ns.
Job Goals	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.	-\$1,266 (\$656) [†]	Ns.
Financial Goals	0.26 (.13) [*]	-0.24 (.11) [†]	Ns.	\$1,161 (\$661) [†]	Ns.
Family Goals	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.	Ns.	.74 ^{**}
N	339	338	311 ^{***}	402	311
Adjusted R ²	0.32	0.28 ^{***}	0.12 ^{***}	0.45	.37
		0.17	0.11 ^{***}	0.42 ^{***}	.33 ^{***}

Note: Coefficients are presented as unstandardized (standard error) with standardized coefficient on the second line. All models include DV

(dependent variable) at twenty-four months and these measures at baseline: age; education (high school degree, GED, or better); ethnicity (African-American, Hispanic); single-adult with children in household; three or more children; youngest child age two years or younger; ever worked full-time; receiving AFDC, general assistance, food stamps, or Medicaid; income in the past year under \$5,000; access to a car; in an AFDC household as a child; New Hope experiment. "Ns." is not statistically significant.

*p < .10; [†]p < .05; ^{***}p < .001

wages and a negative wage change value between two and five years. It may be that educational goals indicate a beneficial and unobserved motivation to achieve higher human capital that is not reflected in job improvement goals. In addition, those who reported higher job improvement goals may have shared unobserved characteristics that are associated with difficulty in the labor market.

Different Goals and Strategies for Success

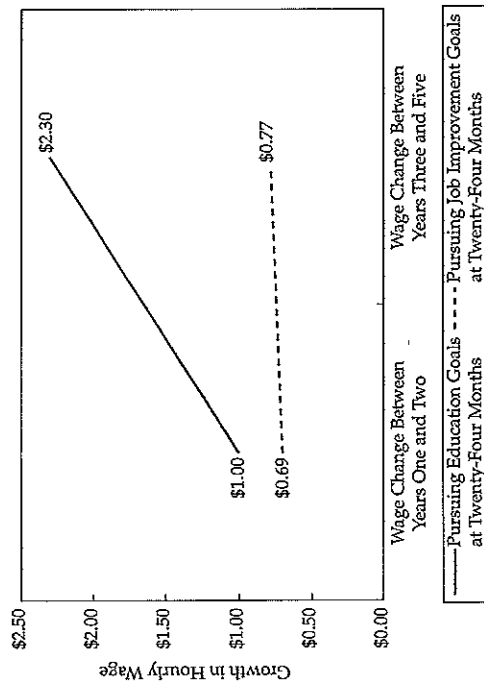
The two most frequently cited types of goals (educational and job improvement) led to very different outcomes. When we compare those who were pursuing job-related goals to those who were pursuing educational goals, we find that educational goals led to greater wage growth and income growth than job-related goals.

This comparison is demonstrated in figures 7.1 and 7.2. Figure 7.1 shows wage change for the first two years of the study and wage change between years two and five of the study for those who reported pursuing either educational goals or job improvement goals in the twenty-four-month survey. Those who were pursuing educational goals experienced accelerated wage growth between the twenty-four-month and sixty-month surveys. On the other hand, those who were pursuing job-related goals experienced modest levels of wage growth between the two time points.

Figure 7.2 shows a comparison of change in total personal income, based on estimates from records of reported earnings and welfare receipt from the state of Wisconsin, for those who reported pursuing educational goals and job improvement goals at the time of the twenty-four-month survey. While those who reported pursuing educational goals at twenty-four months experienced substantial income growth between years three and five, those who reported pursuing job improvement goals actually experienced a modest decline in income between years three and five.

Those who were pursuing educational goals enjoyed much greater wage growth and growth in personal income than those who were pursuing job-related goals at the time of the twenty-four-month survey. Often, in the low-income employment literature, these two avenues are referred to as pursuing either human capital (such as education and skill development) or labor force attachment ("finding and keeping work") (Hamilton et al. 2001). This analysis suggests that, for those women in our sample who were already employed, pursuing more education and skill development was a better strategy for improving their wages and income than simply trying to find a better job in the rather difficult, low-wage job market they faced in their Milwaukee communities. Other recent work on

Figure 7.1 Comparison of the Association Between Job Improvement and Education Goals and Subsequent Wage Growth

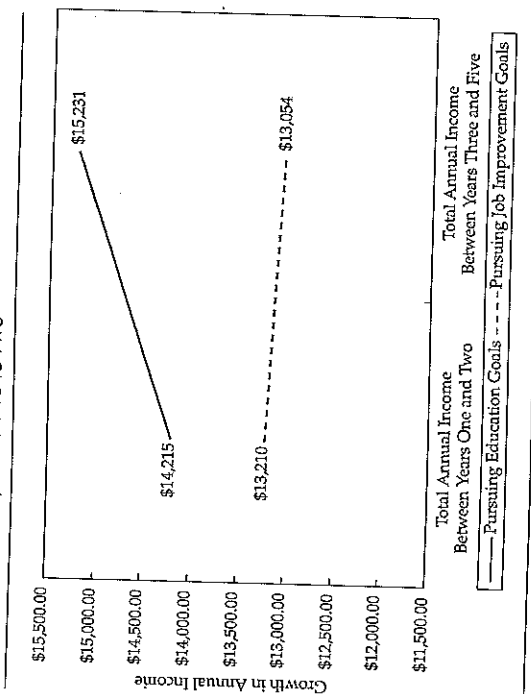


Source: Authors' compilation.

this topic supports our findings here. For example, data from the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies (NEWWS) suggest that placing a high value on one's education, combined with a welfare policy mandate to pursue education or job training on the way to a job, has particularly positive effects on one's earnings and school attainment for one's children. This is not true for high levels of valuing work over family (Yoshikawa et al. 2006).

There is also some evidence from the New Hope data that the type of goal that mothers expressed at twenty-four months was related both to their own educational expectations at that point and to their children's educational expectations (also at twenty-four months after the New Hope program started). Maria Ramos and Hirokazu Yoshikawa (2005) have found that educational goals (but not work-related ones) are associated with higher levels of both parents' and children's educational expectations and that indirect

Figure 7.2 Comparison of the Association Between Job Improvement and Education Goals and Change in Total Annual Income, Years Two to Five



Source: Authors' compilation.

associations of parental goals with children's self-reported expectations through their parents' reported expectations are significant.

Overall, there were some parents whose goals led to somewhat improved job circumstances at sixty months, net of demographic background and controlling for their employment trajectory at twenty-four months. Goals are a relevant influence in employment trajectories, but not the dominant one, and the magnitudes of associations with outcomes are in line with those of non-goal variables. Goals did not seem to lead independently to changes in wages, but they did affect benefits and job length.

The connections between family goals and working for longer periods of time (as with the stable employment cluster) suggest a pattern we now turn to in the ethnographic data: some parents saw their work and family goals as reconcilable, though often difficult to achieve.

ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA ON PARENTS' WORK GOALS

Goals related to work had meanings for the NHES women that went beyond hopes of finding and keeping jobs and perhaps improving their economic circumstances. Many of the topics they brought up when they talked about employment goals had to do, not with their concrete plans or immediately attainable job results, but with their wishes, frustrations, and hopes. Looking more closely at the ethnographic cases shows that these mothers' goals were often thwarted by events over which they had little or no control.

The Multiple Functions of Goals

One of the reasons that goals influence, but are certainly not determinants of, employment patterns is that they are not just statements of instrumental strategy or tactics. When parents are working in low-wage jobs, their comments about work goals are also about personhood, fantasies, position in society, and feelings, in addition to (or instead of) a strictly instrumental, strategic calculation of job prospects. Values and goals have many functions in addition to the instrumental one of organizing an individual's attention and efforts to the work and parent (D'Andrade and Strauss 1992).

For example, thinking about goals helps to make sense of the world and what it means. Allison commented to a field-worker that "work . . . is about much more than just making money." Allison was in the stable employment cluster. She worked in the auto parts industry for the entirety of the ethnography and realized steady wage increases over the three-year period.

Goals also guide one's attention and appraisal of events and provide rationales for what one does and critiques of what others are doing. Rose commented that she "doesn't believe in just sitting in the house doing nothing all day, collecting a state check and watching TV . . . but I know people who do." Faye talked about "starting small" as a job search plan: "You can't expect to go out there and get a job earning \$11 to \$13 an hour immediately. . . . It happens for the lucky few, but it is not going to start with most people. . . . You got to be willing to start small." This helped her to make a near-term decision about finding a job in spite of the fact that she was not going to get her hoped-for ideal job right away.

Goals and values surrounding work also helped define our participants' social identities. Heather talked to her field-worker about the gap between her work goals and her real hopes for the future. "Heather said that what she would really like to do is volunteer work. Volunteer at the school, help out at her church, run a youth choir, or develop and run a support group for teens. She said that she would really like to do something like that, just as long as it wasn't a job. It would be something that she wanted to do, not

something she had to do." Samantha, who struggled to get steady work, remarked that she was not a "fast-food person. . . . Believe me, I don't want to work in fast food. I want a real job where I could look nice and go regularly every day." Maria was in the steady employment cluster and go regularly in child care; she also commented on her hopes to change her job because she wanted to be treated "like a human"; "It's not human to order adults around like that. . . . They treat you like you are nobody."

When the goal of having a job meets the actual experience of dead-end, low-wage work, that goal can become both a blessing and a curse. It keeps families afloat, but sometimes it also keeps them from moving up. To some extent, society defines low-wage work (such as working at a fast-food restaurant) "as something akin to the untouchable status of the Indian low castes" (Newman 1999, 297). Although there is no shame in that game, as Newman puts it, imagine the ambivalence and mismatch with their broader goals and values that so many of the women in our study experienced when they found themselves working at jobs with no benefits, little chance of an upward path, and little chance of controlling their future. Yet even such jobs hold the promise of finding a better life and greater respect by moving up into a better job. Nancy's field-worker described a conversation with her about work and personal happiness:

Nancy says, "I want to find work that makes me happy, not just the money." She described her high-wage job as a window cleaner with an hourly wage of \$10. Her eyes *shone* when she mentioned the \$10 figure, since it was clearly much higher than her previous job. Besides, she worked thirty-five hours a week at that job, as opposed to the twenty-five hours a week she was given in the earlier job.

Many of the comments about work and job goals and about overall goals regarding money also provide humorous or ironic commentaries on the world or reflect fantasies. Evelia was in the full-time, low-wage cluster and had a steady job for much of the ethnographic portion of the study, but she was unemployed for several months, and her salary decreased by \$1.00 an hour during year two. Evelia smiled when talking about her income and family goals, saying, "I want to be a millionaire . . . win the lotto . . . and get married, all in the next year." Belinda just said that "Wal-Mart is getting on my nerves." Hence, narratives about goals ranged beyond the instrumental in many ways. These mothers' narratives about their work and family goals were connected to other cultural schemas about themselves, about their communities and families, and about what they wanted in life. Thus,

what they said and felt about their work and family goals was not necessarily unidirectional from goals to specific intentions and plans, and then directly to jobs.

FAMILY VIGNETTES: GOALS AND WORK EXPERIENCE BY EMPLOYMENT CLUSTER

The largest number of values and goals statements in our field notes, compared to any of the other field-note domains (including family, children, spirituality, politics, marriage, and fathers), were about employment. This emphasis on work and employment goals no doubt was due in part to the New Hope focus on work-based supports. Nonetheless, parents were constantly concerned about making ends meet, budgeting, and work. Their work values and goals were no different in overall content from what most American workers talk about. For example, they described good jobs (those that were stimulating and offered autonomy, benefits, stability, and respect), strategies for getting work, stress at work, types of work, and the kind of worker they were or wanted to be (someone with a good work ethic, more experience, or good references; someone able to enjoy the job).

Some general observations about these mothers' work trajectories are relevant to appreciating goals in the context of employment clusters. The wages they earned were low, averaging around \$8.00 an hour, and benefits were few. Only a few were able to move up in wages or job stability—but some succeeded. It should be apparent that regardless of their values and goals, the range of jobs and incomes open to them was rather limited, *including* the often long stretches when they were working. Few of these mothers were ever doing dramatically well by any means.

The No-Work and Part-Time, Low-Wage Clusters

Prior to the ethnographic study, all of the women in these two clusters had primarily been caring for their children at home. They had little prior experience in sustained employment. Many of them had strong parenting goals, while others had health problems that prevented them from doing steady work. Iris and Elizabeth were in committed relationships with their partners for the entire study period, and they relied on these men as the major source of household income. Iris, a long-term recipient of public assistance, tried to work briefly in early 1999 at the W-2 offices and held a few part-time temporary positions prior to the ethnography, but these jobs never lasted. She eventually gave up public assistance and came to rely on the foster child payments she received for caring for her two nephews, in addition to the income her husband brought home.

Iris had a criminal record, had been fired from a job at baseline, and reported serious health problems. In other words, several significant barriers kept her from working—or certainly made it difficult to find work that fit her circumstances. She wanted things for herself, but she did not want to do what she needed to do to get them. That is, she wanted a good job, but she was not willing to go out and apply for jobs or take a job that was not great now but would give her opportunities to move up. Iris compared herself to her family members, usually her sisters and mother. For example, she thought that her sister who had attended college and become a medical secretary was quite successful. Such comparisons to the work trajectories of friends and relatives play an important role in shaping the schemas that connect values to goals and to plans and action. Regardless of her current circumstances, Iris recently had accomplished an important goal: she completed her GED, while working a full-time job. She would spend four hours in the morning at GED class and then eight hours working at the second-hand store. She said that she would get home at 11:00 P.M. just exhausted, but was so proud when she walked across the stage to get her GED, with the spotlight on her.

Elizabeth, a U.S.-born Latina mother of six children ages one to eight, relied on partners for support when her children were young. She tried a few temp jobs, but nothing lasted very long. She eventually gave up her efforts to find work and settled for full-time homemaking as a career choice. Staying home and taking care of their children was particularly important for Elizabeth, Iris, and others in these clusters. For example, in early 2000 a fieldworker was discussing with Elizabeth whether she had any plans to work and whether her husband, Victor, wanted her to do so. She said, "Victor doesn't understand. He thinks I should work, but I've decided that I should stay home with the kids. Who else will treat my kids well? . . . Who else will deal with all this?" (Elizabeth pointed to the children running around through a maze of toys.) "You just don't know about people nowadays. . . . The main thing I need to do with myself is take care of my family—of my kids." These data corroborate other recent findings from samples of low-income families suggesting that putting a high value on taking care of family and children at home over working full-time indeed predicts later employment behavior (Yoshikawa et al. 2003).

Elizabeth wanted to become a parole officer for juveniles or perhaps a police officer, but she had only a vague idea about what it would entail to get either of those jobs. Mostly, she reported wanting to get her GED. She said that she was tired of staying home all the time. She "didn't want to work at Taco Bell for five years and then look back to see that she hadn't accomplished anything." She wanted an education and a "good job." "The first thing I want to do is finish my GED." She only had to pass the math and

social science parts of the test and thought that she might take a class for those sections or just study on her own.

Elizabeth said that she would have liked to work, but that she really wanted to get an education so that she could get a good job. She said that when she started with New Hope she liked the idea of working, but that she wanted to go to school. She thought getting an education should be a priority, and New Hope really didn't help her in her efforts to reach that goal. Elizabeth said that her husband's brother had recently gotten a college degree. She smiled and said, "He thinks he's really something. I can't wait to go to school too."

Parents in the part-time, low-wage cluster elected to care for their young children, did not have much work experience, and, in some cases, had partners to assist them. Parenting and family caretaking goals were especially important to many in this group. They encountered significant barriers to regular employment, such as uncertain mental and physical health, unstable child care, and for many of them a partner who did not want them to work. Their goals, such as pursuing their own education or becoming a foster parent, often had been achieved without wage work. Their work goals were often clear and focused on upward mobility, but they rarely had the intermediate goals to achieve them, nor the supports.

The Rapid Cycler Cluster

Heather and Evelia had personal and domestic relationship problems and concerns that affected their employment. For example, Heather, an African-American mother of two at the start of the ethnography, stopped working twice during the study because of the births of two more children. She also moved for several months to Florida with her children and her fiancé before returning to Milwaukee in January 2000. These moves were planned: she had intended to join her fiancé there and was counting on family in Florida to help her with the children and with getting a job. But Heather also had quit her nursing home job (a job she hated, she said) after getting 401K money cashed out from a former job, and she was fired from another job for not returning to work immediately after the birth of her second baby. Evelia also lost a job, in part because of problems with her boyfriend.

The goals expressed by many of the mothers in this group were not unrealistic. Rather, the jobs available did not match their otherwise reasonable goals. Evelia's main goal was to find a secure and stable job, not a job that, as a field-worker wrote, would be stable today, "but maybe tomorrow they will move the company and she will lose the job. 'My goal is just to have a stable, good job, a job that I like.'" But she did not manage to find such a job and remained stuck in a post office temp job without benefits for much of the

ethnography. When she finally left to take a job as a line supervisor at a meatpacking plant, she discovered that it did not provide stability either. Evelia did not like to be responsible for so many people, and liked even less the working conditions in the meatpacking job. She said that never in her life had she seen people work so much, so fast, in such bad conditions, for so low a wage. Evelia did not think that the salary she earned (\$8.79 per hour) was right, because it did not reflect the great responsibility her job entailed. She had to enforce the sanitary requirements that the law demanded, and she also had to look after the quality of the meat that was being packaged. Evelia also worked at obtaining a regular position with the U.S. Post Office and worked there as a part-timer for long periods. But according to her report of how hiring was done, she said that she was "never going to get a regular job" at the post office.

Heather's long-term goal was to open her own child care center. She explained that she already had all the child care certifications she needed to open a child care center of her own. All she had to do was renew her license. She took all the early childhood development certification classes. Heather said that she did not mind working, but that she wanted to work on her own terms; she didn't want to be *obligated* to work. Further, her goals changed and cycled along with her employment patterns. Heather said that she would have liked to go back to school and finish her college degree—but how could she? She was thinking about returning to school in the winter and majoring in a medical assistant field. She was also thinking about getting training in medical terminology, which her mother would be able to help her with. Her mother was a registered nurse; family contacts and work comparisons and connections—social capital—help explain the connections between goals and plans. Heather, it turned out, was not able to do this training and still work enough hours to make ends meet.

If jobs had allowed for some flexibility, some of their goals could have been met. For example, one participant got a community service job (CSJ) through New Hope to work at a shelter for homeless men. After working the CSJ for a while, she was hired as a regular employee by the shelter and worked as a receptionist. One of the things she liked about this job was that it afforded her the flexibility she needed to take care of sudden family concerns, such as the times when her children or her partner's children got sick. She was also supported by her partner in managing the household. In addition to being employed and contributing to the household finances, he attended to the children's needs when she could not take time off and provided some help with household chores. The relationship was stable throughout the study period, as was her job; she eventually moved from cycling or not working to steady work.

Tiffany, the mother who simply wanted "what everyone wants," still did not want "just any job, she wants a high-paying job and a nice, decorated

house so that all she has to do is move her furniture in." She did not want to become satisfied with a \$7.50-an-hour job. She saw too many people in her neighborhood who settled for too little. They "just get a job, get a house, have kids, but never really make much of themselves." Tiffany had high goals and expectations and wanted to get the education to achieve them—yet she did not succeed. Her goals were admirable, but she was thwarted by not only her immediate job situation but by her inability to take all the intermediate steps, to write a script for attaining her goals.

These women's goals included work, but they were often derailed from their jobs by other concerns and problems in their lives. They continued to try to meet their work goals, and the goal remained salient, but events overtook their plans. This pattern was common among those mothers who cycled from one job to another that did not provide income gains or improvements in skills.

Medical or drug/alcohol problems prevented some rapid cyclers from working regularly, and others had family problems, had to move, and experienced other non-work-related disruptions. For example, Katrina had both an education and job skills, and she did find steady work for most of the ethnographic study. However, she was in a relationship with an abusive boyfriend, whom she eventually left, and one of her four children had severe emotional problems. She herself, she said, had problems with depression. It was no wonder that she sometimes struggled with working and taking care of her children.

A number of mothers could not keep steady work because their jobs simply came and went in spite of their intentions and plans. The ethnographic data also revealed non-work-related life changes that affected work, such as residential moves, partner relationships, health concerns, job harassment, and transportation glitches. The goal of staying employed was strong in this group, but many other concerns, such as child care problems or their own health problems, often thwarted mothers' work intentions.

The Stable Employment and Full-Time-Wage-Growth Clusters

About one-third of the mothers in the ethnography found more stable work, and their incomes often went up. This was clearly an important group of parents for policy. Parents in the stable employment and full-time-wage-growth clusters gave us a window into what mattered most in attaining work and family goals. Their jobs provided them with both networks of contacts and skill sets (such as computer skills and accounting) that led to more regular employment and growth in income. These mothers worked at auto dealerships and county agencies, in their own child care businesses, and in financial services, computers, and similar industries in which one

could move into a job based on experience in the last job held in that same industry. The women in these clusters had some control over their work schedules, and many had good employment histories that allowed them to get better jobs in the same industry. Not surprisingly, job mobility was most common in these two clusters. Leora's field-worker gives us a glimpse of one such situation:

Leora comments about her current job at a bank in the payroll office, that being responsible for everyone's check gave Leora a sense of control in the office environment. She smiled and said, "I am not egotistical, but it makes me feel that I am in charge of everybody's check," and quickly [added] that a year and a half ago, "I was not even in charge of my own life."

Leora's mother-in-law has been looking for an entry-level position in a real estate agency for Leora. She told Leora a few days back that an agency was looking for an assistant who could do basic clerical work. They would pay at least as much as Leora is making in her current position and pay health benefits as well. Leora can join such an agency and then work her way up. In her current job, there is no job ladder.

Alicia was an immigrant from Nicaragua whose goals included learning English, obtaining a higher education, and thereby steadily enhancing her career chances. She worked as a teacher's aide and as a teacher at a day care program and then took on another job, delivering newspapers, to try to make ends meet. Maria, another mother in this cluster, was proud that she had obtained her GED and finished several training programs. Her child care center job remained stable for four years.

She likes her work and described her experience as one in which she has progressed through the ranks. She is currently the employee who has been there the longest. She started the position as a teacher's assistant and now has her own classroom. It took her a while to feel that she wanted the responsibility of her own classroom. She turned down the offer the first time that it was made to her. As the most senior employee, she has a good amount of leverage with her supervisor and the other employees.

Wendy similarly worked at her own day care center. Her goals included opening the center, expanding it to eight kids, and getting her own building for it. She reached all these goals. Her next goal was to buy her own house.

Allison got steady raises by staying in the same niche industry—auto service and sales—and by working out a very clear strategy: if she did not get a raise where she was, she would look for a higher-paying job at another company. Each of these job changes was facilitated by a coworker from a former job. Allison had computer skills and worked in an industry that provided opportunities for job mobility. Her field-worker commented:

Allison is aware that having computer skills is an asset in the job market and therefore it was important she practiced that set of skills for future jobs. Allison has always worked since her teenage years. She thinks it is important to work and everyone should work. It was more for her than just making money.

Allison had both goals and social capital (social networks, prior work experience, access to industries) and made use of both.

The goals of mothers in the stable employment and full-time-wage-growth groups were often concrete, intermediate in their difficulty of attainment, and characterized by short-term objectives that were part of a chain of plans and intentions (get a modest raise; plan for a new job before leaving another; make a move to a new apartment; but do not change jobs yet). Their goals and plans fit better with their non-work-related circumstances: for example, their partner was also working, so they could take time off; their child care arrangements fit their work hours; their health was good; someone in the household had a car; their education and training efforts fit into their work schedules and complemented their existing skills. These mothers usually did not face what other working-poor parents in other employment clusters often did: cascading problems that arose unpredictably and sometimes all at once, thwarting their high-level goals and thus preventing them from being realized. Their overall daily family routines were more *sustainable*—that is, their routines fit with the available resources, were relatively more balanced, created less conflict among family members, and were more predictable and stable (Lowe and Weisner 2004; Lowe et al. 2005). Thus, their employment goals were less often thwarted.

CONCLUSION

Most NFHS mothers' goals for work and family were not unrealistic, and they sometimes achieved their goals. If low-wage work conditions were improved, good transportation was made available, and New Hope-type supports were more routinely offered, many working-poor parents would be ready with goals to fit those conditions. Though it may be analytically useful to distinguish goals for work from other kinds of goals, in these parents'

minds educational and family goals were closely intertwined with work goals. We in fact found mixed evidence concerning the associations of work and educational goals with work trajectories. For example, educational goals measured at twenty-four months predicted higher wage growth between twenty-four and sixty months, but job improvement goals did not. Mothers in the New Hope program group did earn more income, work more hours, were less often in poverty, and their children's school achievement and well-being was higher than the control group (Duncan, Huston, and Weisner 2007). The mothers in the Stable Employment and Full-Time Wage Growth clusters suggest some pathways through which income and employment gains are related to values, goals, and plans. These parents linked values (a better job, more income, more education and training, success for their children) to attainable intermediate goals and plans. Their daily routines, though hardly easy to sustain, fit better with those goals and plans.

But the realities of low-wage jobs often did not fit what were the fairly reasonable job goals of the New Hope parents. Their work goals were also thwarted by cascading family problems and insufficient resources. These mothers sometimes worked less than full-time, or only intermittently, in order to achieve their goal of staying home with their children, or because of health concerns. Others had children with significant developmental and behavior problems that sometimes constrained their ability to work (Bernheimer, Weisner, and Lowe 2003). Job instability, flat wages, and churning from one job to another were work conditions that often had an impact on their parenting obligations. Their goals and beliefs about parenting, family, and good work sometimes limited their ability to work steadily or to take better jobs. These included, for example, the notions that good parents do not leave young children with strangers, that health comes first, that children need their mother when they are very young, or that no one should have to work under certain exploitative job conditions. Indeed, some women who experienced little improvement in their employment trajectories actually described this intermittent work pattern as a step on the way to a goal that was merely *deferred* for a while.

Chapter Eight

What Earnings and Income Buy—The “Basics” Plus “a Little Extra”: Implications for Family and Child Well-Being

Rashmita S. Mistry and Edward D. Lowe

A FUNDAMENTAL way in which work and family are linked is economic—through the income and resources that earnings bring to families and children. Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated that the dynamics of work across time predicted parents' psychological well-being and children's school and social outcomes. However, those chapters did not investigate whether in fact work resulted in higher income and improved financial standing. Nor did the earlier chapters examine how families negotiated across competing expenditure demands to make ends meet and the impact of negotiations related to income and expenditures for family and child functioning. These questions are central to understanding whether or not work translates into one source of meaningful difference in the lives of low-income families—that is, economic security. The combination of survey and qualitative data provides us with a unique opportunity to not only investigate what the New Hope women thought and felt about their income but also to use this information to conduct a quantitative exploration of some of the *family processes* through which income affects children's academic and social outcomes.

Welfare reform in Wisconsin and elsewhere did not necessarily lead to greater economic well-being. For many low-income mothers, increased work effort did not always lead to escape from poverty. For example, national studies of welfare “leavers” in the first years after welfare reform

MAKING
IT
WORK

Low-Wage Employment,
Family Life, and
Child Development

Hirokazu Yoshikawa,
Thomas S. Weisner, and
Edward D. Lowe
Editors

2004.

Russell Sage Foundation
New York