

# Evidence-Based Practice

- Defined as: “the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use” of the best evidence in making decisions about human service assessment and intervention (Sackett et al. 1997, p. 2).
- Inherently critical
- Research evidence can provide guidance to practitioners and policy makers
- Critics of past practice concluded that it often was ineffective at achieving its goals
- Requires collaboration between research and practice

# Evidence-Based Practice

## ➤ Reasons for emergence:

- Developing body of research findings that can guide practice
- Research in past decades frequently failed to support practice effectiveness

## ➤ Forms of evidence

- Not all “evidence” is equal
  - Experience of an individual practitioner with one client
  - Randomized controlled experiment
- Understanding research methodology helps one to judge the relative value or quality of evidence

evaluation as one of their goals. (Given the close link between policy and program, there is much overlap between the two: Program evaluation is often a part of a policy evaluation.)

**Practice Effectiveness Evaluation.** Whereas program evaluation focuses on the assessment of entire programs or policies, the concern of human service professionals often is considerably more specific—namely, “Is what I am doing right now with this particular client working?” For this reason, practitioners are often disenchanted with the utility of evaluation research as a direct aid to helping clients. In recent years, however, major advances have occurred in the ability of research to answer professionals’ questions about the efficacy of intervention efforts on specific clients. One such advance is a form of research called *single-system design*, in which practitioners devise a way to repeatedly measure the occurrence of a problem and monitor the behavior of a single client, group, family, or larger system for a period of time. Intervention then begins, and the behavior is again monitored. Comparison between the baseline and intervention periods permits the practitioner to make more accurate assessments of progress than the informal assessment on which human service professionals traditionally have relied. Through such careful monitoring of behavior and measuring of intervention effects, human service workers not only can enhance their own effectiveness, but also can contribute to the development of an intervention technology that others can successfully apply.

Obvious similarities exist between program evaluation and practice effectiveness research. For example, both are concerned with the effectiveness of certain practices. The difference, however, is in the scope of the efforts. Program evaluation focuses on complete programs, whereas practice effectiveness emphasizes the assessment of some particular aspect of a practice situation in a way that will not necessarily affect the entire program.

### Evidence-Based Practice

A theme that underlies many recent developments in the human services, and shows great promise for

linking practice and research, is encapsulated by the term **evidence-based practice**: “the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use” of the best evidence in making decisions about human service assessment and intervention (Sackett, et al., 1997, p. 2). According to this approach, the “best evidence” is knowledge that has been gained via the scientific research process. Research in Practice 1.1 discusses some of the issues involved in the development of evidence-based practice in the human services. As the insert shows, this approach has been called a number of different things over the years by different practitioners, although “evidence-based practice” seems to have emerged as the most widely used designation. The evidence-based approach is inherently critical, which means that it is always questioning whether particular practices or policies are effective. Just because a practice method has been routinely used in the past does not mean it is necessarily effective. Just because a practice method has worked with clients with certain characteristics (e.g., based on age, race, or gender) does not mean it will work on other clients. The evidence-based practitioner constantly questions the efficacy of methods, and the primary yardstick used in resolving these questions is the evidence provided by scientific research (Mullen, Bledsoe, & Bellamy, 2008).

This approach has emerged, in part, because there is now a growing body of research evidence—some of it basic and some of it applied—that can provide guidance to human service practitioners and policy makers. In the past century, researchers in the social sciences and human services have developed more sophisticated research techniques and have used them to produce a large and complex body of knowledge about human social and psychological behavior. This body of knowledge now provides human service practitioners and policy makers with scientifically grounded evidence about what works and what doesn’t. So it is much more feasible today—than it was, say, 50 years ago—to base practice and policy on scientific evidence.

Another reason for the emergence of the evidence-based approach is that some startling criticisms of human service practice surfaced a few

decades ago that concluded that such practice is not very effective at achieving its goals—or at least that we don't have much proof that it is effective, other than the claims of the practitioners themselves. In response, in the intervening decades, human service researchers and practitioners focused their attention on producing research that would provide such proof. The resulting collaboration of researchers and practitioners has produced a body of research that provides us with evidence about what is effective in practice and what isn't.

Evidence comes in many different forms, of course. The observations that a practitioner makes of a single client in her office is "evidence," as is the complex statistical analysis done on the observations of thousands of people in a highly controlled experimental study. So a central part of the evidence-based approach is to critically evaluate research studies to determine how much confidence we have in their conclusions, and thus whether we want to use them as evidence in particular practice or policy settings. The purpose of this text is to provide students in the human services with an introduction to research methods so that they are in a better position to understand and participate in this critical evaluation. Although an understanding of research methods in general certainly contributes to becoming a more effective human service practitioner, we will link research methods specifically with evidence-based practice in a number of chapters where the linkage is especially relevant. In addition, we have enhanced the focus on this critical perspective by including a brief section toward the end of each chapter titled "Critical Thinking." There we suggest some ways in which the material in a particular chapter can be a guide for critical thinking and analysis in practice and policy realms, as well as in one's everyday life.

### **Diversity and Research: The Impact of Diversity and Difference on Research**

Human service professionals recognize that diversity and difference—whether they arise from variations in race, ethnicity, gender, or something else—are powerful influences on people and social life. Diversity

and difference can lead some groups to suffer disproportionately from the problems that human service workers attempt to alleviate, such as poverty, inequality, or discrimination. So human service practice devotes special attention to diversity and difference. Issues of diversity and difference also need to be addressed when conducting research in the human services. Because of the position of minorities in society, conducting research that produces accurate and complete data on them can be a challenge. In fact, in some circumstances, the standard research methods used in human service research result in misleading and, in some cases, outright false conclusions regarding a minority. In those circumstances the research methods need to be modified.

This problem is sufficiently important to human service research that we devote special attention to it throughout the book. In each chapter, where relevant, we point out particular ways in which problems or biases in research on minorities can occur and provide strategies for overcoming them. The goal is to create a sensitivity to the fact that research methods can have built-in biases when focused on particular minority groups, and that care must be exercised to detect and avoid this.

### **PARALLELS AND LINKAGES BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

Although scientific research is different in many respects from human service practice, important parallels exist between the two. In fact, researchers and practitioners use many of the same strategies in approaching their problems. After reviewing the steps in conducting research, we will point out parallels that can be found in practice.

### **Steps in Conducting Research**

Although each research project is unique in some fashion, some general steps characterize virtually every project. The research process can be divided into six identifiable stages: problem formulation,