



# **Effectively Using Research and Assessment in Couples and Family Therapy**

## **Chapter 4**

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# Effectively Using Research

## Introduction

- The systemic nature and dynamics of couples and family therapy require interplay between research and assessment.
- Nonetheless, inconsistencies with those individuals providing counsel to clients and those conducting research give rise to concerns about the practicality and efficacy of such information.
- Because a gap between researchers and clinicians exists among various social science professions, the importance of employing evidence-based interventions cannot be ignored.



# Effectively Using Research

## Introduction

- Given an overwhelming push within social sciences to compensate for questions regarding the field's scientific value and the push for use of evidence-based interventions, integration of research and assessment as well as collaboration between researchers and clinicians has gained growing importance.
- Knowledge and implementation of assessment methods and research findings in family therapy are a crucial component of ethical and effective practice.



# Effectively Using Research

## Role of Research in Effective Family Therapy

- The International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors (IAMFC) established continued research relative to the efficacy of treatment approaches in addressing issues presented by clients as an expectation in providing ethical practice.
- The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT, 2013) research serves as the fundamental crux of the viability, integrity, and credibility of family counseling with studies demonstrating increased effectiveness of family therapy in the treatment of specific behavioral and mental health issues.



# Effectively Using Research

## Role of Research in Effective Family Therapy

- Brock et al. (2009) identified that the onset of family therapy literature was fraught with suppositions and unsupported ideas, bringing into question the efficacy of treatment approaches.
- By conducting honest research that focuses on the issues often resulting in the disintegration of the family structure, counselors can increase preparedness for addressing such concerns in treatment.



# Effectively Using Research

## Role of Research in Effective Family Therapy

- The establishment of this research has resulted in the formulation of improved theories and will continue to guide practice.
- With an increased focus on research integrity, family therapists have distinguished themselves from other similar professionals.



# Effectively Using Research

## Conclusions Drawn in Family Therapy Research

- Marriage and family therapy is effective in addressing issues such as adolescent developmental disabilities and behavioral issues.
- Family therapy has been demonstrated to be more effective than individual therapy when increasing communication and reducing discrepancies in perception between parents and children.



# Effectively Using Research

## Conclusions Drawn in Family Therapy Research

- Multidimensional family therapy (MDFT), which utilizes diverse techniques such as psychoeducation and developmentally based interventions, has been successfully employed when working with adolescents in the juvenile justice system.
- The integration of multiple approaches to addressing the complex issues that develop in family members is an effective approach to targeting individual issues.



# Effectively Using Research

## Conclusions Drawn in Family Therapy Research

- There has been a continued challenge and assessment of the efficacy of family systems approaches as well as how to incorporate diversity as a means to increase outcomes across multiple populations.
- Through the utilization of research procedures, marriage and family therapists continue to establish the field as a viable and necessary component of counseling where systems, as opposed to individuals, are targeted.



# Effectively Using Research

## Research Methods

- Research can be categorized into one of three processes: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods.
- Qualitative research is often more naturalistic and flexible in approach and utilizes inductive means of inquiry that allow the research to work from participant responses to create a more thematic understanding of the data.
- Quantitative research is often conducted when the researcher seeks to explain or identify relationships between several variables.



# Effectively Using Research

## Research Methods

- Although studies that employ qualitative and quantitative methods may occur independent of each other, some research questions allow for researchers to examine a phenomenon by employing both methods in the same study. This is called a mixed-methods design.



# Effectively Using Research

## Research Methods in Family Therapy

- Bridging the gap between the largely inductive approach to qualitative inquiry and the deductive approach to quantitative research, an increase in mixed-methods studies can be found within the family counseling literature.



# Effectively Using Research

## Research Methods in Family Therapy

- Referring to the importance of randomized clinical trials (RCTs) in establishing evidence of efficacy, Sprenkle (2012) described the potential benefits of merging elements of both approaches in order to gain the scope of information allotted through qualitative means while maintaining a sense of external validity offered through quantitative means.



# Effectively Using Research

## Effectively Evaluating Couples and Families

- Creswell (2013) established three considerations that lay the foundation for which design to implement in a research study.
- Specifically, the researcher must understand his or her philosophical worldview, the course of inquiry that fits the worldview, and the method(s) which complement the two factors.



# Effectively Using Research

## Effectively Evaluating Couples and Families

- Creswell noted that qualitative research often involves either post-positive, interpretive, or critical methodological approaches.
- As with any research study, establishment of a representative sample is necessary to ensure research that meets the standards set forth in the IAMFC Code of Ethics.
- Failure to ensure that samples clearly reflect the population of interest results in the portrayal of misleading information.



# Effectively Using Research

## Effectively Evaluating Couples and Families

- According to Tuckett (2004), establishing a specific number of participants needed for qualitative research is nearly impossible, as qualitative research requires saturation of information as opposed to a specific number of people.
- Determining sample size for quantitative research, on the other hand, requires understanding of the population size, number of variables of study, and the researcher's desired accuracy (Creswell, 2013).



# Effectively Using Research

## Effectively Evaluating Couples and Families

- Given the presence of diverse philosophical foundations, integration of various counseling interventions, a reliance on multiple research methods, and variance in desired treatment outcomes, various instruments may be utilized including qualitative approaches of interviewing, observations, and focus groups, as well as quantitative methods such as surveys and pretest posttest measures.



# Effectively Using Research

## Effectively Evaluating Couples and Families

- Overall, research regarding family therapy is a compilation of research involving individuals with a broader focus on the family system as opposed to the person. As such, researchers must make decisions regarding the methods and instruments utilized based on the availability of information on the phenomenon and the research questions being answered.



# Effectively Using Research

## Effectively Evaluating Couples and Families

- Given the standard for evidence-based classifications, utilization of instruments in family research requires the same expectations concerning validity and reliability or credibility as other studies.



# Effectively Using Research

## What Is Assessment?

- When individual clients, couples, or families present for therapy, they do so with individual perceptions, ideas, and stories. Despite any discrepancies, the counselor is tasked with gaining a clear understanding of the presenting problems.



# Effectively Using Research

## What Is Assessment?

- According to Watson and Flamez (2014), the method of this information gathering process is assessment. Whether through informal or formal means, as discussed further in this chapter, counselors gain important information from this process, which sets the stage for how they conceive the clients' reason for seeking counseling services.



# Effectively Using Research

## Purpose of Assessment

- Deacon and Piercy (2001) go as far as to argue that “Family therapy without assessment is like a car trip without a map” (p. 355).
- Without a clear understanding of the family history and dynamics, the family counselor does not possess the tools to work effectively with the family for positive outcomes.



# Effectively Using Research

## Reliability and Validity

- The term *reliability* is utilized to describe the ability for the test data to be reproduced. Higher reliability estimates therefore indicate that if provided the instrument more than once, an individual would score significantly similarly if external factors are considered. As such, increased reliability scores indicate more trustworthy assessments.



# Effectively Using Research

## Reliability and Validity

- Whereas reliability addresses the ability of test scores to be reproduced, the term *validity* is utilized to evaluate the potential for an instrument to be interpreted accurately within given populations. As such, the validity of an instrument is not a measure of quality but instead a measure of how accurately scores would apply in a given context.



# Effectively Using Research

## Selecting, Administering, Scoring, and Reporting Assessment Results

- There are several sources that can be accessed to learn more about existing tests and their various advantages and disadvantages across counseling settings including: the *Mental Measurements Yearbook (MMY)*, *Tests in Print*, *Tests*, and test publisher websites.
- Although there are numerous assessments available, one must ensure he or she is qualified to administer, score, and interpret the test.



# Effectively Using Research

## Selecting, Administering, Scoring, and Reporting Assessment Results

- Most test publishers specify the level of qualification one needs to purchase and utilize their products.
- According to Watson and Flamez (2014), information regarding the qualifications of administering these tests is often included in professional standards from national counseling organizations, and it is the legal and ethical responsibility of the counselor to ensure that they are followed.



# Effectively Using Research

## Selecting, Administering, Scoring, and Reporting Assessment Results

- Failure to address these expectations may result in a counselor practicing outside his or her own scope of competence, an ethical violation.
- Furthermore, failure to follow the protocols established by specific instruments has the potential to invalidate results.



# Effectively Using Research

## Selecting, Administering, Scoring, and Reporting Assessment Results

- Scoring of many formal instruments is also established under the instrument's testing guidelines. As such, counselors employing these instruments must also ensure that scoring follows the established guidelines in order to provide the client with the most accurate and ethical feedback.



# Effectively Using Research

## Informal and Formal Assessments

- Mirroring the potential subjectivity of social understanding regarding human behaviors and interactions, informal assessments provide less structured approaches to understanding family systems.
- Formal assessments, on the other hand, are more structured and based on empirical data, which may be required when validated means are necessary.



# Effectively Using Research

## Informal and Formal Assessments

- Understanding the uniqueness of each assessment method is necessary for family counselors in providing effective therapeutic treatment.



# Effectively Using Research

## Informal Assessments

- During the data collection process, informal assessments often serve to provide the family counselor with relevant information necessary to inform the counselor's approach.
- According to Spinelli (2008), informal assessments are often multitiered approaches that focus on complex and diverse issues.



# Effectively Using Research

## Informal Assessments

- Observations, interviews, interest inventories, preference questionnaires, genograms, medical examinations, and structural diagrams and self-assessments, for example, may be employed in the counseling process as an ongoing diagnostic assessment of family functioning.



# Effectively Using Research

## Formal Assessments

- Whereas informal assessments seek to gather a wealth of information in a concise period of time, formal assessments seek to utilize validated, standardized measurements specific to the phenomenon being evaluated.
- Given the diversity of issues that may be the focus of family treatment, hundreds if not thousands of formal assessments exist with implications in family counseling.



# Effectively Using Research

## Formal Assessments

- Evaluation of which formal assessments to employ with family therapy relies heavily on the established reliability and validity estimates of these instruments relative to the specific populations of interest.
- Specifically, family clinicians must understand whether assessment needs to be targeted on an individual member of the family system, relationships between couples within a family system, or within the overall family system.



# Effectively Using Research

## Use of Standardized Assessment Instruments for Individuals

- Although the central focus of couples and family counselors primarily revolves around increasing the stability of the overarching systems, whether it is the couple or family, individual assessment is often a useful and necessary component of the counselor's role.
- As such, treatment of couples and families also requires treatment of individuals within the system.

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# Effectively Using Research

- **Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Inventory-3 (SASSI-3)** is an effective and useful tool in clinical practice designed to “identify individuals with a high probability of having a substance dependence disorder, even if those individuals do not acknowledge substance misuse or symptoms associated with it.”

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# Effectively Using Research

- **Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)**, developed by Katharine Briggs and her daughter, Elizabeth Myers, measures four dichotomies of individuals' personality preferences. Available in two different forms, Form M and Form Q, the MBTI is one of the most widely utilized personality assessments for normally functioning persons.



# Effectively Using Research

## Inventories for Couples and Family Counseling

### Assessment in Premarital Counseling

- **PREPARE/ENRICH** is a widely known marriage program that was developed more than 30 years ago and designed to increase awareness of relationship strengths and growth areas. PREPARE is for couples preparing for marriage, while ENRICH is for married couples.



# Effectively Using Research

## Inventories for Couples and Family Counseling

### Assessment in Premarital Counseling

- **Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis (T-JTA)** is a widely used personality assessment in premarital and family counseling that helps clients in developing awareness of characteristics that influence interpersonal relationships and building relationships with others.



# Effectively Using Research

## Couples or Marital Assessment

### Assessing Specific Problems and Stressors

**Derogatis Sexual Functioning Inventory (DSFI)** is an individually administered test of the quality of the current sexual functioning of an individual.

**Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2)** is the most widely used measure of assessing for domestic violence on a partner in a marital, cohabitating, or dating relationship. The assessment also provides information on the techniques the couple uses to handle conflict within the relationship.



# Effectively Using Research

## Assessing the Quality of the Relationship

**Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (MAT)** is one of the oldest assessments used to measure marital satisfaction.

**Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS)** is one of the most widely used measures of relationship quality and is a helpful tool in determining the degree of dissatisfaction couples experience.



# Effectively Using Research

## Assessing the Quality of the Relationship

**Marital Satisfaction Inventory, Revised (MSI-R)** is a self-report inventory used to assess the nature and extent of conflict and distress within a marriage or relationship.

**Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale IV** is a family self-report assessment that assesses family cohesion (e.g., emotional bonding members have toward each other) and flexibility (e.g., quality of leadership and organization, relationship rules, and negotiations).



# Effectively Using Research

## Family Assessment Instruments

**Family Assessment Measure-III (FAM-III)** is appropriate for ages 10 years and older and assesses family strengths, weaknesses, and functioning. The FAM-III provides useful information to the counselor by obtaining a picture of how family members perceive their levels of interaction with other family members.



# Effectively Using Research

## Family Assessment Instruments

**Family Environment Scale (FES, 4th Edition)** is a useful tool to assess the social environment of the family unit, compare parents' and children's perceptions, and examine issues of importance in family treatment.