

Research in Counseling

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Research Methods and Program Evaluation

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The counseling profession we know today would not exist without research. Research has helped mental health professionals gain the knowledge they need to understand their clients and how to help them heal. This composition will explore the relationship between research and program evaluation. It will also highlight the roles and responsibilities of a researcher in counseling and relevant strategies in the research process.

Relationship Between Research and Program Evaluation in Counseling

Program evaluation is a collection of data about a program in order to make informed decisions about that program. More specifically, program evaluation helps a researcher understand how a process or product is going to impact the clients. It also helps to determine if the process or product is successful. Common questions that are answered in a program evaluation include: Does the program work? How exactly does the program work? Does it make a difference? What does the program need to improve? How does the program fit into the client's life? For example, a counselor is working with a group of adolescents in a psychiatric rehabilitation center and is using a specific group intervention method that is targeted to help the adolescents stay out of the rehabilitation center. It is important for the counselor to know if the intervention is truly effective. Program evaluation will help answer this question.

Roles and Responsibilities of Researchers in Counseling

Informed consent is the process of informing the client or research subject of the potential risks, benefits, and outcomes that accompany a research project or therapeutic approach they consent to partake in. It is vital for a researcher to review informed consent verbally and in written form. A researcher must provide this information promptly in order to give the client or participant time to contemplate if they want to partake in the study. When a researcher provides

informed consent they must do so in a way that is understandable to the client. This means free of technical language, jargon, or slang (Balkin et al, 2016). Because researchers are going to be working with diverse clients and research participants, they must also communicate informed consent that is developmentally and culturally appropriate. For example, if a client speaks a different language and is having difficulty understanding the researcher, the researcher must take the necessary steps to arrange for an interpreter or translator (American Counseling Association, 2014).

Researchers have a responsibility to protect and represent vulnerable populations. Vulnerable populations include the elderly, children, pregnant women, incarcerated persons, mentally disabled individuals, and economically or educationally disadvantaged persons. When doing research with these populations, there are three important areas that need to be evaluated: coercion, assent, and representation. Researchers may have to take extra precautions to ensure clients are protected from influence and coercion. They also have to ensure these populations can truly give consent (Balkin et al, 2016). For example, it can be difficult to obtain consent from mentally disabled individuals and educationally disadvantaged persons because of their impaired ability to understand the research study. Another example is when researchers work with children. Researchers are required to obtain both consent from the parents and assent from the child. However, in many cases, if consent and assent are obtained simultaneously, the child may feel obligated to participate because their parent is in the same room. That is why it is vital for consent and assent to be acquired separately. Lastly, representation is crucial for individuals in an institutional setting like prisons or psychiatric hospitals. “The representatives serve as advocates for the potential participants to make sure that their best interests are represented.” (Balkin et al, 2016, pg. 70).

Another major responsibility of the counselor is to maintain the American Counseling Association's (ACA) research responsibilities. According to the ACA (2014), a counselor must "accurately explain the purpose and procedures to be followed." This includes providing details on potential risks and discomforts associated with the research process. The researcher must also advise the client or participant that they are able to withdraw from the research process at any time and possible limitations to confidentiality.

Relevant Strategies

Researchers often conduct research on subjects they are interested or passionate about. Even though being passionate about one's research can be beneficial, it can also promote a conflict of interest. This is because the researcher's feelings and beliefs are incompatible with their responsibility to gather research in an unbiased way. It is important for researchers to be self-aware of how their biases can get in the way of their research methods. They also need to be open to the idea that their research ideas may be disconfirmed. When it comes to reporting results, researchers must ensure to not distort or misrepresent data, deliberately bias their results, or engage in misleading research (American Counseling Association, 2014). For example, researchers must always accurately report research findings even if the results are unfavorable to stakeholders.

Conclusion

Research is one of the most important aspects in the field of counseling. It can not only help researchers to determine the effectiveness of a process or product, but help counselors understand their clients more effectively. So, it is important for researchers to stay up to date on research methods in order to remain competent.

References

American Counseling Association. (2014). 2014 ACA code of ethics.

<https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2014-code-of-ethics-finaladdress.pdf>

Balkin, R. S., & Kleist, D. M. (2016). Counseling research. Wiley.