Evaluating Developmental Disabilities Services

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This chapter focuses on contemporary program evaluation activities in adult developmental disabilities (DD) services. Program evaluation is best understood as a:

A tool through which management seeks to understand the operational elements of a social program and the processes through which beneficial impacts are achieved. Critical issues confronting administrators involve (1) the degree to which an individual's needs and abilities mesh with the programmatic and social characteristics of his or her residential situation; (b) responsiveness to constituent demands and resource limitations related to changing care philosophies, new legislation, and regulation; and (c) the determination of relative program benefits and costs... (Jacobson & Schwartz, 1991, pp. 35–36)

This definition is similar in its focus and overt parameters to services research (Jacobson & Holburn, in press, 2004, based on Newman, Howard, Windle, & Hohmann, 1994), which also similarly encompasses

epidemiology (including risk factors) and demographics of service and of services distribution... the development of improved measures of disability..., the efficacy and effectiveness of treatment for specific disorders..., rehabilitative and habilitative features parameters of service delivery programs or classes of services, and assessment of outcomes of treatment with respect to alleviation of disorders, alleviations of symptoms

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There are both critical and not-so-critical distinctions between program evaluation and services research. Some of the critical distinctions lie in considerations of breadth, application of findings, and generalizability of findings, whereas some of the less-critical distinctions involve focus of studies (where considerable overlap is apparent between these activities), and the initial goals of evaluative or research projects. While evaluative studies are generally intended to produce findings and services research often addresses administrative or systemic concerns, and hence are structured for application of findings at these differing areas of emphasis, the methods used in some evaluative studies may permit broad applicability of findings that transcend individual service organizations. Critically, depending on the breadth and clarity of definition of measured independent and dependent variables, and parameters such as single-site or multisite data collection and measurement, ensuing recommendations that are developed for management application may also demonstrate suitability for more pervasive generalization.

COMPLEMENTARY EVALUATION REVIEWS

The primary focus of this chapter is on considerations of individualization and implementation of specialized interventions in contemporary DD services. This focus was selected because substantive summaries of other aspects of past and present services have encompassed numerous other aspects of service operations (e.g., Jacobson & Holburn, in press, 2004; Jacobson & Schwartz, 1983, 1991), including foci on implementing evaluation activities (Jacobson & Regula, 1988) and training personnel or transferring technology (Jacobson & Holburn, 2004). Jacobson and Schwartz (1983), during a very active period of deinstitutionalization activity, focused their review on analysis of community residences and their impact on people served, and offered a general model for evaluation based on primary dimensions of developmental progress, quality of life, and home-like environments. Later, as community services had become well-developed, more diverse in form, and as barriers to effective coordination and cross-organizational collaboration had become more evident, Jacobson and Schwartz (1991) broadened their review of evaluative findings to include family living, supportive residential foster care, and medical and behavioral services, heightened emphasis on organizational and management issues such as staff turnover, and slightly increased attention to consumer and family. These reviews also identified instruments or measures suitable for application in evaluation of a range of settings.

Although it can be suggested that the primary concerns of program evaluation in developmental services have changed over the past 20 years (Schalock, 2000), in fact a substantive shift in the purposes of research is not so much apparent as a shift in the variables of interest. Whereas