

Research in Counseling

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Introduction

Research and program evaluation play a critical role in the counseling profession by helping practitioners remain effective, ethical, and responsive to client needs. Understanding how studies are designed and applied allows counselors to base their work on sound evidence rather than assumptions (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). Counseling research draws from psychology and education, helping counselors use findings to improve their practice. Program evaluation measures how well services meet client and community needs, promoting growth and accountability. The practitioner-scholar model guides counselors to use research in daily work so decisions are evidence-based and responsive to clients.

Research and Program Evaluation in Counseling

Research can seem complex or hard to follow, but learning how it is developed and how knowledge is created with transparency, accuracy, and usefulness helps counselors stay competent, improve their practice, and serve clients through evidence-based methods (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). Because counseling research stems mainly from education and psychology, studying these areas helps counselors understand research within their profession. Program evaluation is a form of applied research that helps counselors assess and improve the effectiveness of their services while contributing to the knowledge of the profession. Counselors should begin their research by identifying clear, ethical, and relevant questions that address the needs of clients or programs. A short needs assessment helps identify which problems are most important and what goals should come first (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). This plan keeps the research focused and helps counselors track whether their efforts lead to meaningful improvement. The practitioner-scholar model encourages counselors to use both research and evaluation to guide evidence-based decision-making in real-world settings, while traditional research focuses on

results in controlled environments (Lenz, 2022). Methods that study programs in real community settings help connect scientific accuracy with everyday usefulness, leading to stronger and more meaningful results. Participating in research also encourages critical reflection, sharper problem-solving, and a deeper understanding of data within daily practice for counselors (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). These abilities allow counselors to advocate for better services and demonstrate the value of their work to clients and organizations. According to the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014), counselors are expected to base their work on proven methods rather than personal belief or habit. By reviewing and evaluating their own services, counselors can strengthen results, manage resources wisely, and maintain accountability to clients. Consequently, research becomes a practical way to support ethical practice and advance the profession.

Roles of Researchers

Counseling researchers connect theory with real-world practice, using research and evaluation to enhance services and make informed, evidence-based decisions (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). Before starting any research, counselors should reflect on the ACA ethical principles of beneficence and social justice and consider how their actions may influence participants (ACA, 2014; Balkin & Kleist, 2022). Ethical practice involves genuine care for people, not just compliance with procedures. Respect for people must shape every decision, from forming questions to collecting information, so that everyone is treated with honesty and consideration. Counselors must remain aware of possible power differences, especially when working with marginalized or at-risk groups, and actively prevent harm throughout the process. Practitioners should also reflect on their own beliefs and biases to ensure these do not affect the research process or influence how results are understood (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). Professionals can look

to ethical models, such as the one by Forester-Miller & Davis (2022), when making tough choices in research. These models remind them to consider who might be helped or harmed and to take into account cultural factors before taking action. Researchers must protect participants by adhering to ethical standards, obtaining informed consent, and maintaining confidentiality in reporting.

Multicultural counseling competencies were created to better serve a diverse society (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). Cultural awareness in research involves understanding how participants' language, beliefs, and life experiences influence the way information is interpreted (Lyons et al., 2025). The U.S. created regulations for research involving human participants through the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). Federally funded institutions must follow these rules and have an Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). Others can uphold the same ethical standards by working with local IRBs or using services through the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Ethical and culturally sensitive research promotes fairness and respect for all clients (Chu et al., 2022).

Ethical and Cultural Strategies for Research

Ethical and culturally responsive research must be built into every stage of a study (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). Counselor-researchers should design studies that protect participants, respect cultural values, and benefit the communities involved. Informed consent should be communicated in plain, culturally appropriate language, and recruitment should include diverse participants and avoid excluding marginalized groups. Researchers must also respect community rights and data ownership. The CARE principles - Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics - encourage researchers to work collaboratively with communities and respect their control over data use (Global Indigenous Data Alliance [GIDA], 2019). These

values complement U.S. federal regulations in the Common Rule (45 CFR 46), which mandate IRB review for studies involving human participants (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2018). Counselors involved in research must adhere to federal rules and the ethical standards outlined in Section G of the ACA Code of Ethics (ACA, 2014), which specify responsibilities in research and publication. These include protecting participants, maintaining boundaries, reporting results honestly, and sharing findings appropriately. Counselors must meet both legal and institutional standards. When using new or untested methods, they should seek supervision, ensure client safety, and clearly explain that participation is voluntary, ensuring informed consent. Researchers are advised to focus on the practical meaning of findings and not just the statistical substance, and to interpret them within a cultural and social context (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). Researchers are expected to choose assessment methods that are dependable and respectful of cultural differences. Any changes made to fit particular participant groups should be clearly explained. When presenting findings, investigators should adhere to accepted reporting practices, including the American Psychological Association's *Journal Article Reporting Standards* (JARS) for quantitative work and frameworks such as SRQR or COREQ for qualitative studies (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020; O'Brien et al., 2014; Tong et al., 2007). Researchers should report findings honestly, acknowledge study limitations, and share results in ways that are clear and useful to others (Balkin & Kleist, 2022). Finally, results should be shared in accessible, culturally appropriate ways, like through community summaries, bilingual materials, or local presentations. Ethical, transparent, and culturally informed practices ensure research is both credible and respectful across diverse populations. The true value of research lies in how it improves everyday counseling practice. When results are shared and applied in teaching, supervision, and community work, they can create meaningful

and lasting progress. Using research in this way helps counselors base their work on evidence while continuing to meet changing social and client needs.

Conclusion

Using research and evaluation in counseling helps counselors grow, stay accountable, and act responsibly. When studies are done ethically and with cultural awareness, clients are treated fairly, and trust is built. Following core ethical values, such as beneficence, fairness, and showing respect, along with the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), ensures honesty throughout the process. As Balkin and Kleist (2022) explain, research is meant to improve how counselors help others. Applying research in teaching, supervision, and community settings keeps counseling both caring and evidence-based.

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