PARALLEL PROCESSES IN COMMUNITY-BASED PRACTICE RESEARCH

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Drawing upon the clinical practice concept of parallel process, the researcher describes her experience conducting an evaluation of a community-based case-management program that provides services to those persons receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) who have significant barriers to employment. The evaluation project encountered two simultaneous patterns of parallel process: "skepticism and uncertainty" and "validation and encouragement." Identifying these two patterns broadened thinking beyond the immediate data results to the confluence of multiple factors in community-based evaluation. Clinical practice concepts (such as parallel process) can serve as vital tools in community-based research to help researchers understand, intervene, and make recommendations regarding systemic relations even when this is not necessarily the topic of the evaluation.

Engagement

Having recently received my Ph.D. and begun a tenure-track position, I wanted to develop a research agenda doing practice evaluation in a community-based setting. I had previously worked at a family service agency, so I was cheered when I read an article in *Families in Society* about the Connecticut Council of Family Service Agencies' (CCFSA) efforts to incorporate research in some of their community-based programs (Ristau, 2001). After approaching the director to explore options for collaboration, I then met with the program director of the Empowering People for Success (EPS) program. She was interested in evaluating the program because the funder (Connecticut Department of Social Services) was beginning to request outcome data in addition to other statistical information regarding service use. The process had begun.

In speaking with the program director and other staff, I discovered that the State of Connecticut Department of Social Services (DSS) selected the Connecticut Council of Family Service Agencies to provide community-based case-management services through the components of the Empowering People for Success Program with those clients who face significant barriers and/or have been sanctioned by DSS. These program components help families throughout Connecticut as they transition from welfare to work by emphasizing outreach and engagement in order to obtain a complex understanding of the family in their environment. The EPS program provides intensive, strength-based, case-management services for those persons receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) who have significant barriers to employment. Primary service managers (PSMs) actively engage with potential clients through home-based and community outreach. After clients agree to participate in the program, a comprehensive assessment of family strengths and needs is completed with clients, resulting in a mutually constructed family development plan. Program activities also include in-home mental health and substance-abuse assessments and interventions when indicated, referrals to community resources, and support for clients as they negotiate and communicate with other service providers and employers. Clients are eligible to participate in the program for up to eight months (two to three months if they have already been sanctioned by DSS).

I began to put together my ideas for an evaluation project as I continued to meet with

administrators and primary service managers. We were getting to know each other, exploring whether this project could work. I was moved by the PSMs' commitment, tenacity, and creativity anchored in a context of uncertainty, hardship, and mixed success. They rejoiced with clients when there was positive change, agonized when they needed to close cases prematurely, and worked twice as hard out of fear – fear that if clients don't succeed they will be destitute. The fear stems from real consequences: time limits, eligibility requirements, sanctions, and an unpredictable state safety net. PSMs spoke of their efforts to counter fear by emphasizing potential. They would do this by sharing personal experiences with clients of when they had personally stumbled but had gotten back on track to encourage clients to persevere. PSMs noted how hard it is to persevere, however, because clients and PSMs frequently encounter negative, disrespectful comments from many in the social service field that reflect stereotypes about those who receive TANF.

In conversations with PSMs I heard about their struggles to establish relationships with clients who are distrustful of them, expecting the same unpredictable process and disrespectful encounters they experience in other settings. They expressed frustration with some policies as well. For example, a client's case must be closed when certain income levels are reached even if substantial barriers persist. The unintended consequence is that clients need to fail to continue to receive services.

What a challenge: implementing a relational, empowering community-based program within the context of bleak economic times and a restrictive, judgmental, temporary family-assistance policy structure. I continued to wonder about what it is like for the PSMs to work in this context. I also wondered how the evaluation project would be impacted by this confluence of factors.

Despite these concerns, the program administrators and I decided to move forward with the evaluation. The evaluation consisted of administrative data from the usual program forms completed by PSMs (an assessment tool, service plans, weekly contact forms, and closing forms). An additional tool—Problem Resolution Outcome Survey (PROS)—that assessed the clients' problem solving skills and problems solving efficacy (Heppner, Cooper, Mulholland, & Wei, 2001) was included as a pre/post measure. The evaluation plan also included a follow-up contact by PSMs with clients six months after case closing to obtain information on their well-being and to invite them to participate in an interview regarding their TANF and EPS experiences with social work students. I provided training for the PSMs on how to administer the problem-solving skills tool. I was optimistic, hopeful, and pleased with the collaboration that had occurred thus far. Although PSMs worked with the clients' experiences of TANF policies (e.g., compliance, unpredictable enforcement, disrespectful attitudes, little flexibility), it appeared that PSMs were not caught up within these uncertain dynamics. The evaluation was finally launched.

Implementation

One month after data collection had begun, I was informed that referrals were significantly down due to layoffs and transfers of DSS workers, resulting from an economic deficit in the state's budget. The EPS director also informed me that the EPS program was being restructured to streamline and clarify responsibility and accountability within the organization. The program model was not changing, but the chain of command was.

My heart sank. This carefully constructed evaluation was already in jeopardy due to fewer referrals and the uncertainty regarding the impact of the organizational shifts. I continued to monitor the referrals and extended the time frame in which clients would

be included in the project. Referrals picked up and I began to plan for the analysis of a small sample of the data (those who completed the program in less than six months).

I received the interim data and was glad to see that there were over 80 clients in this initial sample. As I analyzed the data from the various agency forms, however, I was once again surprised. Where were the data for many of the clients? There were demographic data and closing status data, but in-between it was like Swiss cheese – different data were present for different clients. What had happened? When I shared this with the program director she, too, was surprised. Audit checks had found some missing information, but it had not appeared to be a major issue.

I tried to understand why paperwork was unevenly completed by PSMs, and started wondering whether PSMs were indeed affected by interactional dynamics similar to what clients told them regarding their experiences in the TANF system. I began to notice some parallels in the experiences of clients and PSMs. Their future income (TANF or agency employment) depends upon their compliance with agency policies and procedures. This compliance, however, does not guarantee future income because funding for both TANF and the EPS program comes from a combination of state and federal dollars that vary from one budget cycle to another. The consequence of a program based on uncertain funding for clients, therefore, is the maintenance of set time limits within an unpredictable safety net of additional benefits, i.e., global uncertainty regarding their future well-being (housing, employment, resources for family needs, and so on). The consequence for PSMs of a program reliant on uncertain funding is an uneven stream of referrals and periodic lay-offs.

My understanding of the PSM-client relationship was becoming more complex. As

I gathered the interim results together to present to the PSMs, I wanted to validate their struggles, affirm their willingness to continue within such an uncertain context, and appeal to the commitment and desire I had heard from them earlier when we were initially talking about doing the program evaluation. Despite the gaps in paperwork, the initial results were positive. I thanked them for their efforts, applauded the preliminary successes, and provided an explanation regarding how their paperwork can be combined to tell others about the good work that they do to benefit their clients. I wanted to convey the importance of doing paperwork, not for compliance, but rather as a tool to communicate the story of their work. I encouraged them to keep doing it and to reach out to clients for the six-month follow-up contact. A couple of PSMs thanked me afterwards, saying how good it felt to be affirmed because they usually didn't hear much positive feedback. They were appreciative.

I now directed my attention to training students to conduct the client interviews that would be arranged after PSMs completed the six-month follow-up contact. I prepared the lists of which clients needed to be contacted and waited for a response. Once again I was taken aback. After three months there were only a handful of clients who had been contacted, and only one who had agreed to be interviewed. Now what? I spoke with the director and discovered that there were PSM lay-offs again and that morale was quite low. With PSMs struggling to adjust to these changes and wondering whether those remaining would keep their jobs, how could I expect that they would be willing to take on the additional responsibility of trying to find clients after they had stopped working with them? Despite this understanding, I was disappointed because I had thought that the client interviews would provide stories of client experiences to enrich the quantitative administrative data. After sitting with my

disappointment for a few days, I thought about the parallel processes that had unfolded in this evaluation project.

Parallel Process

To support my reflection of parallel processes in the evaluation project, I turned to literature from counseling and psychotherapy. I was reminded that parallel process typically refers to patterns in the clinical relationship that appear in the supervisory relationship. I remembered that some instructors during my doctoral education at Smith College described parallel process as an unconscious process: in supervision, a therapist would talk about issues with the supervisor in a way that was similar to how the client was addressing the issues with the therapist. As I leafed through some of the classic writings, I was intrigued to find that parallel process can also work in the reverse, i.e., a therapist can unconsciously adopt the views or techniques of the supervisor when interacting with the client (Doehrman, 1976; Ekstein & Wallerstein, 1972). Then I looked at a more contemporary article (Ganzer & Ornstein, 1999) and noticed that relational models of psychotherapy are now blending the traditional ideas into a cyclical frame. This approach seemed to make the most sense for understanding the evaluation project because it shifted the concept from a hierarchical, linear description to a more fluid view involving the participation of any person (client, therapist, or supervisor). As I applied the relational view to the dynamics involved in this evaluation project, I noticed two simultaneous parallel processes. Since this was a research project, the persons involved were not the traditional triad, but rather clients, PSMs, administrators, and this researcher.

Parallel Process Theme 1: Skepticism and Uncertainty

In their contacts with DSS (implementers of the TANF policy) and others in their everyday lives, clients seem to expect the unexpected, yet appear to still be taken by surprise at times (e.g., think that they have complied with TANF requirements and then receive a letter stating that there is something else to do; or if they think that they have someone to care for their child and then are informed that person is no longer available). As a result, PSMs say that clients' spirits are often low, that clients are sometimes hesitant and skeptical of the PSMs who reach out with offers of help. Clients appear to be particularly skeptical of requests for paperwork and a high degree of contact because they seem to wonder how the information will be used and doubt that positive, lasting change can occur.

PSMs generally provide extensive outreach and explanation in an attempt to show clients that the case management program is more collaborative and thus able to provide needed resources and referrals. PSMs do not seem to be immune, however, to the dual effects of client resistance and employment uncertainty. Just as clients appear to be skeptical of how PSMs can help them in the face of uncertainty, PSMs appear to be skeptical of the degree to which the agency can help them keep their jobs when the program funding is unpredictable. Why should PSMs be invested in contributing data to evaluate the EPS program when they don't know if they will be there to benefit? A couple of administrators said that the morale of PSMs had been low at several points throughout the evaluation, and I noticed their skepticism of what the program evaluation results could do during meetings. Although it seems clear that PSMs have continued to reach out to clients, it also seems that data recording (and doing the six-month follow-up client contact beyond the program model) has been an expression of their uncertainty

with administrators and this researcher, paralleling the uncertainty experienced by clients on a daily basis.

Administrators then shared their frustration with me, feeling uneasy and dejected that their efforts were not having a positive impact and trying to figure out what was going wrong. I, too, experienced this parallel process and initially felt frustrated that the data were not as complete as they could be. I was disappointed that I would not be able to conduct client interviews. I became skeptical about whether this evaluation would yield anything meaningful and began to lose energy for the project. The theme of skepticism and uncertainty thus appears to have had a ripple effect across all key persons in the study.

Parallel Process Theme 2: Validation and Encouragement

At the same time, administrators planned meetings with PSMs to reinforce the primary components of the program. I presented the interim findings at one gathering and, as noted earlier, validated their struggles while applauding the hard work that led to positive results. I asked for input from PSMs regarding how to interpret some of the findings and told them who would hear about these results. Many administrators seemed to continuously take this same respectful, supportive approach in the midst of the periodic uncertainty regarding funding and employment. These efforts by administrators and researcher looked like they were enacting (to some degree) the qualities that are embedded within the EPS program model: respect, affirmation of strengths, relationship, and mutual collaboration.

After the interim report, PSMs appeared to continue their engagement and work with clients but also increased the amount of data recording they completed for each client. They seemed to remain persistent and respectful as they listened and supported clients in their work towards their mutually constructed goals. Themes of affirmation, encouragement, and validation of struggles appeared to be enacted between the three relational pairs: researcher-PSMs, administrators-PSMs, and PSMs-clients.

This research project thus appears to have encountered two simultaneous patterns of parallel process. Prior history and current unpredictability seem to leave clients feeling skeptical and hesitant. This appears to be transferred to PSMs who also look as if they are experiencing their own uncertainty regarding future employment, enacting it through poor data recording and low morale. Administrators (and this researcher) also seem to have experienced hesitancy and struggle with how to respond. While the themes of skepticism and hesitancy look as if they are being played out, researcher and administrators appear to be simultaneously validating PSMs' struggles and affirming the outreach they're doing. Encouragement from researcher and administrators to PSMs then looks as if it is transferred to the PSM-client relationship as PSMs persistently support and affirm client efforts. Validation and encouragement appear to somewhat counteract the negative impact of skepticism and uncertainty.

Clients seem to have benefited from the validation, encouragement, and PSM activities that facilitated connections to resources within their communities. A majority of clients in this research project successfully completed the EPS program which allows them to continue receiving TANF benefits, participate in welfare-to-work activities, or apply for medical exemption. The majority of clients also made progress on the barriers that interfere with their ability to financially provide for their families (Keenan, 2005).

IV: Concluding Thoughts on Community-based Practice Evaluation

I completed the final report, disseminated the results to the PSMs and other program staff, and was happy to hear that as of today there was funding for the program to continue. I am continuing to meet with EPS program managers, looking to see how this experience can be used to improve the program in the future.

There are obvious suggestions for improvement that immediately come to mind, but the ones I am most interested in are more elusive: 1.) How can the EPS program administrators attend to the clinical themes that impact PSMs and clients on a daily basis? 2.) How can the EPS program managers systemically provide stability in the face of employment uncertainty? 3.) What is the role of the evaluation researcher regarding these issues?

When reflecting on the application of the clinical concept of parallel process in this evaluation project, I realize that the concept helped me to think beyond the immediate data results to explore the influence of multiple factors in community-based evaluation. I have learned that community-based practice evaluation puts researchers "in the soup" in many of the same ways that therapists and case managers are when working with clients. This project has highlighted the opportunities a researcher can have to influence systemic dynamics but has also underscored the ways in which we are simultaneously influenced by the relationships between clients and other agencies, staff, and clients, and so on. I have found clinical practice concepts (such as parallel process) to be vital tools in community-based research – tools that help researchers understand, intervene, and make recommendations to impact systemic relations even when this is not necessarily the topic of the evaluation.

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