

inSocialWork Podcast Series

Episode 286 - Constructing Pathways of Change: Using Implementation Science to Advance Social Work Practice and Address Research-to-Practice Gaps: Dr. Julia Moore

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork, the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:36] Hello listeners. The U.B. School of Social Work's inSocial Work podcast series is absolutely thrilled to be back in the interim. We will have a reduced production schedule and release one episode on the third Tuesday of each month. We have some fantastic episodes planned for this fall, so please be sure to look for our new releases. This is Louanne Bakk, your host and interviewer for this episode. The U.B. School Social Work launched its part time fully online doctor, social work and Social Welfare Degree Program, or DSW in Fall 2019 and I currently have the honor and privilege of serving its DSW program director. The program infuses and applies implementation science throughout the curriculum and trains students on methods and approaches to improve the dissemination, implementation, spread and scale up of evidence-based practices within the profession and within the context of a trauma informed human rights perspective. In this episode, I'll be talking with our guest, Dr. Julia Moore, who is the senior director for the Center for Implementation, about why implementation science is so relevant to the advancement of the social work profession and to addressing the research to practice gaps that currently exist. Dr. Moore explains what implementation science is and how implementation science models, theories and frameworks can be applied to increase the uptake and use of programs, services and supports. Examples of how social workers can approach implementation challenges differently by applying implementation. Science are provided, including how implementation science can reduce inequities in care. Dr. Moore also provides tools and resources that can help social workers apply implementation science in their own practice. Dr. Julianne Moore has a PhD from Penn State, where she was trained as an implementation scientist, researching the best ways to implement evidence-based programs. She is most passionate about supporting professionals how to use implementation science. Having trained over 2000 people in workshops and online courses and supporting over 100 implementation projects. For more information on the Center for Implementation, please visit their Web site at thecenterforimplementation.com And for more information on the U.B. School Social Works DSW program, Please visit our Web site at socialwork.buffalo.edu/dsw.

[00:03:21] Julie, it's so nice to have you join us today. Thank you so much. I know that you've been working with practitioners for quite a few years now. Why are you passionate about the work that you do?

[00:03:31] That's a great question. So I'm so excited to be here and talk to you today about implementation science. My passion for implementation science started a long, long time ago when I was an undergrad.

[00:03:43] I was going to be a teacher, an elementary school teacher, and I did my school placement and I was working in an inner city school in a grade two classroom. And it became obvious to me so quickly that these kids needed so much more than school alone was able to provide. They were hungry. It was Edmonton, Canada. I live in Canada. And

so it was far north. It was cold. They did not have the right clothes. They could not all speak English as a first language. We're trying to teach them math. And they had emotional regulation problems while you're sitting there trying to do addition. And I remember thinking, wow. And it made me realize that I wanted to help build interventions for kids who were disadvantaged to help get them to the place where they could be really ready for school. So I went into a p h d program to do that with this goal of building and evaluating interventions for children and youth, only to discover that there are lots and lots of interventions out there. But we're not actually using those interventions in real life. In that process, I became passionate, a little obsessed with how can we be using the evidence about what we know works? And actually using it in practice so that those interventions are impacting people's lives on a large, large scale.

[00:05:01] Hearing you say that, I was a practitioner for many years and realized that there were truly some gaps in what exists in our ability to use that in social work. Saying that in my own background, looking at implementation science more fully, it can be a little complex to wrap one's head around. So I'm wondering if you could now explain to us what implementation science is in simple terms.

[00:05:24] Absolutely. Terminology is one of the biggest challenges in the field of implementation science. Right, because we have all these different words that mean the same thing and the same words that mean different things. So I'm going to try to make it really, really simple.

[00:05:37] Implementation science is about researching how we get evidence into practice. So that means that we're looking at a whole bunch of different research questions that people could ask about how do we actually take this evidence of what works. It might be an intervention. It might be an evidence-based practice. How do we get that actually into practice?

[00:06:00] And so to do that, people ask research questions like what are the factors, maybe the contextual factors that affect the decision to adopt a new intervention or affect the sustainability of that intervention. But implementation science is really only one piece of this puzzle, because that's about asking the research questions and doing the studies on what works under what conditions. The practice of implementation is about taking implementation science and using the knowledge and evidence we gain from implementation science and using that to actually inform what we are doing on the ground when we are implementing different interventions in the real world.

[00:06:45] So if you were talking to somebody about, OK, what does it encompass? Are the core things that they should be aware of in relation to implementation science and taking that a step further. What they're doing, implementation practice.

[00:06:57] Yes. So that's kind of one of the big questions people ask is what does it mean to apply implementation science in practice? And essentially, that means taking different theories, models and frameworks from implementation science and using that to guide how we actually design, implement, spread and scale, whatever we're implementing. So I'll go through each of those because I think they're really, really, really important key terms. So first, when I'll talk about process models, process models, essentially outline the steps or stages needed to either design something for implementation or to actually implement it. And chances are, if you have ever implemented something, you were using a process model already that you might not even have realized it because this is essentially just saying what are the steps and stages we need to follow along that pathway? But the

advantage of using an implementation science process model is it might have a couple of different pieces where nuggets that you don't normally include, maybe you don't normally include a step to assess readiness for implementation or to plan for sustainability or to assess barriers and facilitators. And so these process models help us think about those steps or stages. Second, we have theories and theories. Help us think about the mechanism of change. So how is it that we're going? Change somebody's behavior. And third, we have frameworks and frameworks is a bit more of a catch all term for things that aren't the process models and the theories. And it helps us think about the factors that affect things. If we're thinking about, say, the contacts, we can think about which contextual factors maybe affect the decision to adopt a new intervention. And so we would use a framework to help us think about those different factors. So can we have those process models? There are steps or stages theories for the mechanism of change and frameworks for the factors that affect something.

[00:08:55] A lot of times when we're talking to practitioners or social workers in the field, they may not be doing some of this. Why is it so hard sometimes for people to take that approach?

[00:09:05] I think there's a lottery sentence. The first one is it's pretty hard to actually pick up articles about implementation science and to figure out what that means you should actually do in the field. And I know the way and we've had a lot of conversations about this and you know that that is very hard to do. You can read those papers, but that doesn't mean, you know, what you should actually do. So I think one of the problems is figure out how to actually put those things into action. And then once you know how to do that, I think one thing that can feel daunting is it can feel like a lot of steps. It can feel like a lot of information and it can feel really overwhelming. Luckily, I think that the number of people who know how to put implementation science into action is increasing rapidly. And we are seeing success from those efforts, which further reinforces how important it is to really use an established process model to guide how you implement and to consider, for example, using a framework to think about factors that affect implementation or sustainability, because we're seeing how important that is and how that can lead us to the client outcomes that you want to achieve in your job. That's why we do what we do.

[00:10:16] Oftentimes an argument for individuals, as I just simply don't have time, is I hear about this. Yes, I listen to what you're saying. It seems like in many ways of front there is a time investment, but it could also save time later. And my understanding that correctly.

[00:10:32] Absolutely. I think that there's definitely an upfront time investment to understand how you can use implementation science. But ultimately, I would like to believe that all social workers became social workers because they want to help people. Right. That's why you get into the profession in the first place. And if we now that our existing approach to implementation is not as effective as it could be, then wouldn't we all want to use a slightly different approach to get better client outcomes so that they have a better experience, have better outcomes and sustain those outcomes long term? And so we think that there is a bit of an investment up front. But ultimately, I think it can build a lot of momentum. And once you have, for example, designed an intervention for implementation using these approaches, the second time is easier. And the third time is even easier. And so it gets much, much, much easier. The longer you do it and the more experience you have.

[00:11:27] So I think with some training or some education on this, it can really advance really what social workers are doing in the field, as well as help facilitate access to the

services and save time ultimately for individuals. Absolutely. You know a little bit about my background, Julia, and I'm not sure if I've shared this story with you. One of the key efforts that we had, we had a momentous effort to avoid rehospitalization in my years as a practitioner. And we received a fairly large grant to implement a program that was focused on making sure people had the supports in the community once they left the hospital talking to learning more about implementation science. It's really clear to me now we didn't follow much of a process at all. And unfortunately, that program failed within about two years because we didn't have Buy-In from individuals who weren't following any certain process for implementing this. So I can if we talk more fully about this, it's clear that by using this, it can really help facilitate access and help the success of a program. Yes, yes.

[00:12:28] In fact, I've trained thousands of people in how to use implementation science. And I would say the most common thing I hear from people is, wow, I just realized why this effort, this initiative, this project we did years ago completely failed because then they can sit there and list really specific reasons why things didn't work in the past. And I think that that is an amazing reflection because it sets you up to do things differently in the future.

[00:12:59] And one of the analogies I like to use when thinking about applying implementation science is that often when we try to create change, it's almost like we are trying to roll the dice and we hope that we are going to reach our outcomes. But when we are using implementation science to inform those efforts, it's more like playing chess. So you can build your skill. You can learn from previous experiences, you can get better and better at what you're doing. But it does not mean you are always going to be successful at implementing and achieving outcomes because implementation and creating change is very hard. At least we can go into it with more intentionality and a more systematic approach and then learn from what happens.

[00:13:43] What you're mentioning is absolutely true. Part of in my case, if I look at this now, based on what I've learned, we really were lacking so much when we tried to design this intervention for implementation. There were so many pieces that were missing in approach we often use. It's like just educate people on this and then they're going to use the intervention. Do you find that sometimes common from people that you're working with at all?

[00:14:05] Yes. So I would say I think that as humans, we like to educate people. It's kind of a go to thing that we like to do. And so when we talk about how we use implementation, science and practice, I really like to think about it as being these two really big buckets of activities in bucket number one. We can think about how we design our interventions for implementation. And in bucket number two. We can think about how we actually implement and then spread and scale those interventions. So if we think about bucket number one, when we're designing interventions for implementation, we really have a few key components there. We want to think about who needs to do something differently. So we'd like to think about the who and the what. So let's take an example. Let me start with a really topical example. We're in the middle of a pandemic right now. And all of a sudden, people need to change the way that we work to be virtual. Many social workers out there spent years and years and years, their entire careers doing work face to face in person. And suddenly you have to transition to doing it virtually. And so that means that there are people who need to do something a lot differently. And so we talk about how important it is to define who needs to do what differently. Say you work in an organization where there's an administrator, maybe administrator now needs to do something differently. You, as a social worker and your colleague need to do something differently. And the clients you're working with need to do something differently. And so what we can think about is you

might have three who's there in each of those groups of people need to do something differently. What? We then like to think about. Well, what are the barriers and facilitators people are facing to doing the what? We should use those barriers and facilitators to help us select strategies to help change people's behavior. Strategies to change people's behavior include things like you said, like education and education is often our go to strategy. We love to educate people. I also see people who love to use things like what we call audit and feedback. So let's look at people's data and feed it back to them to show them, hey, look, you're not meeting targets. I'm going to show you you're not meeting targets so that now you're going to start meeting targets. But the thing is, those strategies are only going to be effective if they tap into people's underlying barriers to change. So when we think about going virtual, this had been a conversation for years and years. And I think people are trying to educate people on how to go virtual. But education only works if knowledge is the primary barrier to change and knowledge is not the main barrier to going virtual.

[00:16:50] And I think we're all experiencing that right now. And so if we pick education as our main strategy, it's really only tapping into that knowledge issue when the reality is we know there's so many other barriers and facilitators out there. And so when we pick strategies to address those, we can set ourselves up for better success to actually create the change that we want.

[00:17:12] That makes perfect sense. It's a great summer of really why why sometimes educating isn't the strategy and why. By applying implementation science, we actually have the ability to go far beyond this and look at some of those underlying barriers that we probably might not see. And I know in my case, as I look back at some of the efforts that I did as a practitioner that I may not have seen. So that can really help us to move forward and increasingly uptake of those interventions. Yes, absolutely. So we've touched on this a little bit. And I know that you're not a social worker, though. I think you'd make a perfect social worker. Why do you think implementation science is so important to the social work profession?

[00:17:53] I think that using implementation science is so deeply linked to the goal of the social work profession. Social workers are out there on the ground helping improve people's lives across a huge range of topic areas. And they work in a huge number of contacts, I think, because implementation science is about helping us figure out what works for whom, under what conditions. Social Workers are in a position in the perfect position to take all of that information and put it into practice to actually impact people's lives. So in my mind, they are just such a beautiful fit together.

[00:18:33] And one of the things that social workers often focus on are one of the things that often really gains social workers attention is the growing disparities in access to services. Are there ways or can you think about how implementation science could help reduce some of those racial and ethnic disparities that we're often seeing within the service room?

[00:18:54] Yes, I kind of have a two sided answer to this. The one is I think that there is incredible potential in using implementation science to help us reduce those disparities because implementation science is about what works for whom, under what conditions. It's really getting at those questions of if you have disparities, say, racial disparities between groups, then we can look at, well, what works for each of the different groups, what works for different groups under different conditions. And so I think it is setting us up to have better information to inform how we actually approach designing interventions and then

implementing them and then especially spreading and scaling them to different populations and different contexts at the same time. I think that I should mention we now right now that there's work going on to improve the existing frameworks to make sure that they better incorporate race and in fact, incorporated intersectionality lens, because not all of the frameworks inherently do a good job at that. And so it is definitely possible to include that, but it's not built into the process all the time. So I think there's really this great potential. But you really do need to be intentional about considering different kinds of disparities when approaching how you design and then implement those interventions.

[00:20:18] So social workers seems an area where social workers might be particularly well fit, because that's one of the things that we're often trained to do. Look at these disparities in access to services or disparities that exist right now within the human service environment. And think about ways to address this. And it might be correct me if I'm wrong, but if I'm looking at implementation science, we might have the ability to go into it with a little bit different lens in highlighting what's being done within that framework. So, for example, you had talked about the WHO, so maybe looking at, gee, do we need to have these conversations with groups that are accessing services to learn more about what some of those barriers that they're seeing? And then help develop strategies to help address those barriers?

[00:21:05] Yes, absolutely. So I think that's actually a perfect example of how you can build this into the process. So, for example, we talked earlier about barriers and facilitators and how important it is to assess barriers and facilitators to change to doing that. And if you just group all people's barriers and facilitators into one big lump, you're gonna pick a bunch of strategies. But if you, for example, looked at barriers and facilitators by race, you may discover that there are different barriers for different reasons. You may look at barriers and facilitators by geographic location. So we know, for example, that people who live in a rural setting, attending something in person, may sometimes be more challenging than if they live in an urban center where they have access to transportation. And so I think that we have opportunities to look at things like those barriers and facilitators by different groups or categories and then select strategies based on those identified barriers and facilitators, which allows us to tailor what we're doing to this specific group of clients that we're working with in that setting.

[00:22:14] And I think that's such a need to be able to do, because a lot of times when we're designing programs, we're designing them from the standpoint that the population is essentially homogeneous. So there's very few variances in what we're doing. But it sounds like this will enable us then to more closely look at what those barriers are and more tailor the intervention to meet those needs. Yes, absolutely. Exactly. Another thing that I wanted to ask is I know oftentimes we'd love examples of like, OK, we've talked a lot about terms during the course of our interviews so far. Could you give me an example of a way social workers could approach implementation challenges by applying implementation science or how they could approach implementation challenges differently by applying implementation science?

[00:22:59] Definitely. So I was just in a series of conversations with people who were talking about scaling up a suicide prevention intervention across multiple states. It wasn't exclusively social workers, but social workers were definitely a large portion of the people who'd ultimately be delivering this intervention. And we were talking about. How we can use implementation science for, in fact, those two different buckets of activities.

[00:23:25] So first, this suicide prevention intervention had a series of practices that they wanted people to do differently, but they hadn't actually defined the strategies about how to change people's behavior. And so I was working with a group of people who were kind of tapped on the shoulder and told, hey, you're really great at your job. We would like you to join this planning committee as we work on planning for scaling up this intervention. And so we're talking about first. OK, well, what is it we want people to do differently? What's the what? For each of the who's.

[00:23:59] And then we identified what were the barriers and facilitators and selected those strategies. But that's only the first part of the puzzle. Right. The first bucket. Then we can talk about the second part, which is how do you actually plan to implement, spread and scale this intervention? So we selected another process model for the implementation process and started asking questions like which sites were most ready to implement this intervention? Which sites had the best fit with the intervention that we had? Because, as you know, lots of different practice settings look pretty different. So sometimes the fit isn't perfect. So let's not ram square pegs into circles here and figure out who's ready, what fits into where and which contextual factors might affect people's ability to actually implement this intervention. And then how can we do things like plan for sustainability?

[00:24:57] How can we make sure that we are assessing whether people are actually implementing this intervention the way it was intended to be implemented? Because we know if you've ever worked on an implementation project, that people often make a lot of changes along the way. And so it isn't necessarily the same intervention at the end that it wasn't the beginning. So really understanding. Did they implement it with quality? Did they make adaptations? What were those adaptations and what kind of impact might they have? So there are just a few of the kinds of questions that we can ask as we're thinking about implementing, spreading and scaling the suicide prevention intervention in lots of different counties across multiple different states.

[00:25:39] That's an excellent example. I love it. And it speaks so well to what we've been talking about throughout the course of our discussion. Really, how can we apply this to actually help facilitate change, which is a large part of what social workers are doing? Many of our audience on this podcast are working in the social work field, but they aren't researchers. So they may be listening to us talk and thinking, oh, I need to have more research experience in order to do this. So do you need to be a researchers to know how to apply implementation science?

[00:26:12] Definitely not. I would say, in fact, these days I seldom work with researchers because everything that we are doing is helping people implement, spread and scale those interventions. And the reality is, most people who are implementing interventions are not researchers. They are people who are tasked with delivering interventions, delivering services. And they are working on the front lines. And so you absolutely do not need to be a researcher to use implementation science to improve how you create change.

[00:26:43] What skills would come in handy for individuals?

[00:26:46] Excellent question. So we actually did a lot of work a couple years ago on core competencies for using implementation science. So there's a bunch of different things. There's a bunch of hard skills kind of being able to understand how to assess barriers and facilitators. We've talked about a lot. There's some evaluation skills that people can have. Being able to assess the context. There are also a lot of soft skills that you need because a lot of implementation is about relationship building, building trust and really developing

strong relationships to help support and inspire people to actually enact the change at multiple different levels of the system. And so there's kind of a combination of these hard skills and a lot of soft skills to really make this happen.

[00:27:33] And as you say that, as I hear you talk more about it, it seems like many of these skills are things that social workers naturally possess. So it's really taking what they're doing, in a sense, to a little bit of the next level and applying these skills that they already possess in a slightly different way.

[00:27:50] Exactly. And I think that's such a great way to put it. One of the things I talk about when I talk to people about using process models or frameworks is you probably inherently think about a lot of these things on your own all the time. You you're probably trained to do some of these things as well, or they might be embedded in your job. But by using a framework or a process model, that's from implementation science and as evidence. This can actually help improve the way we reach outcomes. It just gives you that little step up to help plan what you're doing better and increase the likelihood you're actually going to reach the outcomes that you want to achieve. So it's not a fundamental change. It's tiny little shifts in the way we think about an approach. Our change efforts to really create a bigger impact in us.

[00:28:41] I think about working with you on implementation science as we implemented our DSW program here at The U.B. School of Social Work. Much of what we were talking about in this is really building on what you said. It's things that we were kind of already trained to do in the practice field. But we may have been missing little pieces here and there, but it's having us approach it more thoughtfully and more of a scientific manner to actually build those interventions, designed those interventions for implementation and then to actually implement those interventions.

[00:29:12] Exactly. And I would say that most people that I've worked with over multiple years, that's exactly how they feel. They feel like I always sort of did this. But now I have words and frameworks that I can draw on to do it more systematically and to explain it to other people in a really clear and concise way.

[00:29:31] So as we think about the are there any tools or resources that can really help social workers to apply implementation science?

[00:29:39] Yes. So I would say one of the ones I'm really excited about is we have just launched our second version of our free online mini course, inspiring change. And so this is about a one to one and a half hour online module with videos and activities and a workbook that really provides a very high level overview of kind of the theories, models and frameworks from implementation science. And so I'd say that's a great place to start. We also have lots of different resources. For example, our Implementation and Action Bulletin has lots of different examples of how people are using different theories, models and frameworks. The other place I would definitely recommend people check out is the National Implementation Research Networks Active Implementation Hub, where they have lots of different modules and resources that people can use. For example, if you've been tasked to create an implementation team, they have an excellent module on how to do that. And some of the pieces involved in working with an implementation team.

[00:30:37] And the one thing that I wanted to add to your. This is we actually implemented our DSW program here at the U.B. School of Social Work back in twenty nineteen. We're actually beginning our second cohort this fall. And the reason I was so excited to talk to

Julia about this is because one of the core aspects of our DSW program is that we are applying implementation science throughout the curriculum to help train social workers in improving access to those services and supports that they're providing to clients to actually increase the uptake of services and supports for their clients. So I was so excited to talk to Julia because we did implement our program. And this, again, is one of the Corie aspects of that program.

[00:31:21] And I think one of the things that's so unique about your program is that a lot of the programs out there that look at implementation science help kind of train people to become scientists or their researchers, but they're not necessarily training people on how to apply the science to improve the practice of implementation. And so I think that what's so unique about this DSW program is it's really focused on what is implementation science mean and what does it give us so that you can actually improve the practice of implementation.

[00:31:50] We're training our students to actually apply implementation science throughout that curriculum and actually having them work within their agencies on a specific project as they go throughout the course of their studies. So, yeah, very exciting. So I think we're about coming to the end of our time together, Julia. Is there anything you'd like to add?

[00:32:11] I think my very final thoughts are reflections are that I hope that people should not feel daunted or overwhelmed by implementation science.

[00:32:19] I think that if you have thought about it or considered it, but kind of walked away in the past, I want to encourage you to take a second look, because I think that even though it can feel overwhelming right at first, people who kind of jump into the implementation science pool absolutely love the way that it helps you organize your thoughts and your plans around how you actually create change. And I think that there's something so inspiring and exciting in seeing people overcome that first hurdle of kind of jumping into that implementation science bill and saying, yes, I want to learn more about this and use this to improve the way that I work.

[00:33:00] Right. Thank you so much. I really appreciate your taking the time to talk with us today.

[00:33:06] Thank you, Louanne.

[00:33:07] You've been listening to Dr. Julia Moore discuss how implementation science can be used to advance social work practice. Please be safe and stay while everyone.

[00:33:25] Hi, I'm Nancy Smyth. Professor and Dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school, our history are online and on the ground degree in continuing education programs. We invite you to visit our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there, check out our Technology and Social Work Research Center. You'll find it under the community resources menu.