On the Perceived Non-Utility of Research in Counseling

P. PAUL HEPPNER and WAYNE P. ANDERSON

Additional observations about the perceived non-utility of research are offered in terms of relevance and rigor, practicum training, practitioners' work environments, and efficiency of information exchange.

Howard addresses a very important issue in his article, namely that a substantial group of practitioners do not perceive research as being of much value to them. This observation has been made repeatedly in the past (e.g., Gadlin & Ingle, 1975; Goldman, 1976, 1977, 1982; Hill, 1982; Levine, 1974; Rausch, 1974; Ross, 1981). In addition, several special issues in counseling journals have been devoted to bridging the gap between research and the practitioner (e.g., Gelso & Johnson, 1982; Minor, 1981; Remer, 1981a,b). The persistence of these observations, however, is disturbing because they suggest that the issue has not been resolved and perhaps not even given the attention it warrants. Howard is to be commended for grappling with a difficult issue and trying to identify a possible cause for the perceived irrelevance of the published research.

Howard focuses primarily on the type of variables that have been examined in the published research. He maintains that research that is published tends to investigate efficient causes as opposed to final causes of behavior, with the latter being the causes that practitioners tend to believe in. Thus, a schism. Gelso (1979) made another observation: Relatively few counseling psychologists actively engage in research after they receive their doctorate degrees. As reasons, Gelso questioned the feasibility of the scientist-practitioner model and the research preparation within training programs.

Both the observations of Howard and Gelso (1979) can be interpreted as reflecting a similar issue: Research is not perceived as a viable means in which to learn about human behavior, either by reading about it or by doing it. We would like to offer some additional observations. Our comments will be grouped into the following categories: relevance and rigor, practicum training, practitioners' work environments, and efficiency of information exchange.

RELEVANCE AND RIGOR

Research within counseling psychology has been criticized for not being relevant to the practitioner (e.g., Goldman, 1976; Hill, 1982; Ross, 1981). On one level, it seems that we have two different groups (practitioners and researchers) who at their extreme ends have different goals and philosophies. The research group is striving by rigorous investigative methods to establish a science of behavior. They believe that this will eventually give them a basic knowledge of behavior that will provide practitioners with what they need in the way of knowledge. The practitioner group is striving to find relevant information so they can use this knowledge to help change clients' behaviors. Some practitioners believe that current research methods cannot provide the knowledge that is needed and that researchers' rigor obliterates what is relevant to know. Subsequently, they seek a

basis for their work elsewhere (e.g., Gadlin & Ingle, 1975; Levine, 1974; Ross, 1981). In some ways, this is not so different from Howard's views.

We do not doubt that research has enhanced the practice of counseling psychology. Witness the results of the research on anxiety management (e.g., Deffenbacher & Suinn, 1982), group psychotherapy (e.g., Hare, 1976), assertion training (Linehan, 1979), and counselor self-disclosure (Gurman, 1977). Although a practitioner may not be able to cite a specific reference, most practitioners' graduate school training was likely based on a tremendous amount of research data, all the way from personality theory to intervention strategies. The accumulation may be slow, but the data eventually advance our working knowledge of the field.

Nonetheless, that research is seemingly continually criticized for not being relevant is cause for concern in and of itself. Likewise, the fact that relatively few counselors and counseling psychologists publish after they leave graduate school (Gelso, 1979) is another reflection of a problem for a group of people claiming to be scientists and espousing the Boulder model. In short, there is sufficient evidence that trainers should be concerned.

Consider the claim that the current research methods and rigor are inadequate to study the complexity of human behavior. Although there can be some merit in this claim, Gelso's (1979) caution regarding paradigm fixation is an excellent strategy to overcome an overemphasis on one methodology. Or consider the claim that there is a hierarchy of different types of research, with the tightly controlled experimental study at the top. It is believed that other research designs, such as correlational or applied studies, are less than adequate. This is an antiquated philosophy of science, one that again has been addressed very well in the literature (see Gelso, 1979; Kazdin, 1980). It can be maintained that investigators have developed some strategies to overcome such pitfalls. But understanding and appreciating both the pitfalls and the solutions requires an advanced level of knowledge about research design, the philosophy and development of science, and the status of the counseling literature. This requires a continued commitment of learning and reading, probably beyond the amount of time available to the typical practitioner or graduate student.

In some ways the relevance versus rigor debate may be more appropriately identified as a relevant and rigorous issue (Krumboltz & Mitchell, 1979; Remer, 1981a). Both are needed in a balanced manner. Perhaps the task for trainers and journal editors is to facilitate the merger of these two issues into the counseling research for both research and practitioner oriented counselors and psychologists.

PRACTICUM TRAINING

Gelso (1979) aptly identified several training issues that affect both the student's development of research skills and interest in conducting research. In addition to examining the research

training graduate students receive, it may be equally important to examine how we teach our students to be practitioners. For example, a practicum student encounters a client problem that he or she knows relatively little about, let's say enuresis. What percentage of the time are trainees referred to use the research literature as a problem-solving tool to facilitate their assessment or interventions with such client problems? Our impression is that this happens relatively infrequently, and that it is much more commonplace to train students via the experiences of their supervisors. Likewise, to what extent is research integrated into practica classes? A basic purpose of practica classes is to practice what students have learned about counseling and the science of human behavior. Our impression is that there is a tendency to emphasize the practice and experiential elements apart from the scientific basis of behavior. This is not to imply that the experiential aspects are unimportant in training, but rather to point out that the integration between what students learn from their experiences may not be integrated with research data.

In short, it may be important to examine what graduate students learn about the role of research and its utility within counseling in their applied and practica classes. If one views training as a successive shaping process, this may be particularly important given that the practicum experience is the closest approximation to the activities of the practitioner. How students are taught to work as counselors in their practica classes and internships most likely will reflect how they will work as practitioners.

Gelso (1979) discussed the research role models that faculty provide; it may be equally important to examine the role models that practitioners provide. How do service-oriented students develop their ideals of what they want to do and be like as practitioners? It may be that the role models that are most influential for service-oriented students are service-oriented practitioners; the research-oriented faculty may have substantially less modeling influence on service-oriented students. And most importantly, what do these students learn about the daily viability of research for practice? Our hunch is that students learn little about the utility of research findings in this fashion.

PRACTITIONERS' WORK ENVIRONMENT

Krumboltz and Mitchell (1979) noted that it may be useful to examine the graduate school environment when considering the research training of our graduate students. It may be equally important to examine the environment that practitioners face in their applied world. What are their job expectations? What is valued in their performance? What are salary raises or other reinforcements related to?

Many times practitioners are confronted with relatively heavy client loads, and they are often reinforced (explicitly or implicitly) for the quantity of their client load. Using the research literature in one's practice, especially if it seems complex and technical, is an added time demand, and the short-term environmental rewards may be quite negligible. Sometimes research activities are actually perceived as removing the practitioner from practice. One psychologist working full-time in a large university counseling center lamented, "Every time I turn around, someone wants to know why I am doing this research, and asks me to justify it." In short, some of the environments that practitioners find themselves in may not value research as a means of learning about human behavior or solving problems, and may even punish such efforts. Thus, another variable that may be important to study with regard to the under-utilization of research is the practitioner's work environment.

EFFICIENCY OF INFORMATION EXCHANGE

As research methods become increasingly sophisticated and powerful, the complexity and precision of the research also tends to increase. Subsequently, the level of knowledge needed to interpret and integrate one study into a program of research or a series of research findings also increases as one balances the "Bubble Hypothesis" (Gelso, 1979), paradigm fixation, internal and external validity, and an array of statistical analyses. The increased sophistication is sometimes reflected in highly specialized language, which at times builds a semantic wall between the researcher and practitioner. Some titles of articles illustrate this: "Demand Characteristics in the Satiation-Deprivation Effect on Attitude Conditioning" or "Expressive Control and the Leakage of Dispositional Introversion-Extraversion During Role-Played Teaching."

Likewise, experimental results are presented in small pieces of useful knowledge across a number of articles and journals over time. It may take many articles on a topic before there is a critical mass that will be of any use to counselors or applied psychologists. Information about a topic area may be spread over so many journals that practitioners cannot readily synthesize all that is being discovered. In short, unless the typical practitioner puts in a considerable amount of time, the research literature may not provide information that is readily usable or "digestible." If our observations are accurate, journal editors may need to carefully examine how they can reduce such information problems and facilitate the integrative functions that are needed. The recent emphasis and call for integrative reviews may be one useful vehicle to bridge this gap (Fretz, 1984; Goodyear, 1984).

Howard suggests that there is a schism between the practitioner and researcher. In several respects, skilled practitioners who counsel daily may be the front-line experts in the profession. They work to hone their observational, assessment, and intervention skills. As Rogers recently pointed out, it is these people that we so critically need to learn from and exchange information with (cf. Heppner, Lee, & Rogers, 1984).

The flip-side of practitioners being able to efficiently digest useful information from the literature is practitioners being able to efficiently contribute useful information to the literature. On the one hand, journal editors have developed columns in journals designed for ideas, observations, and programs developed by practitioners (e.g., "On the Campus" and "Craft Reports" in the *Journal of College Student Personnel*, "In the Field" in this journal). On the other hand, it may be useful to examine to what extent such columns are stimulating all of the types of information from practitioners that are needed. There may be some validity to the claim that the emphasis on methodology and rigor prevents some practitioners from publishing useful information. In short, the door needs to swing both ways for maximum gains in to be achieved in acquiring knowledge within the profession.

CONCLUSION

We believe that research in counseling and counseling psychology is useful to practitioners, but could be more useful to many more. The scientific method offers powerful tools in which we can reduce biases and examine the effect of some variables on others. It is important not to "throw the baby out with the bathwater," not to discount the scientific method because of some flaws in a series of studies or discount the utility of research because some research seems irrelevant to the practitioner.

We suggest that there are a number of causes that might affect why research is not perceived as a viable means in which to learn about human behavior. It may be, as Howard suggests, that research has predominantly examined efficient causes of behavior. Likewise, the research training issues identified by Gelso (1979) and research strategies (Anderson, 1981) also merit attention. Also to be considered are some specific training issues within applied practice-oriented courses and the mentoring process. In addition, other variables meriting examination include

the practitioners' work environment and the efficiency of information exchange between practitioners and researchers.

REFERENCES

Anderson, W. (1981). How to do research in community mental health agencies. *Personnel and Guidance Journal, 59,* 517–523.

Deffenbacher, J.L., & Suinn, R.M. (1982). The self-control of anxiety. In P. Karoly & F. Kanfer (Eds.), *Self-management and behavior change from theory to practice* (pp. 393–442). New York: Pergamon Press.

Fretz, B.R. (1984). Call for proposals for research reviews. *Division of Counseling Psychology (17) Newsletter,* 5, 2.

Gadlin, H., & Ingle, G. (1975). Through the one-way mirror, the limits of experimental self-reflection. *American Psychologist, 30,* 1003–1009.

Gelso, C.J. (1979). Research in counseling: Methodological and professional issues. *The Counseling Psychologist, 8*(3), 7–35.

Gelso, C.J., & Johnson, D.H. (1982). Research in counseling psychology II [Special issue]. *The Counseling Psychologst, 10*(4).

Goldman, L. (1976). A revolution in counseling research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 23,* 543–552.

Goldman, L. (1977). Toward more meaningful research. *Personnel and Guidance Journal, 55,* 363–368.

Goldman, L. (1982). Defining non-traditional research. *The Counseling Psychologist, 10*(4), 87–89.

Goodyear, R.K. (1984). On our journal's evolution: Historical developments, transitions, and future directions. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 63,* 3–9.

Gurman, P.S. (1977). The patient's perception of the therapeutic relationship. In A.S. Gurman & A.M. Razin (Eds.), *Effective psychotherapy: A handbook of research* (pp. 503–543). New York: Pergamon Press.

Hare, A.P. (1976). *Handbook of small group research.* New York: Free Press.

Heppner, P.P., Lee, L.A., & Rogers, M.E. (1984). Carl Rogers: Reflections on his life. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 63,* 14–20.

Hill, C.E. (1982). Counseling process research: Philosophical and methodological dilemmas. *The Counseling Psychologist, 10*(4), 7–19.

Kazdin, A.E. (1980). *Research design in clinical psychology.* New York: Harper & Row.

Krumboltz, J.D., & Mitchell, L.K. (1979). Relevant rigorous research. *The Counseling Psychologist, 8*(3), 50–52.

Levine, M. (1974). Scientific method and the adversary model, some preliminary thoughts. *American Psychologist, 29,* 661–677.

Linehan, M.M. (1979). Structured cognitive-behavioral treatment of assertion problems. In P.C. Kendall & S.D. Hollon (Eds.), *Cognitive-behavioral interventions: Theory, research, and procedures* (pp. 205–240). New York: Academic Press.

Minor, B.J. (1981). Bridging the gap between research and practice [Special issue]. *Personnel and Guidance Journal, 59*(8).

Raush, H.L. (1974). Research, practice, and accountability. *American Psychologist, 29,* 578–681.

Remer, R. (1981a). The counselor and research, Part 1 [Special issue]. *Personnel and Guidance Journal, 59*(9).

Remer, R. (1981b). The counselor and research, Part 2 [Special issue]. *Personnel and Guidance Journal, 59*(10).

Ross, A.O. (1981). Of rigor and relevance. *Professional Psychology, 12,* 318–327.

P. Paul Heppner is an associate professor and **Wayne P. Anderson** is a professor in the Department of Psychology, University of Missouri-Columbia.