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EVALUATION METHODOLOGY APPLIED TO
COUNSELING OUTCOME RESEARCH

by

Rulon Owen Gibson

A DISSERTATION

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Department of Educational Psychology and Measurements

Under the Supervision of Associate Professor Larry Braskamp

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COUNSELING OUTCOME RESEARCH

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Historically, as professions in fields providing both medical and social-psychological services to members of society have become sophisticated and open (rather than occult or secret) critics have attempted to assess their impact on man. The criteria used in the traditional healing arts are rather straightforward and obvious, while those available in the social-psychological arena are far more subtle, obscure, and in many ways must be created. Shaffer's report (1936) of outcomes of psychoanalytic therapies and Williamson's and Bordin's (1940, 1941) attempts to evaluate counseling were forerunners of numerous efforts undertaken that pointed out the high complexity and variability of research designed to evaluate counseling and psychotherapy.

More recently, reviews by Eysenck (1952) and Levitt (1957) of outcome research in counseling and psychotherapy have been especially controversial. On the basis of the studies he reviewed, Eysenck concluded that roughly two-thirds of neurotic patients recover within two years without therapy. It appeared that this figure was remarkably stable regardless of patient type, standard of recovery or treatment method. Levitt arrived at similar conclusions while reviewing studies with neurotic children. Needless to say, such open expressions were hotly contested and led to anticipatable reactions.

One of the more rational responses was made by Bergin (1963, 1966) who outlined at least four general difficulties with many of the studies included in the previously mentioned reviews. Bergin pointed out (1) the inadequacy of many of the control groups used, (2) the lack of an adequate definition of the treatment (counseling) variables, (3) the frequent occurrence of greater variability in treatment group compared to control group outcomes despite the general lack of significant mean differences between the groups, and (4) the wide variability in criterion measures.

The controversy and the resultant criticisms of most outcome studies have led at least in part to as much attention being directed to methodology and design issues as to direct studies of process and outcome (Stollak, Guernsey, & Rothberg, 1966). A number of writers have addressed themselves to the control group problem and specifically to the necessity of adequate controls to allow rejection of the spontaneous remission alternative (e.g., Gergin, 1963; Cross, 1964; Edwards & Cronbach, 1952; Hunt, 1952; Truax & Carkhuff, 1967). There is some evidence that some of the control groups in the outcome studies cited by reviews were not control groups but were actually therapy groups.

The definitional problem mentioned by Bergin has received greater stress in the literature. Research has begun to emphasize careful and more specific exploration of the "for what?" "with whom?" and "under what conditions?" factors and their interactions rather than attempting to answer the broader question of whether counseling

(psychotherapy) works or not (Blocker, 1966; Edwards & Cronbach, 1952; Hunt, 1952; Krumboltz, 1966; Stollak et al., 1966). Counseling in its totality appears impossible to evaluate (Volsky, Magoon, Norman, Hoyt, 1965) and attention is gradually being focused on more specific problem areas as well as more sophisticated statistical treatment such as factorial designs and interaction analyses. The existence of other reviews of counseling outcome studies (Bergin, 1963, 1966; Truax & Carkhuff, 1967) showing significant treatment effects as compared to non-treatment control conditions lends support to this search for relevant variables underlying the general concept, counseling. A further justification for the focus on specific treatment factors related to the third issue raised by Bergin (1963): the frequent occurrence of greater variance in counseling outcomes as compared to control group outcomes. An important implication underlying this issue is that counseling (psychotherapy) might have either facilitative or inhibitive effects that tend to cancel each other out across clients.

The remaining problem is the criterion issue. It appears that the wide variability in criterion measures and the lack of agreement as to which counseling criteria are most desirable have led to a deemphasis on research in recent years. Patterson (1960) states that:

Outcome research has been relatively neglected in the past few years. This has probably been related to the criterion problem; it appears that the difficulty of obtaining criteria, and even agreeing upon acceptable goals which might be translated into

criterion instruments, has led to the focusing of attention upon the counseling process [p. 99].

Much of the literature on counseling concerns such process issues as interpretation of tests, insuring that interview information does not fall in the wrong hands and inducement of client expression of feelings. The criterion issue, however, cannot be avoided. Counseling process itself is significant only in terms of outcomes or effects on the client (Dressel, 1953). Unfortunately, this point is often overlooked. If process is dealt with in a fashion allowing it to be divorced from the criteria or outcomes of counseling, the possibility exists that what may be considered by professional counselors an ideal process relationship may in fact, be independent of successful counseling outcomes. Such ironic research findings are available (Apostal, 1960; Gonyea, 1963) where no relationship has been found between successful process and successful outcome.

One writer has described the definition of criteria of counseling effectiveness as the most important area of disagreement which obfuscates the evaluation picture (Blocker, 1966). Weitz (1964) indicated that what counseling researchers need is not better methodology and instrumentation, but better knowledge of what effects are important. Only by establishing meaningful criteria can counseling really be understood. The accomplishment of the counseling goals, rather than adherence to certain prescribed procedures, marks the successful counseling venture.

In addition to reflecting the counseling goals, outcomes must be represented in visible, significant changes in the client's behavior

(Carkhuff, 1966; Dressel, 1953; Krumboltz, 1965, 1966; Volsky et al., 1965) and measured by instruments of established reliability and validity (Patterson, 1960; Stollak et al., 1966; Volsky et al., 1965). Counseling criteria, then, must inevitably involve observable changes in client behavior.

It thus becomes evident that even significant outcomes take on a dubious worth when the criteria themselves are vague and ambiguous. In fact, a method may be effective in terms of one criterion but not for another (Patterson, 1960). Diverse criteria should perhaps be implemented (Carkhuff, 1966; Patterson, 1960; Stollak et al., 1966) and the criteria themselves made subject to evaluation. At this point, a rather redundant and obvious, but extremely important conclusion can be made. The effectiveness of a counseling procedure can be assessed only in terms of the criteria and criterion measures employed. A program is not effective or ineffective per se, but only when considered in light of the criteria sought by or predicted for that program.

In summary, it appears that a major problem in research on counseling outcomes concerns the criterion issue. More specifically, the major difficulties include (1) an operational definition of counseling objectives and (2) the development of criterion instruments to measure the extent to which the objectives are reached by the client. Since so little agreement does exist on how to resolve these difficulties, outcome research has been neglected in favor of process research. This is not to say that process research should in any

sense be neglected, but rather that it be considered within the crucial context of the effect of the counseling process on relevant criterion measures, and that its relevance be tied to criteria.

Purpose of the Current Study

This study is an attempt to define issues relating to criteria in counseling research. The criterion issues have their parallels in other social fields, and particularly in curriculum and instructional research in education. The similarity between the criterion problems encountered in counseling and in educational research is highlighted in the discussion. On the basis of this similarity, a relatively new approach to outcome research currently being employed in education is proposed for adoption in counseling outcome research. The new methodological approach, sometimes labeled evaluation or evaluative research, directly involves the criterion issues.

As compared to the focus of traditional or classical research on the comparison of treatment and control groups, the central focus of evaluative research is on program or treatment objectives and the extent of achievement of the objectives made by the clients. In other words, the success of a program is defined in terms of goal achievement rather than demonstrated superiority over a control group. The evaluative research strategy does not preclude the use of adequate statistical and experimental design controls as well as comparisons with control groups. Rather, such tactics serve to supplement and support further the general strategy of assessing the success of a program or treatment relative to its goals.

This investigation is in essence a methodological study. It describes the application of evaluation methodology to a vocational counseling program in order to evaluate the success of the program relative to its objectives. The purpose is to demonstrate the advantages of the evaluative approach in dealing with the criterion issue, while still adhering to well established scientific tactics. A control group was used to demonstrate that comparison among groups is possible within the evaluative framework for which common objectives are shared.

Since an essential aspect of evaluation methodology requires selection of program objectives and criterion instruments to measure outcome performance relative to these objectives, emphasis was placed upon their development and examination as they may be relevant to vocational counseling. In addition, the objectives for the program to be evaluated were defined and an attempt made to justify the choice.

The vocational counseling program evaluated is labeled Career Planning Review (CPR), a program attempted on a pilot basis in the University of Nebraska Counseling Center before this study was started. This approach provided students opportunity to take a battery of tests and receive subsequently a written interpretive summary together with specific recommendations. The client was not required to see a counselor in person. The purpose of the program is to provide students with a quick source of vocational assessment, information, and guidance and as an alternative to traditional vocational counseling

requiring involvement with a staff counselor in face-to-face relationships.

Using the evaluation model, the success of the CPR program is assessed in terms of the achievement of program objectives by the clients. Upon termination of the CPR program, the client was expected to be able to (1) specify the decision he had reached with respect to the vocational concerns that brought him into counseling (2) specify steps he had taken subsequent to counseling in support of his decision, (3) indicate on a six-point rating scale an adequate degree of satisfaction with his decision and (4) indicate on a similar rating scale an adequate degree of satisfaction with his experience in the experimental program. A fifth objective related to the efficiency of the program in terms of the average number of counselor hours required per CPR client, and stated that the CPR program would demonstrate at least as much efficiency as the conventional vocational counseling program. As with the last objective, the first four were based on group data. A specifiable proportion of all CPR clients had to achieve the first and second objectives while the group mean for objectives three and four had to be three or less in order for the program to be judged a success. The proportion stipulated for the first two objectives was the equivalent proportion from clients in a conventional counseling program.

A comparative element was also introduced into the evaluation design since the objectives for the individual clients were similar for both CPR and traditional counseling programs. Hypotheses were

developed with reference to each of the objectives which stated that the group performances would be approximately the same for both groups. Specifically, the hypotheses to be tested were:

1. The numerical ratings of both groups on the SATISFACTION WITH DECISION scale are equal.
2. The numerical ratings of both groups on the SATISFACTION WITH TREATMENT PROCESS scale are equal.
3. The proportion of clients recording a decision is the same for both groups.
4. The proportion of clients recording specific steps taken in support of the decision approximately one week following termination of counseling is the same for both groups.
5. The average amount of counselor time spent on a case is the same for both groups.

No a priori information was available to indicate that outcome performance of the CPR clients would be either superior or inferior to the performance of traditional counseling clients. If the CPR program is found successful (independently of the comparison with the control group) and compares favorably with traditional vocational counseling, the program will be seen as an attractive alternative for interested counseling center clients who are seeking vocational guidance.

In summary, the study serves primarily as a model for the adoption of an evaluative research strategy in assessing counseling

outcomes. It is hoped that the modeling displayed in this study might serve to accelerate the use of a research approach that holds considerable promise for defining and assessing criterion issues in counseling outcome research.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter will be devoted to a description and discussion of the educational evaluative research model, its appropriateness to counseling research, and the application of the evaluative research model to a counseling program.

Since the topic of this study is counseling, a general definition is necessary. One appropriate for this investigation is Thoresen's (1969):

Counseling is a variety of procedures systematically undertaken by a counselor to promote specific changes in the behavior of clients. These changes are directly relevant to goals which have been mutually established between the client and counselor [p. 844].

This conceptualization has considerable appeal because of its broadness and its emphasis on outcome as opposed to process. It also facilitates the development of certain parallels to be drawn between counseling research and applied research in education.

As will be shown, outcome research in counseling shares a number of commonalities with educational evaluative research, a strategy uniquely suited for program evaluation which has engendered considerable enthusiasm during this past decade. It is the thesis of this paper that because of these commonalities, evaluation methodology may provide an adequate framework within which counseling outcomes may be appropriately investigated.

Evaluation Methodology

Evaluative research can perhaps be most easily described by comparing it with basic research. Stake and Denny (1969) describe basic research as concerned with the discovery and building of principles, while evaluative research is concerned with the nature and worth of a program and finding relevant answers for decision-making. Basic research is considered to have the greater generalizability. More descriptive yet, is the distinction drawn by Glass (1971) among several types of inquiry. According to his view, educational research attempts to assess the "scientific truth" of something, or in other words the logical consistency or the empirical verifiability of a phenomenon. Methods of inquiry which depend on assessment of empirical verifiability (e.g., Skinnerian operant psychology) or assessment of logical consistency (e.g., psychometric test theory) lead to empirical truth or rational truth, respectively. These methods are identified with research. Assessment of social utility, however, is evaluation.

To be sure, distinctions are by no means as clear-cut upon examination, as they appear to be superficially. Glass conceptualizes the three assessment approaches as dimensions along which various research enterprises may be arrayed. In this scheme educational outcome studies would be found toward the high end of the "assessment of social utility" dimension. They would be labeled evaluation studies. The role played by empirical and rational inquiry in evaluation studies must not be discounted. The relative importance

of these in evaluative research, however, is a point of controversy today. Guba (1969) is representative of one group willing to minimize the importance of the other two methods of inquiry if necessary, while Stanley (1969) represents the other, which considers any assessment procedure inadequate which does not take into account the rational and empirical aspects of inquiry. The position taken here will be the latter which appears to have greater potential for counseling outcome studies.

Evaluative research is applied research; a mixture of empirical and rational inquiry pointed toward (1) immediate and rather openly communicable problems with practical rather than theoretical significance and (2) the identification of program objectives and their measurement (Caro, 1971; Cherns, 1969; Stake, 1969; Suchman, 1969; Travers, 1964). It represents a special form of applied research in that it focuses on the assessment of the effects or sequelae of specific interventions (Caro, 1971). Evaluative research typically is conceived to have limited potential for generality but great potential for immediate utilization. In addition, it includes an explicit judgmental dimension to account for the value judgments inherent in establishment of objectives and assessment of social utility.

Attempts at a formal definition of evaluation should reflect both the results and the desirability of a program or treatment. Although many different definitions are available (e.g., Alkin, 1969; Guba, 1967; Scriyen, 1967; Stake, 1967; Stufflebeam, 1968; Tyler,

(1969) the one that seems most parsimoniously to incorporate the above-mentioned points is that of Suchman (1967) who conceptualized evaluative research as "the determination . . . of the results . . . attained by some activity . . . designed to accomplish some valued goal or objective [pp. 31-32]." The accomplishment of stated goals or objectives establishes the worth or social utility of a program. Since, however, the desirability of the program goals might be questioned, evaluative research should include procedures for the justification of the goals (Glass, 1971; Scriven, 1967). At this point, values underlying the establishment of goals or objectives can be specified and examined. Once the goals are decided upon, they are defined behaviorally or in performance terms and criterion instruments are developed to measure performance.

In sum, evaluative research as contrasted with basic research places great emphasis on identification of objectives, methods for justifying the objectives, and methods for assessing the attainment of the objectives. Like basic research, evaluative research also attempts to systematically identify the process by which the results were achieved. Admittedly, this description is highly simplified, omitting other important steps such as assessment of antecedents and transactions in a program (Stake, 1967) and utilization of intermediate objectives (formative evaluation) to allow necessary modification of a program before it is completed (Scriven, 1967). However, for the purposes of the current study, the essentials have been described sufficiently to allow comparison with counseling problems.

Evaluation in Counseling

Bandura (1969), discussing counseling procedures, pinpointed two basic decision systems: (1) selection of goals and (2) selection of procedures to facilitate realization of the goals. This process is amazingly similar if not identical to the steps making up the evaluation process. In fact, all counseling outcome studies are directly related to social or practical utility. To be sure, logical consistency and in particular empirical verifiability are essential to counseling evaluation, but the primary purpose of evaluation is to assess the "worth" or practical utility of a particular treatment. This "worth" is defined in terms of an established congruency between the treatment objectives and the outcomes for the client. The criterion question, it will be recalled, appeared to be a (if not the) major issue in outcome research. Thus the definition of evaluative research, which focuses on objectives and criterion-measures, is highly appropriate for the problems of counseling outcome studies as well as educational outcome studies. The focus of evaluation in counseling should be on the assessment of and alleviation or resolution of client problems. The success of counseling then becomes a function of the achievement of pre-established behavioral objectives based upon client problems rather than a necessarily significant mean effect over a control group. The goal of adding to scientific knowledge, although important, is secondary. Obviously, the selection of the most effective treatment to facilitate achievement of counseling objectives is an empirical issue arrived at by the