THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE OKLAHOMA MARRIAGE INITIATIVE TO INDIVIDUALS RECEIVING TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES

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The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) is the first large scale program in the country to promote marriage. One of the main audiences for marriage promotion is low-income families. This study provides the historical context and background of how the OMI has been implemented. In particular, this study examines the implementation of the OMI to TANF recipients. This study provides the background of the OMI and raises some issues related to its implementation. These issues include how the goals of the program are defined, lack of caseworker reinforcement, and the need to address other issues related to poverty that impedes the development of healthy relationships.

In 1999 Oklahoma launched a large scale statewide initiative to promote marriage. The goal of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative (OMI) is to strengthen marriages and reduce the number of divorces in Oklahoma. The OMI is far reaching and not limited to one particular audience. A major focus of the OMI is to train individuals to lead marriage education workshops that promote marital stability through the teaching of communication and relationship skills. Since it began, OMI has trained thousands of workshop leaders from many backgrounds including the religious, public, and not-for-profits sectors. The funding for OMI has come almost entirely from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. TANF was created as a part of federal welfare reform legislation that was enacted in 1996. One of the goals of welfare reform was to encourage two-parent families, particularly among low-income populations. Although OMI is broader then just low-income populations, it has several particular programs that are geared toward low-income individuals. One program in particular, Within My Reach (WMR), was developed specifically for low-income individuals, not couples. Currently the WMR curriculum is being offered to TANF clients in several Oklahoma Department of Human Services offices across the state. The focus of this study is the implementation of OMI and how WMR is presented to TANF recipients.

This paper is a case study of policy implementation in one particular site. This study uses qualitative techniques of interviews and observation. While it contains some elements of both the top-down and bottom-up perspectives, this study fits into the implementation literature as a bottom-up approach (Hill & Hupe 2002; Lipsky 1980). It contains an interesting story of a bottom-up policy implementation. This paper does not test any specific hypothesis, but rather is intended to provide a historical background and context for the way in which the OMI has been implemented to TANF clients. The first section deals with the research related to marriage in the low-income population. The next section deals with the history, goals, and methods of OMI. Research for this section was based on statements of public officials involved with the beginning of OMI. The next section looks at OMI from bottom up approach and deals with how OMI is implemented in one particular welfare office. Data is gathered from interviews with six agency staff, two TANF clients, and a WMR class observation. The focus of the study is how OMI reaches TANF clients and how it came to be that way. In particular, this study examines the Within My Reach curriculum and how it is administered to TANF clients. Finally, this study concludes with a discussion of some potential implementation issues. It is hoped that this study can provide a starting point for further research and analysis.

MARRIAGE AND POVERTY

The importance of family structure in relation to poverty first gained attention in the mid 1960s with the Moynihan Report. The report, entitled, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" was written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan when he was an employee of the Labor Department early in the Johnson administration. It argued that much of the poverty among African-American families was related to the decline of the number of two biological parent families among African-Americans. The report was controversial and was seen at the time as "blaming the victim" (Bensonsmith 2005). Since that time research has been conducted on family structure and child well-being. Seefeldt and Smock (2004) note that, "The upshot of this research is that, on average, children fare better when living with their married, biological parents, provided the marriage is a low conflict one" (10). They continue, "Children who grow up in other contexts face somewhat increased odds of experiencing negative outcomes such as lower school achievement, and behavioral and emotional problems" (10). McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) argue that about half of this difference in outcomes is related to higher socio-economic status among married couples. They note that, "Low income – and the sudden drop in income that is often associated with divorce – is the most important factor in children's lower achievement in single-parent homes, accounting for about half of the disadvantage" (3).

Concern about family structure became a major issue in the debate over welfare reform in 1996 (Haskins 2006). The Personal Responsibly and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) eliminated Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replaced it with TANF. Critics of AFDC claimed that it both reduced work effort among recipients and produced a disincentive to marry (Fagan 2001; Haskins 2006). TANF was designed to address these concerns. First, it required thirty hours of work-related activities from participants in exchange for assistance. Second, it encouraged the formation and maintenance of two parent families. TANF laid four specific goals that are related to work and family structure. They are,

> 1) To provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own home or in the home of relatives;

> 2) To end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
> 3) To prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of -wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and
> 4) To encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families (Children).

As a result of welfare reform policy makers and researchers begin to examine ways to encourage marriage among TANF recipients. Kathryn Edin (2000), using several hundred qualitative interviews, has identified five potential barriers to marriage among low-income women (Edin, 2000). They are "affordability, respectability, control, trust, and domestic violence" (Edin 2000, 118). Affordability deals with the many economic concerns that low-income women face. Theoretically, bringing a male partner into a household will increase the total household income. Edin (2000) finds that this is not the only concern among low-income women. She notes that, "though the total earnings a father can generate is clearly the most important dimension for mothers, so is the regularity, of those earnings, the effort men expended finding and keeping work, and the source of his income" (Edin 2000, 117). Other research has indicated that inflation adjusted income for men with lower levels of education has declined over the same time period that the number of mother-only families has increased. Some researchers have argued that this decline in earnings among men has played a part in the decline of two-parent families (Seefeldt & Smock, 2004). In addition, a study by Bitler et al. found that the emphasis on work surrounding welfare reform may in fact lead to decreases in marriage as more work leads to more women becoming economically self-sufficient (2004).

The second issue of respectability is also related to economic concerns. Edin (2000) points out that, "Even within very poor communities, residents make class-based distinctions among themselves" (120). She continues that most of the women she interviewed held the "eventual goal [to] become 'respectable,' and they believed that respectability was greatly enhanced by a marriage tied to a routinely employed partner earning wages significantly above the legal minimum" (Edin 2000, 120). This observation ties into other research that has found that the goal of many low-income women is marriage and that low-income women hold the same views of marriage as those with middle and upper incomes (Ciabattari 2006; Litchter, Batson, & Brown 2004; Mauldon, London, Fein, Patterson, & Sommer 2004).

The third barrier that Edin identified was control. She noted that many low-income women believed that potential male partners would hold authoritarian views of his role in the home. They feared that these men would want to "take charge" and be the "head of the house" (Edin 2000, 121). They were also concerned about giving up control over how their children are being raised. In addition, most women expressed concern about time restraints and how a husband might take time that a mother might otherwise spend with her child (Edin 2000).

The fourth barrier is trust. Most of the women expressed concern about the infidelity of potential male partners. Most of the women had personal experiences with men being unfaithful or had known of such experiences by their "friends, relatives, and neighbors" (Edin 2000, 125).

The final barrier that Edin discusses is domestic violence. Research has shown that between 20 and 32 percent of welfare recipients are currently experiencing domestic violence, while between 55 and 65 percent have experienced violence in the past (Postmus 2004). Edin identifies two possible explanations for the higher incidence of domestic violence among low-income couples. "First, mothers sometimes linked episodes of violence to fathers' fears about their ability to provide, especially in light of increased state efforts toward child support enforcement" (Edin 2000, 126-127). The second explanation offered for domestic violence is that, "some mothers living in crime ridden, inner-city neighborhoods talked about family violence as a carry-over from street violence" (Edin 2000, 127). For any marriage initiative to be successful it must find ways to deal with the barriers that Edin has outlined.

In 2002, the Bush administration proposed the "Healthy Marriage Initiative" which aims to "help couples who choose marriage for themselves develop the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain healthy marriage" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families as quoted by Seefeldt and Smock 2004, 12). The federal initiative in many ways reflects the state based Oklahoma Marriage Initiative.

THE OKLAHOMA MARRIAGE INITIATIVE

The marriage initiative grew from a report that was issued by economists from the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University. The focus of the report was on raising the per capita personal income in Oklahoma. As Governor Keating noted in his State of the State address in February 1999, the report made four recommendations. These recommendations included, a) infrastructure investment, including bridges and highways, b) tax policy, including reducing, "those taxes that discourage investment, saving, and productivity" c) increase the number of college graduates in Oklahoma, and lastly, d) make Oklahoma a right-to-work state (Keating, 1999). In addition to those factors, the report also concluded that there were several social indicators that seemed to hinder Oklahoma's economic growth. Testifying before the House Ways and Means Committee then director of the Oklahoma Health and Human Services Department Jerry Regier (2001), stated that the report's authors, "mentioned Oklahoma's high divorce rate, high rates of child deaths due to child abuse, and equally high rates of out-of-wedlock births" as issues that hindered Oklahoma's economic growth (2). Regier went on to quote an editorial by an economist from Oklahoma State University that stated, "Oklahoma's high divorce rate and low per – capita income are interrelated. They hold hands. They push and pull each other. There's no faster way for a married woman with children to become poor then to suddenly become a single mom" (2). As a result of this report Governor Keating laid out several policy goals in his 1999 State of the State address including, a) reducing the numbers of divorces in Oklahoma by one third by 2010 and b) reducing the rate of out-of-wedlock births in Oklahoma by one third by 2010. To help reach these goals, Keating convened a Conference on Marriage in March 1999 (Keating, 1999). Regier notes that Keating invited "30 leaders from each of seven sectors," these seven sectors included, "community service providers, education, business, media, religious, government, and legal" (2). The OMI began in 1999 as a result of this conference. Governor Keating laid out four large scale goals when OMI began. They are, "Reduce the divorce rate, Reduce out-of-wedlock births, Reduce alcohol and drug addiction, and Reduce child abuse and neglect" (Regier, 2001). Since its development, OMI has remained popular among policy makers in Oklahoma. Its implementation has continued under a new governor, Brad Henry, and under a new director of the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, Howard Hendrick (Dion 2006).

The OMI is an umbrella organization that houses several different programs. To achieve its broader goals, OMI's current focus is to "strengthen families and build healthy marriages through readily accessible marriage education services" (Dion 2006, 3). The marriage education that OMI offers includes workshops that teach couples communication and relationship skills, trains individuals to be workshop leaders, and offers "Family Expectations" a program geared toward couples expecting a baby or who have just given birth. In addition, OMI provides research on marriage and child well-being (OMI). Each of these services are offered free of charge and are not means – tested in anyway. However, "in exchange for receiving free workshop training from the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) curriculum developers, volunteers agree to provide at least four free workshops in their communities" (Dion 2006, 5). The majority of funding for OMI comes from the TANF block grant from the federal government. The Oklahoma Department of Human Services has set aside 10 million dollars of TANF funds for OMI. As Regier testified in 2001,

> Oklahoma has dramatically reduced welfare roles by 80% over the past six years, leaving approximately $100 million in 'surplus.' This welfare surplus provided an excellent resource and Governor Keating boldly asked the DHS Board to set aside 10% or $10 million for Marriage Initiative programs and services. The Board concurred and the money has been reserved to fund strategies to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce (3).

OMI established a contract with the public relations firm, Public Strategies Inc. (PSI) "to develop and manage the initiative" (Dion 2006, 2). The development of OMI proceeded largely along two tracks. The first was a media campaign to educate Oklahomans about the benefits of marriage. The second track was to develop services that could be provided to couples to strengthen relationship skills (Dion 2006). The second track was chosen as the higher priority for two main reasons (Dion 2006, 2). As Dion notes,

> First, the OMI expected that focused services would be necessary in order to create not just attitude change, but behavior

> change. Second, OMI leaders were concerned that media campaigns stressing the importance of healthy marriage could stimulate demand for services that could not be met until capacity was developed (2).

The services that OMI decided to provide included the marriage workshops based on the PREP curriculum. PREP is in essence a communication improvement curriculum designed for couples. PREP was developed by clinical psychologists and family and marriage therapists (Stanley, Markman, Peters, & Leber, 1995). PREP's curriculum is roughly 12 hours and "was designed to teach partners skills and ground rules for handling conflict and promoting intimacy" (Stanley et al. 1995, 393). It has shown effectiveness in several empirical studies; those studies however have dealt largely with white, middle-class couples (Boo 2003; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). PREP training is one of the main focal points of OMI. Since its inception, OMI has trained nearly 2,000 workshop leaders from across the state and across public and private sectors (OMI). In addition, several state agencies have trained personnel to provide PREP workshops. One reason that Dion (2006) notes for training agency staff is that, "public agencies tend to serve low – income clients, who otherwise may be difficult to reach" (5). Some of the targeted groups that have received PREP include,

> high school students, adult students, GED class participants, prison inmates and their partners / spouses, adolescent first offenders and their parents, TANF recipients, adoptive and foster parents, low-income parents, and members of the military and their partners / spouses, base and post employees (Dion 5 adapted from chart).

PREP was first offered to TANF clients in Oklahoma in October 2003 (Bolerjack 2007). It began in the Midwest City office located in Oklahoma County (Bolerjack 2007; Kinzie 2007). Shorty after PREP began to be offered concerns were raised about the middle class tilt of the curriculum (Kinzie 2007). Since that time however, researchers associated with the development of PREP have developed Within My Reach (WMR), an education curriculum geared toward disadvantaged individuals. WMR curriculum has been taught to TANF recipients since October 2005 (OKDHS 2006).

WMR was developed specifically for low-income individuals that may or may not be in a romantic relationship. WMR "is a relationship decisions and skills program for helping individuals achieve their goals in relationships, family, and marriage" (Stanley, Pearson, & Kline 2005). It is based on PREP and was developed by many of the same researchers and developers. The most important difference between PREP and WMR is that WMR is designed for individuals, not couples. As Stanley et al (2005) notes, there are two "fundamental premises" to WMR.

> The first is that virtually all people have aspirations for relationships that are happy, healthy, and stable – and that these aspirations are most often expressed in terms of a desire for success in marriage. The second [is] that the decisions one makes in romantic attachments will affect the possibility of success in every other aspect of life – especially in child rearing and employment (17-18).

Stanley continues, "Taken together, this new curriculum is designed to improve the chances for participants to attain relationship success for themselves and the benefit of their children" (18). Stanley goes on to outline four "relationship goals and outcomes" (18). They include,

> 1) Helping those in viable relationships to cultivate, protect, and stabilize their unions, and to marry if desired;
>
> 2) Helping those in damaging relationships to leave safely; and/or
>
> 3) Helping those desiring a romantic relationship to choose future partners wisely.
>
> 4) Helping those who are unsure about either the viability or health of their present relationship, or unsure about what they aspire to in the future, to understand more clearly their situation and how to move forward toward their goals (18).

Stanley also mentions that the WMR curriculum is useful for improving communication within any relationship, not just romantic ones. WMR is based on three broad areas of major focus (Stanley, et al 2005).

The first focus area "is about defining healthy and unhealthy relationships by focusing on the themes of safety, family background, [and] expectations" (Stanley et al 2005, 19). The idea of safety is defined by three major types. First is "emotional safety" defined as "being able to talk openly and well, being supportive, being able to talk without fighting, etc (5). The second safety type is "personal safety" defined as "freedom from fear of physical or emotional harm and intimidation" (5). The last is "commitment safety" which is "security of a clear future, mutual investment, and fidelity" (5). Participants discuss what constitutes a healthy versus an unhealthy relationship. In addition, participants are taught the "sliding vs. deciding" framework to evaluate decisions. Someone is understood to slide into a decision when they enter a "relationship transition" without clear forethought of potential adverse consequences. Deciding therefore implies a better understanding of the future risks and rewards of the relationship transition. The sliding vs. deciding framework came from research done on unmarried cohabiting couples. However, it "also provides a very useful way to discuss risks of various other types of relationship transitions that occur without clear decisions about potential longer term consequences: sexual involvement, pregnancy, cohabitation, marriage, and so forth" (21). Stanley notes that low-income individuals are not more likely to slide into decisions then middle and upper-income individuals, but that sliding into poor decisions has a disproportionately more negative impact for low-income individuals. Stanley also noted that TANF participants in Oklahoma experienced "an extremely strong reaction denoting relevance and usefulness for [the sliding vs. deciding] way of thinking" (22).

The second area of focus "is conflict management and affect regulation" (23). This part of the curriculum focus's on "negative interaction and conflict" and on domestic violence in particular (Stanley et al. 2005, 23). Participants are taught about negative interactions between adults and the impact these interactions have on children living in the home. In addition, WMR outlines some behavior warning signs associated with domestic violence. Ideas about negative relationships are reinforced in this section and participants are encouraged to recognize the warnings signs, leave dangerous or potentially dangerous relationships, and to avoid such relationships in the future. Other areas of focus in this section are encouraging participants to take "time outs" when interactions start to become heated and to use the "speaker /

listener technique." The speaker / listener technique encourages participates to listen and not speak while the other person is speaking. It also encourages participates to repeat back what the other person has said in the participants own words.

The final focus area encourages participants to "go deeper in their thinking about relationships, aspirations they hold, and the importance of various dynamics for how their children may do in life" (26). Stanley lays out several relationship issues that are considered in the final section of the WMR curriculum. They include,

> gender distrust and infidelity, multiple partner fertility, risks to children of multiple transitions of romantic partners in the home, risks in partner choices and relationships that are associated with prior abuse, forgiveness, commitment risks and rewards, information about marriage and children, and complexities of how that information may or may not relate to the situation of a particular participants, and guidance for dealing constructively with step-parenting type dynamics with ex-partners (27).

In addition, participants are encouraged to examine their relationship goals and how those goals might be achieved. Additional considerations are discussed regarding how the issues taught in the WMR class are applicable to all types of relationships, including with the participants children, employers, and caseworkers.

TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES APPLICATION PROCESS

To understand how WMR is implemented to TANF clients, it is important to understand how it fits in the context of the entire application process.[1] Most initial TANF applications are made on a walk-in basis to any Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS) office. The client fills out an application and can either turn it in and wait to be contacted by a caseworker or can wait to see an initial caseworker that will screen the application. The initial caseworker then screens the application to determine presumptive eligibility and discuses with the applicant the information provided on the application and what programs the applicant may be eligible for. Once the initial worker determines that the client may be eligible for TANF the application is assigned to a caseworker. The caseworker that is assigned the application provides the client with an appointment time for an interview and outlines items the client needs to bring to the interview to verify information provided on the application. Items may include paycheck stubs, third party statements to verify living situations, bank statements, school records for children, and identification. It is during this interview process that eligibility is determined.

Once the client is determined eligible they are required to participate in a week long (Monday – Friday) orientation class.[2] During the first day of orientation clients are given an education assessment to determine their reading and math levels. On Tuesday's client are administered the Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory (SASSI). This instrument is designed to determine the probability of a substance abuse problem (Institute). Clients that register with a high probability of substance abuse are required to have a urine analysis (UA). The SASSI test is also contracted out by OKDHS, although OKDHS employees can become certified to administer it (Mears 2007). On Wednesday's clients participate in the first session of WMR. The class is presented in a discussion / workshop format by someone trained by OMI. Thursday's are for "staffing," in which the client, caseworker and program representatives discuss what work-related activity the client will participate in. These activities can include GED classes, job-training, and/or job search. On the last day of orientation, clients participate in the second half of WMR

METHOD

DATA

Data for this study is qualitative. It was taken from interviews with clients and caseworkers and observation of a WMR class. The site chosen for this study was the OKDHS office in Midwest City, Oklahoma. Midwest City is a suburb of Oklahoma City and is located in Oklahoma County. This site was chosen because it was the first site for PREP and WMR in Oklahoma. Interviews were conducted with six agency employees. The first was with Social Service Specialist Gary Mears. The second interview was with John Bolerjack. Bolerjack is a former supervisor of TANF caseworkers and played a large part in the way that PREP classes were originally given to TANF recipients. John is currently still employed by OKDHS, but is a supervisor in another area and no longer deals directly with TANF workers, clients, or cases. Interviews were conducted with three TANF caseworkers that wish to remain anonymous. These interviews were conducted and the WMR class was observed on Friday April 13th, 2007. A final interview was conducted on November 7, 2007 by telephone with Mary Jo Kinzie, TANF program field representative. Mrs. Kinzie works at the state office of OKDHS and she is the liaison between OKDHS and OMI. The class observed consisted of two TANF recipients. The class was lead by Gary Mears. Gary indicated that class sizes average from 2 to 5 participants. WMR classes at this site are given either by Gary Mears or Hazel Kesner. Hazel is a volunteer and former counselor and college professor (Mears 2007). Both Gary and Hazel received training from OMI with regard to leading workshops in both PREP and WMR.

RESULTS

HISTORY OF OMI IMPLEMENTATION TO TANF CLIENTS

Although OMI began in 1999, it did not become a requirement for some TANF recipients until 2003. It was first offered in the Midwest City office in October 2003. It started there almost by accident. Mary Jo Kinzie (2007) noted that the thinking on how to present the material to TANF clients operated on "two prongs." One prong was at the OKDHS state office level, where they were "looking for ways to get the PREP material out" to more individuals and communities, particularly low-income communities (Kinzie 2007). The second prong was at the Midwest City OKDHS office. Representatives from OMI had come to the Midwest City office to encourage TANF caseworkers and supervisors to refer TANF clients to a PREP workshop that was being offered in Midwest City. It so happened that about this time a contract to run two days of the orientation class was set to expire. John Bolerjack, an OKDHS agency employee who at the time supervised TANF caseworkers, felt that the communication skills offered by the PREP curriculum would be beneficial to TANF clients. John discussed with OMI and PSI representatives the idea of filling this up coming vacancy in the orientation classes with the PREP curriculum. The idea was approved and PREP began being implemented in the orientation classes in October 2003. Initially OMI sent trained individuals to the office to lead the classes, including Hazel Kesner. Eventually some agency staff, including Gary Mears, received the PREP training from OMI. Over the next six months John Bolerjack felt that he had noticed some changes in the way clients interacted with OKDHS staff as a result of the PREP curriculum (Bolerjack 2007). In an email to Mary Myrick, from PSI, dated May 21, 2004 he stated that,

> I personally believe that we have experienced a great result from it. We have several specific clients that I watched change through this class. The change has been very noticeable in these individuals. Our workers have also commented on the improvement in certain individuals. Also, I speak with our client[s] personally in every other class [and] as a class, they are telling me that they are learning things that will help them with relationships and with family issues, the first goal of the class. One other big indicator is the raw number of calls of complaints about worker actions, they are greatly reduced, and this in a period of continued reduction in our TANF rolls. Our office has reduced the rolls by about 40% in the last 18 months and increased participation rates as well.

Gary Mears estimates that roughly 1,000 clients have been through either the PREP or WMR classes in the Midwest City office from October 2003 to April 2007. As a result of the perceived success in the Midwest City office, PREP began being used in more offices across the state in 2004 and 2005 (Mears 2007). In particular, other offices in Area III began to use PREP in their orientation process. OKDHS divides jurisdiction into six areas across the state. Area III includes Oklahoma County and Canadian County. Mary Jo Kinzie notes that much of the push for using PREP as a part of the orientation process came from the leadership of Area III director Debbie Sexton (2007). In October of 2005 the PREP curriculum was officially replaced by WMR (OKDHS 2006).

WITHIN MY REACH CLASS

The WMR class takes place in a conference room at the Midwest City office. Participants are given WMR workbooks that are provided by curriculum developers. Gary Mears lead the class of two TANF clients. An overhead projector was used with WMR overhead materials provided by the developers. The class was done in a very informal discussion style with active participation by the TANF clients. The workbooks included several question and answer sections and Gary paused several times to allow clients to complete some of those sections. All the material in the workbook was covered, though not necessarily in the exact order of the workbook. Marriage was seldom discussed and most of the examples discussed, both by Gary and the clients dealt with communication between the clients and their children. Gary indicated in an interview that he "doesn't push marriage" in these classes but instead hopes to improve client communication skills with their children and with future employers (Mears 2007). John Bolerjack indicated that he sees the classes, not as a way to push marriage on TANF clients but rather as helping clients learn to have "better relationships with every person in their lives through communication and to leave bad relationships sooner" (Bolerjack 2007). Mary Jo Kinzie also emphasized the focus on the enhancement of communication skills and the possibility of the WMR curriculum to help "families feel more in control" of their lives (2007).

CASEWORKER INTERVIEWS

Caseworker interviews were conducted with three caseworkers to try to answer several questions. **What and how much did caseworkers know about OMI generally and WMR specifically?** Of the three only one felt that he/she knew much about the WMR curriculum. The other two mentioned that they "didn't know enough about it" or "had not been trained on it." The one with knowledge about WMR felt that it "doesn't do much good." All of the three had heard of OMI and understood it to have the goal of helping clients in their relationships. **Do they do any follow up to reinforce the WMR material?** All three caseworkers indicated that they did not attempt to reinforce any of the WMR curriculum. Opportunities for reinforcement could include the initial interview prior to the WMR classes, the end of orientation class when clients are assigned their work-related activity, and during the required 90 day follow up. One caseworker explained that after orientation class that they "concentrate on participation and don't have time to follow up." Under TANF states are required to have at least 50% of their TANF caseloads participating in work-related activities for 30 hours a week. Each worker is required to keep their participation rate, the number of their total cases divided by the number of cases with individuals participating, at 50%. Each of the workers discussed the pressure they feel to keep their participation rate high and how that is where the majority of client communications is focused. **Do they notice any changes in client's communication skills after the orientation class?** None of the caseworkers felt that they noticed any change in client communication skills after the WMR classes. One caseworker noted that "some clients have mentioned that they learned a lot" but that caseworker notes that they "don't notice a change." **In general do they view marriage as an important goal for TANF clients?** Each of the caseworkers felt that marriage is a positive goal for TANF clients, but none felt that it was realistic. One of the workers noted that the clients "have enough trouble all ready" without having to worry about marriage. Another worker mentioned that clients have "basic needs that have to be met" before marriage could be an option. The third caseworker said that marriage would be a "good goal for the family and kids" but that the clients, "don't want to be married because they have the man, the kids, the sex, and the free money." That worker also indicated that he/she felt that the clients often were not honest about their relationships with the father(s) of their children and are often receiving some assistant from them that goes unreported.

CLIENT INTERVIEWS

Interviews were conducted with both participants of the class that was observed. One client was a Caucasian female in her early 20's that has a four-year-old child and a nine-month-old baby. She stated that she is currently still legally married but had left her husband due to domestic violence. She stated that she has had another relationship since, with the father of the nine-month-old, but had ended the relationship due to substance abuse issues. The client indicated that she had substance abuse issues as well, but had recently been through treatment. The other client was an African-American female in her mid-thirties with a 20-year old and a 15-year old child. She stated that she has never been married and that "she never saw herself" as getting married. She also stated that she had been sexually abused as a child and that she had issues with trust stemming from that abuse. Both clients felt that they had learned a lot from the WMR classes, particularly how to communicate better with their children and with other people in their lives.

DISCUSSION

It must be noted that this study is limited as to how well it can be generalized across all OKDHS offices statewide. The focus of this study was on one particular welfare office. However, it can offer insight into some possible implementation issues. One issue is how goals are defined. If the goal of OMI, with regard to TANF clients, is to increase marriage among that population then it is not likely to be successful. As the research by Edin (2000) points out, there are several barriers to low-income individuals getting married and not all are addressed by the WMR curriculum. In particular, WMR does not address any economic concerns and those were deemed most important by low-income single mothers. This study was only concerned with how OMI is implemented to TANF clients, not the entire low-income population of Oklahoma. If OMI wants to increase marriage among the low-income population, it may need to explore other ways to reach that population. This is particularly true because of the sharp decline in TANF cases since welfare reform. Oklahoma went from an average monthly TANF case load of 13,127 in FY2005 to a monthly average caseload of 11,381 in FY2006, a decrease of 13.30% in one year (OKDHS 2006). As the number of TANF clients continues to decline the number of people that can be potentially exposed to the WMR curriculum declines. The WMR curriculum does deal positively with some of the other issues raised by Edin. In particular, is the strong emphasis it places on domestic violence. Clients are taught many of the warning signs that lead to domestic violence and are encouraged to leave those relationships. In addition, clients are taught what makes a healthy vs. an unhealthy relationship. Helping the clients make these distinctions is important and could possibly lead to healthier relationships in the future. Another problem with marriage as a goal is that it implicitly assumes that clients do not want to marry. As noted, research indicates that low-income individuals hold the same desire to marry as upper and middle income individuals. Therefore, the focus of OMI, at least with regard to low-income individuals, should not be on attitude change. With these issues in mind the effectiveness of WMR should be measured not in terms of whether clients eventually marry, but rather in terms of how much they have learned about healthy relationships and effective communication. To achieve this goal it would seem that reinforcement from caseworkers would be essential. It is not likely that a two day exposure to WMR is enough to change client attitude or behavior. More research needs to be conducted, on a statewide basis, to determine the level of reinforcement by caseworkers of WMR and whether the level of reinforcement has any effect. As this research found, there is little or no caseworker reinforcement and there is also little notice of change after the WMR classes. Supervisor John Bolerjack noted that he noticed changes among clients after exposure to the PREP curriculum; however this observation was not noticed by the current caseworkers, who arguably have more direct contact with the clients. A possible explanation for the change, particularly the fewer complaint calls, that John noticed could be the fact that caseloads were reduced by 40% over the same time period. Fewer clients could mean fewer calls. In addition, John specifically mentioned a reduction in the number of complaints about worker actions; it's possible that the actions the clients were calling to complain about were caseworkers closing their cases. This could explain the initial volume of calls, the reduction of calls, and the 40% case reduction that was experienced over those six months. However, it may also be true that caseworkers have too micro a view to notice broader changes in TANF clients. As noted, caseworkers are most concerned with client participation in work activities. This focus may set up a more adversarial relationship between the caseworkers and clients. One of the caseworkers in particular seemed to take a more adversarial tone about TANF clients. In addition, as clients move in and out of the program time with caseworkers may be short and sporadic. This would make it difficult for caseworkers to notice any long term changes. Longitudinal research needs to be done that follows up with clients over the space of several time periods to see if attitude and behavior changes are present as a result of WMR.

Another implementation concern deals with the WMR materials. The curriculum is relatively new and untested. However, as Stanley et al (2005) noted the curriculum is based on empirical research and is currently being evaluated by OMI and PSI. The materials seem to offer ways for clients to learn to improve their communication skills. However, as the caseworkers noted, clients face many more issues then successful communication skills. Both clients in the class that was observed had several barriers to overcome. Just between the two clients there was domestic violence, sexual abuse, substance abuse, and lack of a high – school diploma. As Gary Mears noted, "nearly everyone that walks through the door has difficult problems" (Mears 2007). To be successful the barriers that clients bring with them must be addressed. Expanded services may be necessary to address the mental health, substance abuse, and other issues to which TANF clients are disproportionately exposed. Only when these issues are effectively dealt with can clients become successful employees and successful romantic partners. The WMR curriculum could play a role, but more may need to be done.

A second issue with the materials is how they are presented. The success of WMR, in some ways, depends on the quality of the person presenting it. OMI has seemed to take great care to standardize the curriculum, by requiring workshop leaders to attend training and by providing the workbooks and other teaching materials. Even so, evaluations of WMR may need to control for teacher quality.

This study looks at implementation from both the top down and the bottom up perspective in order to present a somewhat fuller picture. It is a study of policy implementation not a policy evaluation. It could serve as a guidepost for a full evaluation by identifying possible implementation issues that could affect the outcome. It also adds to the bottom up literature by showing an example of how agency personnel affected the way policy was implemented.

NOTES

[1] The application process detailed here is from one particular welfare office. However, the application process is similar statewide.

[2] The orientation process is made, for the most part of the local office level. However, the process described here is applied across all offices in Oklahoma County.

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