The Importance of Research in the Field of Counseling

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The Belmont Report grounds research ethics in three principles: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Building on these principles, the foundations of research and program evaluation center on ethics, cultural competency (humility), and a social justice centered ethos. Each of these foundational elements is vital, ensuring the application of techniques and evidence-based treatments are deployed within a framework that truly enhances the efficacy of interventions for clients and patients. The stewards of research and program evaluation hold vital roles which are more than quantitative and qualitative analysis, but a responsibility to the details of those analyses and how their results and findings will impact the larger population it may serve. Researchers are the first line of defense in the development and application of ethical frameworks of counseling and mental health interventions. When the evidence counselors use to support their treatment plans for clients is grounded in intersectional research, professionals can rest assured an equitable and human-centered approach is accounted for (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). This essay will define the foundational elements of research and program evaluation through an intersectional lens which acknowledges the historical, cultural, and systemic issues impacted by research of the past and present.

The Relationship Between Research and Program Evaluation in Counseling

The major purpose of research has always been to generate new knowledge and understanding of universal truths about the world and people who live in it (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). As such, research works to help mental health professionals in the field practice and understand the most efficacious practices to support and empower their patients and clients in

their mental health journey. Research in its earliest form, however, was not always done ethically and often violated the human rights of participants and their families. Three such stark examples are the Holocaust medical experiments (Weindling et al., 2016), the Guatemalan STD Experiments (Rodriguez & García, 2013), and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (Brandt, 1978). All three of these research studies conducted inhumane experiments on their test subjects, which not only violated the human rights of direct participants, but the human rights of the participants' families as well. Nazi Germany and the United States are by far some of the worst players in the early research game. Black, Indigenous, brown, differently abled, and queer communities were deeply wounded during the early days of research. Fortunately, individuals responsible for the National Research Act, Nuremberg Code, the Common Rule, and the Belmont Report recognized human rights protections needed to be put in place to protect research participants and their families, and honor and respect their physical and psychological donations to the scientific community.

Program evaluation, on the other hand, is a newer concept, "new" being relative, and came out of a growing need for accountability and evidentiary support of counseling practices. Balkin and Kleist state, "program evaluation is a comprehensive endeavor that cuts across the various methods of research...Not only is program evaluation essential to evaluating the efficacy of services for a specific program but such evaluations can serve as initial steps to identifying best practices and empirically supported treatments" (2022, p. 338). Therein, the relationship between research and program evaluation is complementary and works together to help scientist-practitioners and practitioner-scholars better apply knowledge and application of practice to their client's needs, establishing a more efficacious treatment pathway for clients and patients alike. Research and program evaluation under the guidance of beneficence and

nonmaleficence practices has become an industry within counseling and mental health practice that embodies a starting point for counselors in understanding the application of theories in counseling, psychology, and psychiatry. Without research and program evaluation, counselors' ability to address systemic oppressions and inequalities would be severely limited, creating significant barriers in addressing the diversity of clients and patients in counseling. In recognizing research's marred past, the scientific community may take the steps necessary to continue to proactively correct the trajectory of research and program evaluation toward an efficacious and ethical future.

The Roles and Responsibilities of Researchers in the Counseling Profession

The roles and responsibilities of researchers are to provide mental health professionals with a balanced approach to positivist and/or constructivist points of view in defining methodological and epistemological frameworks by which their studies abide (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). When researchers address epistemological aspects of their studies, they are defining "how research participants and researchers interpret the phenomenon and the data" not so much on the data *found* from performing the study (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). Methodologically speaking, researchers must identify risk, bias, rigor, subjectivity, note errors which may impact the validity of their reports and what researchers did to address the error, minimize it, or explicitly state the limitations of the study due to the error (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). According to Balkin and Kleist (2022), researchers also have a responsibility to be aware of treatment fidelity, the limitations of their studies and then communicate these points in their reports, published or not. In designing research studies, counselors must ensure they include an equitable selection of participants, define conflicts of interest, establish informed consent for all parties involved, and establish

safeguards when working with special or vulnerable populations. In addition, Balkin and Kleist (2022) state, “researchers are obligated to include additional provisions to protect against undue influence or coercion.” This is further reinforced by Winter et al. (2018) in their discussion on the inclusion of special populations in research.

Additional Ethical & Cultural Considerations and Responsibilities in Research

Once researchers have developed their course of action and intention for study, they must submit it to an institutional review board (IRB) for approval. IRB review grew out of U.S. Public Health Service policy in the 1960s and was formalized by the National Research Act of 1974. Before these protections existed, researchers in Germany and the United States committed serious human rights violations in research and experimentation. These abuses spawned the Nuremberg Code of 1947 and, later, the Belmont Report and the Common Rule, which grew out of the 1974 National Research Act. Researchers must also maintain the ethical codes set forth by the American Counseling Association (ACA) and the American Psychological Association (APA). Additional ethical and cultural requirements of research were laid down by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Revitalization Act of 1993, which required research to include women, minorities, and sub-groups of those populations (Winter et al., 2018). Presently, these populations are not appropriately invited for participation in research studies (Winter et al., 2018). To combat this, Winter et al. (2018) suggest applying multidimensional strategies to properly support inclusion. These strategies include developing clinical trials that matter to special population participants, utilization of meaningful incentives like non-conditional incentive payment, and building trustworthy relationships between the research field and special populations (Winter et al., 2018). Systemic issues such as the economic landscape of healthcare

continue to prove challenging as it pertains to the recruitment of special populations as well (Winter et al., 2018). Additionally, the historic traumas of German and American research continue to go relatively unacknowledged in meaningful ways, playing a role in the fraught relationship researchers have with the general population.

Conclusion

Defining the importance of research relies heavily on the relationships researchers and program evaluators have with participants, special populations, and the historical and future implications of these relationships in how information and narrative are disseminated (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). At present, the importance of research is understood in the silo of the scientific community, a silo that continues to shrink in size under the guidance of the current presidential administration. Researchers now, more than ever, have a responsibility not only to the ethical and cultural implications of their work, but to the public where media literacy is all but absent in a dangerous and rapidly changing political landscape that seems to prefer bias-heavy pseudoscience over scientific, unbiased research (Bozeman, 2025). As mental health professionals, it is our responsibility to take a stand in the fight to defend ethical and culturally relevant research and practices for the betterment of society and the very people mental health professionals serve.

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