Innovation and Implementation in Mental Health Services for Homeless Adults: A Case Study

Barbara J. Felton, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT: Seeking to identify conditions that support newly implemented evidence-based practices, this case study examined an implementation in which an existing agency was invited to move into the neighboring county to introduce its “housing first” practice with seriously mentally ill homeless adults. Using a constructivist methodology to elicit the narratives of key actors and observers about the implementation and its attendant controversy, this study found three issues at the core of actors’ experiences: mode of presentation, use of an outside agency and the questioned uniqueness of the new practice. Barriers rather than facilitators dominated participants’ interpretations of events despite significant researcher-observed facilitators.

KEY WORDS: innovation in mental health services; supported housing; seriously mentally ill homeless.

With increasing interest in spurring the adoption of empirically validated practices into routine mental health care settings, research has begun to identify the conditions that are needed—at both the individual- and systems-level—to produce and sustain faithful replications of exemplary practices. At the individual level, conditions identified as essential for sustaining the changes in providers’ behavior include: intensive, multi-approach training, ongoing supervision, persistent short-term feedback on technique, and longer-term feedback on outcomes (Anthony, Cohen & Farkas, 1990; Persons, 1995; Torrey et al., 2001; Wade, Treat

Barbara J. Felton is affiliated with Rutgers University.

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Address correspondence to Barbara J. Felton, Institute for Health, Health Care Policy, and Aging Research, 30 College Avenue, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1293; e-mail: bfelton@ihhcpar.rutgers.edu.
and Stuart, 1998). At the systems level, securing new forms of practice can require: greater system integration (Jacobs, Davidson, Steiner & Hoge, 2002), realignments of referral protocols (Burnes-Lynch & Salzer, 2001), reallocations of funding (Stein, 1995), rearrangements of organizational incentives and criteria for evaluation (Nelson, Lord & Ochocka, 2001) and reconfigurations of the composition of decision-making groups (Constantino & Nelson, 1995).

Case studies of innovation in community mental health have added to our understanding of the forces that can operate as barriers and facilitators to implementation efforts (Schulz & Greenberg, 1995). Conditions found to act as barriers to change include: fears of violence, beliefs in the chronicity of mental illness, lack of funding, legal barriers, territorialism among service agencies, and rigidity of organizational boundaries (Hasenfeld, 1983; Hoge & Howenstine, 1997; Nelson, Lord & Ochocka, 2001; Schulz & Greenberg, 1995; Stein, 1995). Interest groups have operated as barriers and as facilitators (Schulz & Greenley, 1995). Other facilitators found to shape change efforts include: active change agents, a socially committed political context, participants' genuine concern for the needs of the disenfranchised, participants' recognition of a need for change, and evidence of the proven success and cost-reducing advantages of a new form of care (Nelson, 1994; Stein, 1995; Schulz & Greenberg, 1995).

The research methods used in the case studies in this area are traditional ones in which the researcher acts as the observer and interpreter of events. Typically, data for these studies are observed structural changes induced by change efforts, pre-existing and changed organizational alignments, policy initiatives as found in mission statements and other official directives, documented plans for new practices, and funding patterns (e.g., Greenley, 1995). Interpretations are grounded in frameworks derived from systems or organizational theory and/or theories of knowledge dissemination and change (Nelson et al., 2001; Schulz & Greenberg, 1995).

A valuable complement to such knowledge, as yet largely unused, lies in interpretations of change processes as formulated by change agents and other participants in the innovation. Researchers have argued for methods that utilize the narratives, or constructed realities, of stakeholders in evaluation research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Brown, 1995), in calls for collaborative research (Green & Mercer, 2001; Nelson et al., 2001), and in theory development (Gergen, 2001; Rappaport, 2000). Research using actors-as-observers and -interpreters of the process of change could add considerably to our knowledge of implementation dynamics.