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EVALUATION RESEARCH: BRIDGE BETWEEN SOCIAL WORK ADMINISTRATOR, PRACTITIONER AND RESEARCHER

Michael Roskin*

ABSTRACT

Questions of service effectiveness, and helpfulness are challenging social work clinicians, administrators and researchers. Evaluative research, has been utilized to meet this challenge. However, too infrequently the administrator, clinician and researcher utilize it in separate rather than interlocking pathways. Presented are practical suggestions to increase mutual understanding and collaborative evaluative efforts.

Evaluation Research : What is it ?

EVALUATION may be considered as the determination of the results obtained by some activity designed to accomplish some valued goal or objective.[1] In a very broad context evaluation research is the study of programs, organizations methods and processes for producing social change through social experiments. The experiments attempt to test the validity of the hypothesis that the program, organization, method or process has certain elements within it that will bring about the development of the desired objectives.

Evaluation research tests some hypothesis that activity A will attain objective B because it is able to influence process C which effects the occurrence of this objective.[2]

The understanding of all three factors objective, program and intervening process- is therefore essential to the conduct of evaluation research.

It may be useful to organize evaluation under three headings : (1) evaluation of process, (2) evaluation of achievement, and (3) administrative evaluation.

Evaluation of process may include technique or method as well. The questions posed here are : What are the elements of this program/process?[3] What actually takes place? This model of evaluative research may be applied to field experiments, clinical experiments, demonstration projects, surveys and single organism studies.

Evaluation of achievement requires : (1) a clear statement of objectives; (2) clearly stated description of the measurements by which success in meeting the objectives is to be gauged; (3) the scientific tools and controls necessary to measure the effect of the program.

This model of evaluative research asks the following questions : (1) Does the "program", organization, method or process meet the

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objectives? (2) To what degree does it meet its objective? And (3) How efficiently are the objectives met?[4]

This model may be utilized in evaluating field, clinical, single organism, demonstration, anthropological and survey research projects.

Administrative evaluation asks : What services are we getting for our money? Is the program efficient? To what extent is the optimal use being made of resources? These questions are often answered vis-a-vis cost accounting techniques. This type of administrative evaluation provides useful information about efficiency, but usually little information on the "programs" effectiveness, the extent to which is achieving its goals. This limitation suggests a different model, a "system model."[5]

It is more demanding and more expensive, but presumably has a better, quicker feed-back mechanism as it deals with the multi-faceted environment, in which most agencies and their programs are immersed. It also deals with all of the three types of evaluations just described.

The system model of evaluation is concerned with not only the evaluation of the achievement of goals and sub-goals, but also the evaluation of whether the coordination in the organization and its sub-units is effective; the evaluation of the organization's acquisition and maintenance of necessary resources; and the organization's adaptation to the environment and its own internal demands. In short, it is an evaluation of goal attainment within the context of optimum resource utilization.[6]

Evaluation research has a number of similarities with other types of research, among which are : (1) utilization of the scientific method and adherence to the basic logic and rules of scientific method; (2) use of a variety of the existing techniques for collecting and analyzing data; (3) utilization of a variety of research designs in the setting or laboratory or/and in a natural community.

Among the distinctive, but not necessarily unique features of evaluative research are : (1) its objective which is primarily testing of the application of knowledge rather than the discovery of knowledge; (2) it is primarily aimed at action and manipulation; (3) its major emphasis is on utility; (4) it is usually very restrictively and finitely limited in matters of time and place; and, (5) it usually asks whether A is effective in order to change B rather than if A is related to B in a cause-effect relationship.

Limitations

The issues regarding its limitation deal with : 1) specificity of focus, 2) scientific nature, 3) the relationship between evaluative research and subsequent action and 4) the conditions under which evaluative research should or should not be undertaken.

Specificity of Focus

The issues are : a) whether the focus of evaluative research should be shifted more specifically toward the variables that underlie a particular program rather than attempting to evaluate the effectiveness of the program as a whole and b) whether evaluation research should deal with causality i.e. to prove that result B was caused by A.

Regarding the greater specificity of evaluative research's focus, Lemkau[7] maintains that findings may be of greater general significance if the variables that underlie a program were tested rather than the effectiveness of the program as a whole. Perhaps with greater specificity of the variables underlying a program, opportunities will increase for studying and measuring cause/effect relationships in evaluative research.

The problem is that one can never be certain that a program which works in one situation will work in another. It also is a

reason why so many evaluation studies appear to be repetitive.[8]

One variation of a more specific evaluative research focus would be the self-evaluation model of the single-subject approach espoused by Michael W. Howe. As he maintains, the purpose of evaluative research is to estimate reliably the effects of social intervention. Accordingly his evaluation model does that for him.[9] Field studies that have been solely set up for the purpose of testing particular variables are other illustrations of evaluative research with a greater specificity of focus.

Peter Rossi[10] distinguishes between a reconnaisance phase and an experimental phase of evaluative research. Although his distinction relates more directly to the evaluative research design it can also be utilized in the choice of the formulation of the problem to be evaluated.

The reconnaisance phase can be applied to using evaluative research for more general evaluation such as of a whole program. And the experimental phase can zero in on specific variables in that particular program.

The rough screening in the reconnaisance phase requires only soft and correlational type designs and not the experimental model in order to filter out those programs that are worthwhile for further investigation, whereas in the experimental phase the powerful control experimental model should be pursued to evaluate relative effectiveness of programs and their variables,[11] for example, to test whether a birth control method is effective where "effective" depends on all chance of conception being eliminated. If, however, effectiveness may be defined as fewer births rather than no births at all, then a more rigorous design and control group are necessary.[12]

How Scientific is Evaluative Research?

The questions and concerns here revolve around scientific requirements versus administrative needs and resources. The concern is that a great deal of evaluative research is done by people who are not trained in research methods and are not able to make informed decisions regarding compromises between scientific requirements and the administrative needs and resources.

Most often the problem faced in developing an experimental or quasi-experimental model in evaluative research is the reluctance of the administrator or decision-making personnel of the program in providing and/or establishing a control group. Usually the response is that it is not ethically sound and appropriate to provide what is thought to be a decent, helpful and ameliorative commodity or treatment to one group and not to another group. Often the problem is that it is very difficult to find a comparable control group, even if the decision makers wanted to utilize a control group.

Campbell[13] suggests two ways to utilize an experimental design in evaluative research. The first, referred to as the regression-discontinuity design, requires an ameliorative commodity that is scarce, i.e., that there isn't enough to provide for everybody who wants it or needs it, therefore it is necessary to define a cutoff point. He suggests that this cutoff point should be sharp and clearly delineated vis-a-vis quantifiable decision criteria. Subsequently the control group is composed of those who are requesting the service but are randomly distributed between control group and experimental group.

Campbell's second suggestion referred to as staged innovation requires the distribution of "X" to a number of units of people over a period of time so that the last units to get "X" will in effect act as controls for most of the earlier units of the experiment.

Some argue that the use of the experimental model in evaluative type research is that it is counter-productive because it re-

quires holding the program constant rather than viewing the program realistically as an ever-changing phenomenon. Wiess[15] maintains that this is not so. The experimental method does not require a stable program. The randomized designs are capable of reliably and validly measuring the effects of an ever-changing program. It is possible also to compare the original program, the so-called model program, and the actual program that emerges. Eventually, it is possible to evaluate outcome at regular intervals that do not require the program to have completed its full cycle before evaluation takes place. Indeed, a "series" of evaluative research projects across time and/or similar settings could well contribute to the base of knowledge and move the focus forward, toward causality.[14]

As is often the case a decision comes down to deciding between feasibility and full utilization of the scientific method. Hopefully, some of the selective ideas in the literature for more imaginatively using scientific experimental methodology may increase its use in evaluative research. However, when one has to resort to quasi-experimental designs, they can still provide utilitarian results that may be sufficient for more general purposes. The usual design in the quasi-experimental method of evaluative research is the non-equivalent control design. Of course here, instead of randomly selecting the control group, the group is matched. The difficulty, of course, is in the reliability of matching.

Another dimension regarding evaluation research's scientific nature involves the issue of who performs the evaluation. First, the initial premise must be that evaluation is intended to aid and not to hamper a project. This premise should weigh heavily in the decision making regarding the utilization of someone inside, or connected with the operating program, or from outside the program to do the evaluation. The person on the inside is more informative about the program and is in a better position to know what aspects require evaluation. However, he is more likely to stress the positive developments as it is a vested interest of his own that he is intending to evaluate. The advantage of the outsider, of course, is greater objectivity. But he is less able to really understand the program, its objectives and procedures and less sensitive to how the evaluation in itself may interfere with the services provided by the program. Suchman[16] suggests a combination approach of utilizing both the outside evaluator and the inside person connected with the program in a division of labor. The inside evaluator(s) defines the objectives of the program to be evaluated in consultation with the outside evaluator. The outside group design the evaluation study, but in consultation with the inside evaluators. Data collection is then carried out by both groups while the analyzation of the data and presenting the results of the evaluation is done by the outside group. With this approach, more often, the results are translated into recommendations, and eventually program changes result much more readily than when only outsiders do the evaluation.

Future Action as a Result of Evaluation Research ?

Findings from evaluation research do not appear to influence programs, policies and legislation to any large extent. What contributes to this situation? The insider-outsider issue reappears. Problems that administrators have in accepting the results of evaluation research done by outsiders are related to their organizations needs, as the results are not especially feasible, acceptable, or ideologically sound with whatever they had in mind in pursuing on behalf of the organizations. Because the initial reactions to evaluation research are often feelings of being

attacked, anxiety and a general withdrawal from that which is to be researched, these reactions carry over to the completed research. Consequently, the resistance to utilization of the findings for future action develops from the initial reactions and resistance to the research itself.[17]

Again one returns to the concept of a joint effort, not only in doing the evaluation itself, but in defining the objectives to be evaluated from the beginning. Additionally, the findings need to be conveyed and disseminated in a very readable fashion, not excessively long complex and complicated in statistical analysis. The timing of the results should be congruous with the decision-making process within the particular program that has been evaluated.

As the involvement of a number of key people at the outset and during the process of the evaluation can be helpful in reducing anxiety, it can also provide the basis for the dissemination of the results. This basis permits the presentation of appropriate results to different groups or subgroups that are more appropriate users of the evaluation's results.[18] Evaluative research carried out as a partnership functions as liaison or bridge between researcher, administrator and staff practitioner.

This partnership may also operate on a community wide basis. For example, X facet of community mental health programs are to be evaluated in all the mental health agencies of a city. These agencies may be coordinated by a city wide mental health board responsible to the city council. The evaluation may be initiated by the community or by an outside source for its own research needs.

The insider-outsider distribution of research tasks may be carried out. In this instance the researcher negotiates with the key community leaders and seeks his new knowledge of the community biases and order of priorities. Soon afterward the evaluative research project may take on "we" and "our" nomenclature. The evaluation research which then evolves, has allies, a base for feedback, a willingness to implement findings and fewer problems related to generalizations of findings. Indeed, the community gains important feedback for upgrading its programs and policies. The process of carrying out the evaluation research in this manner, in and by itself, links the key community leaders with the researcher and researcher to agency executives and staff vis-a-vis the community leaders.

When Not to Evaluate

The final issue for discussion involves the conditions which are necessary for initiating an evaluative research effort they also depend on the relationship between those doing the evaluation and those being evaluated.

This relationship cannot develop and be maintained unless certain circumstances initially are present. They include : (1) specific questions about the program; (2) a clear orientation regarding the program's objectives, substance, clientele, etc.; (3) agreement on the program's objectives; and (4) sufficient money or qualified staff to conduct the evaluation. These circumstances are necessary for a reasonable expectation to exist that the results of the evaluation will impact the decisions of the organization or program.

In considering the substance and limitations of evaluation research in this brief format it is hoped that an additional degree of understanding will emerge and begin to foster more collaborative evaluative efforts in response to the challenge posed by questions of social work program and service effectiveness.

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