

Research in Counseling

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Mental health professionals are consistently engaging in research as they gather data from the client and present theories to determine the best care options. The evaluation of the results are collected and analyzed to determine additional and new treatment protocols. This is very different than formal published research, but “similar skills such as observation, reasoning, conceptualization, and analyzing skills are needed for both paradigms” (Dukic, 2015, p. 4).

Research and Program Evaluation

The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014) provides clear direction and guidance to ensure the counselor is adhering to a set standard of ethical behaviors including research, training, and collaboration. According to the ACA, Code of Ethics (2014), section G is devoted to research and publication, and encourages counselors to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.

Since its formation as a professional organization in 1976, the American Mental Health Counselors Association, AMHCA, has been committed to establishing and promoting vigorous standards for education and training, professional practice, and professional ethics for clinical mental health counselors (AMHCA, 2020).

Research is an important element in counseling, it allows and encourages a counselor to look deeper into understanding the clinical mental health matters of their clients. Counseling research is acquired through the study of their clients (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). When we think of research, we generally think of the gathering and studying of information and data on a particular topic. An individual’s methodology, process used to gather information, will typically develop over time through the practice of research (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). Research is critical as the counselor must have a routine of research methods and resources throughout their career.

Additionally, as counselors engage in research, they should develop a methodology to gather information. The methodology of a research study should follow a prescribed system of data collection and analysis (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). The combination of these will prove beneficial to the counselor and the client.

Program evaluation is imperative in any formal research method. Program evaluation is designed to ensure consistent and supportive treatment is being delivered, monitored for effectiveness and ensured it is meeting the primary goal. Additionally, it is utilized to better support and determine improvements within the program itself. In addition to counselors and counselor educators, program evaluation data can be used by policy makers at the state and national levels to make decisions about standards of care and/or the availability and application of funding (Balkin & Kleist, 2022).

Research factors (conducting, interpreting, reporting)

When conducting research, it is imperative to acquire informed consent. Additionally, according to the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014), G.2.a. individuals have the right to decline requests to become research participants. This is the initial factor in research, it is imperative to follow the nine specific guidelines in this section to ensure informed consent is obtained. One way to ensure informed consent is obtained, review and re-review guidelines, communicate with the guardian or family, ensure all documents are reviewed and signatures are obtained, print guidelines for informed consent to ensure all aspects are covered. Also, the participant can decline at any time during the research. The American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics states in code G.1.e that it is a counselor's responsibility to take reasonable precautions to avoid causing harm to their clients that includes their emotional, physical, and social health (2014). When dealing with this particular dilemma,

counselors must provide informed consent to every client. Some individuals, especially those who may have a disability, can be more challenging to provide this to. However, they must still understand exactly what they are signing up for before doing so. Code G.2.a and G.2.e state that individuals have the right to decline participating in the research and that every part of it must be clearly defined to them and the informed consent must be provided appropriately to any and all participants, regardless of ability (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014).

Another important ethical consideration is for counselors to be up to date about the latest research on best practices (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). When using research in clinical practice, it is important to ensure that the research was conducted according to best practice and that the information presented has been reviewed (ACA, 2014). For example, if a counselor were attempting to use a specific method during a counseling session that they learned about through the reading of a research study, then it is their responsibility to vet that the study they intend to incorporate into practice was conducted ethically and was thoroughly vetted through review (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). The primary responsibility of all counselors is to promote the welfare and respect the dignity of all their clients (American Counseling Association, 2014).

When planning to research special populations, some ethical dilemmas may occur. The researcher needs to ensure that the purpose of the research is ethical and does not exploit or take advantage of the special population. This includes giving misinformation, trespassing on private areas, bribing, making assumptions, and disrespecting the special population. Any biases or pre-misconceptions must be addressed and put away since they can obscure results and cause harm to the client. The ACA code of ethics instructs all counselors to protect the welfare of clients and show all kinds of people respect and dignity (ACA, 2014). To avoid violating their rights, researchers should inform people and have their consent to participate in the research. They must

be aware of and understand the purpose of the research and why it is needed. Unethical research usually leaves the participants and researchers feeling uneasy, exposed, and vulnerable (Cacciattolo, 2015). Two dilemmas that were discussed were conducting research with biases by exploiting the special population and not asking for consent or violating the participant's privacy. To avoid some of these dilemmas, it is advisable to ensure that there is careful planning and ethical standards are adhered to and to use strategies to prevent any violation or exploitation (Cacciattolo, 2015).

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