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Women, Poverty, and Public Policy: A Community-Based Model for Collaborative Outreach Scholarship

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Abstract

The Women and Poverty Public Education Initiative (WPPEI), established by the University of Wisconsin Women's Studies Consortium Outreach Office in 1994, developed a collaborative outreach scholarship model that paired women from the poverty community with women's studies faculty from universities in eight Wisconsin communities to study the effects of welfare reform on those most directly impacted by it. This paper explains how this model was enacted in a longitudinal in-depth interview study conducted with 160 women transitioning off welfare in Wisconsin between 1997 and 2000, the first few years of Wisconsin Works (W-2), Wisconsin's welfare reform. Results from the study are analyzed with an eye toward underscoring the effectiveness of using a collaborative outreach model as a way to gather data that is missing from other similar studies and to bring the voices of women living in poverty into policy debates.

Introduction

The University of Wisconsin System Women's Studies Consortium Outreach Office, established in 1990, linked groups of University of Wisconsin women's studies faculty and students with off-campus communities for collaboration on projects that included: organizing conferences; studying and providing education about the impact of environmental damage on women; incorporating knowledge of Wisconsin Indians in school and university courses; and conducting research and disseminating knowledge in the Women and Poverty Public Education Initiative (WPPEI). WPPEI was its last, most ambitious, and longest lasting project.

WPPEI's purpose was to connect women affected by welfare policy with faculty to educate both the public and decision makers about the lives of families living in poverty. Since Wisconsin was becoming a test site for welfare policy experiments, it seemed

important that those affected by the policies be given opportunities to contribute to policy debates.

The project had a statewide coordinator, a research director, several regional coordinators, and local groups in eight locations that were co-led by a woman from the impacted community and a woman from the university. Funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation contributed to the support of this work. The WPPEI collaboration accomplished the following: the production of a video (*In Our Own Image*—funded by the Wisconsin Humanities Committee); several reports (*In Our Own Words*) that were the first in the country to give the perspectives of women being affected by welfare reform; collaborative research projects that highlighted the experiences of these women; and a "Walk a Mile" Project that paired welfare recipients with state legislators. WPPEI also coordinated coalitions of advocacy groups. These projects were united by the goal of including the voices of those whose lives were being affected by welfare reform in the discussions as policy decisions were made. The projects listed above, along with countless testimonies made at the local, state, and national levels, brought the experiences of women living the realities of welfare reform to both the general public and the decision makers. For more information on WPPEI as a project, see Rhoades, Statham, and Schleiter *(2002)*.

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This paper describes the research process and presents several key findings of the largest WPPEI research project. To thoroughly explore the impacts of welfare reform in Wisconsin, WPPEI began a depth interview study in 1997, as Wisconsin's welfare reform program was being implemented.

Past Research

This study began as an effort to correct misconceptions about those living in poverty in the literature at the time we began. Despite a large amount of research, researchers and policymakers

knew little about why few welfare programs had succeeded in bringing families out of poverty. The factors that had been explored are those available in official databases—education, family status, age, work experience *(Bane and Ellwood 1986; Bane and Ellwood 1994; Tienda 1991)*. The connections of the patterns found with other factors in the lives of families were neither explored nor explained. Two policy outcomes of this past research are worth noting. First, many of these studies had used administrative data to focus on determinants of entrances to and exits from welfare, with few attempts to look deeper. Researchers focused on determinants such as marriage that had the largest correlation coefficients and labeled these as causes. These findings, with little context for their meaning, had given fuel to policies that encourage women to get and/or stay married as a solution to poverty *(Edin 2000)*. This continued even after assessments of programs designed to enhance marriage rates among disadvantaged women who had never been married *(Franklin, Smith, and McMiller 1995)* showed these programs to be unsuccessful *(Winkler 1995)*.

A second policy direction that came from past research involved education and training. Many previous evaluations of federal JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training) programs had shown little or no impact on the movement out of poverty *(GAO 1995)*, but again without information about the details of people's lives, the reasons for these findings remained elusive. Oliker *(1994; 1995)* had noted that even the most sophisticated evaluations of poverty programs had failed to ask questions about women's lives beyond the narrow confines of employment and training efforts. Few attempts had been made to find the subtleties of the types of training, the problems with it, or the incremental impacts an accumulation of training may be having over a lifetime. No consideration had been given to how to improve training programs. Instead, we got a policy that mandates "work first" with little support for education and training, and charges that women have been "hiding out from the workforce," using training as an excuse.

The WPPEI study began as Wisconsin's welfare reform policy was starting. We conducted depth interviews with women in eight communities throughout Wisconsin, repeatedly interviewing approximately 160 women, some as many as four times, to see how they were doing over time. The way we have gathered our data provides more detailed information about women's lives than previous studies. The comprehensive approach to understanding women's lives should allow for more robust, effective programming that can truly move families out of poverty.

Methods

We go a step further than traditional qualitative research by including members of communities impacted by welfare reform in our research team. With other qualitative researchers *(Bartunek and Louis 1996)*, we have blurred the artificial binary of researchers/subjects by striving for a participatory model of inquiry based on researchers working with members of the researched community as co-researchers who aid in posing questions that guide the study, gathering and interpreting the data, and writing and disseminating results. Women whose lives were being directly affected by welfare reform have been full collaborators in the research from the beginning. The team worked hard to include all members in decision making about the goals of the research, the design of the interviews, and the selection of the sample. Many of our interviewers were themselves part of the study population, and a collaborative training program was developed that combined the research expertise of the academic women with the cultural sensitivity of the women from the impacted community. The coding scheme and interpretation of the data also benefited from this diverse team. The process of inclusion was at times difficult, and resources and time were allocated to breaking down unconscious elitism and resolving conflicts.

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Including the perspectives of the researched group is not new, but it has usually been limited in scope and confined to studies of elites. In our collaborative model, we are using a model of shared leadership. Scholars and members of the impacted community conduct research together to ensure that the voices of women who are affected by welfare reform are heard. We have learned firsthand that such collaborative research results in countless benefits even as it presents multiple challenges.

One of the most significant benefits of this collaborative research model is its ability to bring certain issues to the forefront that may never be considered in a more dispassionate policy con-

versation. For example, we have uncovered information about the anxieties of women who must leave children in low-quality child care settings to go to dead-end jobs, and about the fears women have that they may lose their children if they talk with researchers that seem to be connected to the welfare system. Examples of these undiscovered gems of information abound in our data—ways that the particular stories of women's lives fail to fall neatly into previously constructed policy categories of support. Our approach also enables us to gather insights the women themselves have about how the system might be changed to better serve them.

A research team composed of our team leaders (a woman from the university and a woman from an impacted community), sometimes joined by other community women, attempted to conduct 20–25 interviews in each community. The study was longitudinal; the same individuals were re-interviewed as many as three or four times between 1997 and 2000. The first interview asked about background experiences, as well as initial experiences with and concerns about the new system. Subsequent interviews followed up on experiences reported in the first interview, and expanded to ask about how the women were coping with the policy changes and how they and their children were doing at different points in time. Those interviews also explored women's strategies for moving themselves out of poverty, and their level of confidence that they would be successful.

"Scholars and members of the impacted community conduct research together to ensure that the voices of women who are affected by welfare reform are heard."

Sample: We used a purposive sampling strategy, combined with some elements of snowball sampling, to ensure that we included adequate numbers of women from each community with characteristics known to exist in their low-income populations. Three of these communities were small rural communities in the northwestern part of the state, more than 90 percent white, but with some representation of Hmong and Native Americans (Menomonie in Dunn County, the River Falls area including Pierce, St. Croix,

Polk, Sawyer Counties, and Eau Claire), two other small rural communities more centrally located (La Crosse and Stevens Point in Portage County), and several urban communities in the southeastern part of the state (Milwaukee, Madison in Dane County, Racine/Kenosha served by UW–Parkside, and Beloit/Janesville in Rock County served by UW–Rock County). The samples were constructed to approximate the known ethnic makeup of the low-income, AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) population in each community.

"[A] 'one size fits all' welfare policy is not likely to work equally well with all women who need help moving out of poverty."

Most of the women in our sample were white (90) or African American (39), with fewer women of Latin, Native American, or Hmong descent. The women were mostly between the ages of 20 and 34 (prime childbearing years), but there were several women in their 50s (grandmothers who were caring for daughters' children).

Results

Family background: The majority of these women had working-class or poverty backgrounds, although about a quarter of them were from middle-class families, and a few others had spent some time in the middle class. There was some movement in and out of these statuses, as their families experienced hard times, then recovered again. Sometimes this happened because their mothers married or divorced, sometimes because of the changing fortunes of their fathers or stepfathers. They were from families somewhat larger than the average for the U.S. population as a whole, with the average having between three and four siblings.

Our data provide insight into the role that family background can play in determining later fortunes. We are able to show in great detail that the majority of these women had childhoods that were problematic in some way. Approximately 20 percent experienced the loss of a parent through death or divorce:

> As soon as I was born, we left and went to California and then . . . my mom and my dad broke up . . . We were staying in San Francisco . . . My mom was trying to find him . . . that's when she died . . . in a car accident . . .They contacted him . . . I don't know how they found him. . . .

For nearly 10 percent, the injury or illness of a parent or their loss of a job seemed to be a critical turning point in their lives:

> When my mother lost her job and we were broke, very broke, we had to get back on our feet. That challenged us a lot 'cause I couldn't get a lot of things that I wanted. She couldn't give me a lot of things that she wanted to give me . . . kids that age, of course, want everything.

Another 13 percent reported neglect by parents:

> By the time I came along my mother had no time for me . . . she was traveling around and not at home much. . . . It was a violent place and I was not paid much attention to. . . . My reading is not good at all. I have a learning disability. . . . My mom never did pursue it to get me help.

Abuse, combined with alcohol and drug abuse, was reported by more than 43 percent of these women:

> There was verbal abuse everybody to everyone . . . my mom's drinking was very, very bad . . . coming home . . . finding her passed out in the laundry room . . . picking her up and bringing her upstairs. . . .

Spousal abuse was also mentioned by approximately 18 percent. This sometimes extended to children. One woman's former husband was in prison for killing their son:

> He's incarcerated. He killed one of our children . . . last month, was [the] . . . anniversary of my son's death . . . when that day comes I sort of fall back. He would have been 13. . . .

About 7 percent reported being sexually assaulted by relatives.

> My step-father was an alcoholic . . . he was very abusive and . . . I was molested by him for ten years. And my mother promised to get him out of the house, and she broke that promise on [my] sixteenth birthday, so I moved out.

For about 8 percent, race was a factor in how they were treated by their families:

> My father . . . has been out of my life since I was 10 years old . . . I seen him when my daughter was about 4 months old, and he told me he didn't want nothing to do with me and my baby 'cause she was a nigger.

Slightly more than a quarter of these women experienced the instability of more than two or three moves when they were young:

> We left in the middle of the night and went to a battered woman's shelter . . . we moved out of the shelter, we got an apartment. I was going to school . . . my mom was like losing it . . . we moved . . . down to Texas . . . There was no warning. That was the second time I had left . . . all my stuff behind. All my folders, tablets, gym stuff, just no warning, boom, you're gone.

About 10 percent moved frequently:

> [We] moved a lot . . . My dad's solution to any problems that came up . . . instead of trying to fix 'em his solution was to move.
>
> . . . to this day Mom still moves a lot . . . she's not comfortable being anyplace very long . . . We grew up learning "Don't make friends with anybody because you're not gonna be here long enough to get to know 'em . . .
>
> We moved a lot. I went to four different high schools.
>
> I was in a lot of different schools . . . we moved around a lot because of my mom . . . I went all twelve years and didn't graduate.

About a fifth of the sample had witnessed the abuse of their mothers:

> The things . . . I remember . . . when my father was with us is when he beat my mother.

> The only thing I would change . . . is the verbal abuse . . . my father did to my mother.

A fifth ended up in foster care:

> We were in and out of foster homes. A lot. Fourteen years . . . in and out of foster home[s] . . . .

About 13 percent experienced early pregnancies:

> Well, I got married and I had children, I had to work. There was no time for school. Here I am, a teenager, and I have a husband and I have a child. School didn't fit in there anywhere.

Nearly 17 percent acted out rebelliousness in other ways:

> I used to get tired of . . . them doing whatever they wanted to do and being that I couldn't do anything . . . I would sneak outside, then when I would come back I would get hit . . . with shoes, extension cords, with anything that she would find near her . . . So I wound up in a group home until I was about 15 years old.

Research that indicates this level of detail is not common. This information can suggest policies better attuned to the needs of the individual women, with some prospect of helping them stabilize their lives, both emotionally and financially. We have additional specific information on issues they have around their own and their children's health, education, jobs, and the care of their children, as well as their coping strategies and support systems and their encounters with the welfare and related systems.

Education: The problems detailed above must be understood within the broader context of these women's lives. Some of these

issues were more common among certain types of women in our sample, indicating that a "one size fits all" welfare policy is not likely to work equally well with all women who need help moving out of poverty. The woman's level of education was a major factor related to the differences we found in the incidence of problems. We identified three major patterns:

1. The first pattern is one of severe, continuing problems, more characteristic of women who did not finish high school. These women reported difficulties during their childhood or teenage years, which prevented them from gaining the basic skills and knowledge most people gain from high school, first jobs, and other typical teen experiences. They were equally likely to have mothers who were either very supportive and working hard to support their families or mothers who were very abusive or neglectful. There were various reasons for not finishing high school. Issues other than pregnancy loomed large as reasons. One reason was frequent moves, another getting kicked out of their homes. These women have difficulty coping with daily life since they face challenges that make coping difficult. Although they may begin jobs, problems of the family and household as well as difficulties coping with the ordinary stresses of a job quickly overwhelm them. Without services to help them overcome these difficulties, they do not stay in a job long. They are often from working poor families in the urban, southeastern part of the state, somewhat more likely to be African American. They are on average about five years younger (27.7) than the women in the other two groups. They are more likely than the other two groups to have been rebellious when young, sometimes for no apparent reason. They also experienced higher rates of neglect, and if something went wrong when they were young, they more often ended up in foster homes. They experienced the highest rate of work-preventing illness, especially mental illness.
2. The second pattern, one of working hard and staying focused on survival, was more characteristic of women who had completed high school. While these women may have a high school diploma, they are finding they are not able to earn a living wage. Women in this group

earn less than they need, and they seem to be stuck in low wage jobs with little potential for advancement. The struggle to juggle expenses and avoid trouble is a source of stress, but they see little chance for upward mobility without more education. Struggles with day-to-day survival, which often involves working more than one job and trying to squeeze in as much time with their children as possible, make higher education a luxury they can't afford. They had the highest rates of reported abuse when they were young, and more often said their parents or other relatives had alcohol or drug problems. They were more likely than the women in the first group to have grown up in families on welfare, but most often grew up in families somewhere between middle and working class, often moving back and forth between the two. When things went wrong, there was often a family member who would take them in.

3. Pattern three, a pattern of succeeding with major assistance during young adulthood, was observed among the women who had some postsecondary education or job training. They were more often from the northern, rural part of the state. A significant portion of them came from middle-class families; more than 10 percent came from two-parent families. The majority of them had benefited for some of their childhood from having a wage-earning father in the home. However, some of them had some of the same background experiences that seem to overwhelm those in group 1. They attribute their success not only to their education but also to major assistance from family and friends. The assistance these women received included such things as: a place to live while attending college, substantial help with child care, financial and material assistance during crises, assistance with transportation, assistance in getting needed health care (including mental health care), and assistance in finding jobs. This kind of help would be usual in the lives of young people from middle-class families, but families with fewer resources are usually unable to provide this degree of help.

Conclusions

As this small sampling of our full findings makes clear, these women as a whole have come from difficult situations and need a myriad of services not anticipated in current welfare reform policies. These services would include help for adults with learning disabilities, treatment for post-traumatic stress syndrome arising from experiences with abuse, and work on self-esteem issues that result from neglect and lack of family support as a child. We plan to communicate our findings to state and national policymakers. The findings provide greater insight into the lives and needs of women struggling to move out of poverty than has been present in the literature to this point. We plan to continue with our approach in the design of policy suggestions, based on our findings, as we have done throughout the project.

To this point, our collaborative approach has met with both success and distress in influencing policy. The rich stories we present appeal to policymakers, who are often unmoved by numbers alone. Helping them to see the underlying reality can be powerful. We are also able to mobilize a diverse group of people who speak to legislators about insights we have gained. The challenges include claims that we are not scientific, that we are advocates and not researchers, and that we are not connected to the more "official" system of evaluation research.

Despite its "power-sharing" and "power-shifting" *(Maguire 1996, 108)* potential, our model has presented challenges that underscore the struggles that arise in relationships where power is unequal. Learning to talk across our differences, to identify what each member can and cannot contribute to the project, and to mediate the stark material inequities in our lives beyond the research realm have all presented hurdles.

Any research involves tradeoffs. Although we are mindful of the problems associated with our model, we are also convinced that these problems are balanced by significant gains. A collaborative, shared leadership model for outreach scholarship is only one step toward research practices that may eventually shape public policies that are more responsive to those who are most affected by them. We remain committed to forging a path of participatory research because, with Gorelick *(1991)* we believe:

> To understand the different milieus in which women experience their oppression and to trace their connections with each other, we need a social science produced

> by women of various social conditions (race, class, sexual preference, nationality, or ethnicity), a social science that reveals the commonalities and structured conflicts of the hidden structures of oppression, both as they are felt and as they are observed. *(1991, 474)*

Our model provides one important first step on this path.

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