

New methods for counseling research and its utilization

Mark L. Savickas

Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine

Rootstown, OH

USA

Paper presented in Z. Hou (Chair) *Methodological issues in counseling research*.
Invited symposium presented at the 28th International Congress of Psychology.
Beijing, China (August, 2004)

New methods for counseling research and its utilization

The ultimate goal sought by those who produce scientific knowledge is the eventual application of this knowledge to some practical problem. For counseling researchers, the application is obviously in better understanding and improving the counseling process and its outcomes. Counseling researchers thus hope that counselors will apply research in their practices. This hope rests on the assumption that researchers will communicate their findings in a way that is meaningful to practitioners. This assumption is my main concern this morning. My critically examination of the traditional research and diffusion model leaves me concerned that the rift between researchers and practitioners causes much counseling research to fall short in achieving the goal of influencing practice.

I believe that the rift between researchers and practitioners is understandable and that practitioners have good reasons for their ambivalence about theory and research.

1. Counselors and researchers represent different personality types.
2. They pursue different career goals. This difference in attention to whole versus part is reflected in their philosophical stances.
3. The goals of service versus science lead to different philosophical stances.

“fact-based science and value-based service” (Bailey & Eastman, 1996) propel different philosophical stances toward knowledge production. Researchers think nomothetically and practitioners think idiographically; researchers share an ethos of discovery while practitioners share an ethos of application, and researchers use group research designs while practitioners think in terms of case studies.

This leads to Trouble in Paradigms, with separate disciplines dealing with the same problems.

4. Counselors and researchers live in different language communities

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) wrote about *language communities* who had trouble translating statements from one language to another even when discussing the same problem such as career indecision. Counselors talk in terms of purpose, goals, intentions, biography, defining moments, choice points whereas counseling researchers talk about causes, variables, hypotheses, test scores, statistical significance, and diagnoses. Maybe this is why we talk about *translating* research into practice. Validity should lead to usefulness but does it.

Researchers exacerbate the problem by not even communicating with each other.

What can we do about it? Beutler, L. E., Williams, R. E., Wakefield, P. J., & Entwistle, S. R. (1995) and Howard (1986), among others noted in the reference list, have suggested the following strategies.

1. Researchers must link better to other scientists.

Theory schools drive wedges between scientists and put off practitioners.

They do not have to agree, conflict brings new ideas, but they should collaborate to aid practice.

2. Researchers must initiate and maintain relationships with practitioners.

Practitioners are doing more to bridge the chasm than are scientists. Practitioners Attend conferences, read journals, write case reports, take continuing education while researchers seem to take less interest in the work of practitioners.

3. Researchers should reconsider the role of practice for advancing science.

Practice is a source of *discovery*, whereas science is a source of *confirmation*. Research explain what practitioners have already discovered. Research takes these discoveries and systematizes, organizes, validates, and operationalizes them.

4. Researchers must try harder to make research relevant to practitioners.

Research does not remotely resemble what takes place in counseling sessions. Research reports are written for other researchers, not for practitioners. Margaretha Lucas (1996) has suggested that we apply practice to theory by systematically collecting case studies linked to major career theories and then use the cases to develop counseling models or mini-theories that specify “treatment protocols for frequently encountered career problems in specific populations.” She calls this *practice knowledge*. It addresses the question posed decades ago by Williamson and Bordin (1941): “What counseling techniques (and conditions) will produce what types of results with what types of students?”

5. The field needs to develop vehicles for translating science to practice.

Communication of research is as important as research itself. Separate journals for researchers and practitioners continue the rift.

I think we should study how practitioners use research in practice. Simionato, (1991) distinguished between research consumption (reading it, attending conferences) and research utilization (changing practice in some way). He studied what influence practice: past experience with clients (43%), discussion with colleagues (27%) workshops/seminars (6%), how-to books and articles (12%) intuition (9%), theory articles and books (7.5%), conferences (2.5%), and research articles (4.1 %)

Research utilization models focus on advancing practice by moving from “task-oriented to science-based practice.” The steps in research utilization are topic identification, literature search and critique, presentation and discussion of review, decision to proceed with RU project implementation, documentation, and evaluation (Omery & Williams, 1999).

RU more prescribed task than EBP. RU begins with body of research or identification of clinical problem. Critique of scientific findings and application into practice and evaluation through measurement of outcomes. RU uses only scientific findings and integrates the change process into its tasks. (Omery & Williams, 1999). In contrast EBP is careful and practical use of current best-evidence to guide practice decisions. EBP usually includes consensus and expert opinion to produce clinical practice guidelines to direct the clinician. Evaluation of the guidelines in practice is not usually included (Omery & Williams, 1999).

So, in the end for me, the exciting new methodology for research is practice-based research networks. This would consist of groups of practitioners who have agreed to implement research protocols and data collection in studies that examine common counseling problems. This methodology has the advantage of analyzing common counseling problems and interventions in the settings in which they are routinely encountered. The networks also provide a fertile environment for emerging areas of interest, including the fostering of outcomes research and the development of clinical practice guidelines. The research issues must be practical, fitting time and resources of practitioners. Moreover, the identification of compelling research issues is critical to sustaining the interest of practitioners, who must struggle with the necessities of their practice and clients. Today, we can use the capacity for information systems to collect, analyze, and effectively use data. We must exploit these new tools.

References

- Barak, A. (1998). The role of research methodology in counsellor education: A case of second-order effect. *Canadian Journal of Counselling, 32*, 50-63.
- Beutler, L. E., Williams, R. E., Wakefield, P. J., & Entwistle, S. R. (1995). Bridging scientist and practitioner perspective in clinical psychology. *American Psychologist, 50*, 984-994.
- Pfiffer, S., Burd, S., & Wright, A. (1992). Clinicians and researchers: Recurring obstacles and some possible solutions. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 48*, 140-145.
- Goldfriend, M.R., Borkovec, T. D., Clarkin, J. F., Johnson, L.D., & Parry, G. (1999). Toward the development of a clinically useful approach to psychotherapy research. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 55*, 1385-1405.
- Howard, G. S. (1986). The scientist-practitioner in counseling psychology: Toward a deeper integration of theory, research, and practice. *The Counseling Psychologist, 14*, 61-105.
- Lucas, M. S. (1996). Building cohesiveness between practitioners and researchers: A practitioner-scientist model. In M. L. Savickas & W. B. Walsh (Eds.) *Handbook of career counseling theory and practice* (pp. 81-88). Paul Alto: Davies-Black.
- Millstein, K. H. (1993). Building knowledge from the study of cases: A reflective model for practitioner self-evaluation. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 8*, 255-279.
- Peterson, D. R. (1991). Connection and disconnection of research and practice in the education of professional psychologists. *American Psychologist, 46*, 422-429.
- Simionato, R. (1991). The link between empirical research, epistemic values, and psychological practice. *Australian Psychologist, 26*, 123-127.
- Williamson, E. G., & Bordin, E. S., (1941). The evaluation of vocational and educational

counseling: A critique of the methodology of experiments. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 1, 5-24.

Wittgenstein, L. (1953): Philosophical investigations. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.