Investigating Adult Children of Alcoholics

Amy Bandfield-Jones
CSI Outstanding Research Recipient

It was an honor to receive the Chi Sigma Iota Outstanding Research Award last spring. When I reflect upon the research process and knowledge gained from the experience, many ideas come to mind. First, the nebulous term “research” was demystified for me. I remember having an interest in research yet I was uncertain about where and how to begin. To me, research seemed like something that was done behind a mysterious Oz type door. What I discovered was research, at least for this project, was an ongoing, collaborative effort broken down into small steps to answer a question: Are college students raised with an alcohol dependent parent more likely to experience substance-dependence, symptoms of co-dependency and defensive response styles? In part, this question was developed based on the clinical experience of the researchers who have knowledge of chemical dependency and treatment. The results of the study provide insight about working with Adult Children of Alcoholics in a college setting. This is an example of how clinical practice may influence research as well as how research may influence clinical practice. This reciprocal relationship became evident to me by the end of the study. I also learned about the necessity of research to help the profession continue to advance and develop evidence-based practices.

Although I had some trepidation about the research process this was normalized for me by counselor educators. I had an opportunity to work with them and share ideas, apply statistical procedures, and process and interpret data. I was encouraged and had an opportunity to learn about the direct connection between research and counseling. This hands-on experience outside of the classroom helped me to integrate the concepts learned in research classes and statistics courses in a practical context. I was provided mentorship and a supportive research environment to pose questions and contribute to a research study that has practical implications for college counselors.

ACAO Literature

I was familiar with literature about Adult Children of Alcoholics from authors such as Claudia Black and Janet Woititz who posit the experience of growing up in a home where substance abuse is present may create an environment where children learn to develop certain roles, coping mechanisms and lifestyle patterns. I was intrigued to learn about what was found when the characteristics described by these and other authors were tested empirically. I discovered the literature provides partial support for the ACOA hypothesis. In the literature reviewed by the authors of this study, statistically significant differences between ACOAs and non-ACOAs surfaced in the following areas: relationship problems (Beesley & Stoltenberg, 2002; Kelley et al., 2004), psychopathology, overall general distress (Obot & Anthony, 2004), academic performance (Carle & Chassin, 2004), substance abuse (Chrisoffersen & Soothill, 2003), and denial of problems (Hart & McAleer, 1997). However, an equally vibrant body of empirical literature failed to support this hypothesis. Group differences failed to surface between ACOA and non-ACOA samples in studies of memory impairment, psychopathology, self esteem (Rodney, 1996) and standardized personality assessments. While some studies uncovered hypothesized differences between ACOAs and non-ACOAs, others failed to find differences. In order to find clarity in a line of research as clouded as this, it became apparent that multiple investigations involving participants from a wide variety of settings and situations

Chi Sigma Iota Exemplar ♦ Spring, 2008
are needed in order to gain further understanding about the experiences and personalities of the over eleven million Adult Children of Alcoholics (National Association for Adult Children of Alcoholics, 2005). Currently the prevalence rate of ACOAs attending college is estimated to range from 12% to 25% (Middle Tennessee State University, n.d.). Due to the potentially harmful impact of growing up in a home where substance abuse was present, it seemed important to investigate the theory that college student ACOAs have higher rates of substance abuse, are more defensive, and exhibit more co-dependent behaviors than their non-ACOA peers.

Previous investigations of this phenomenon among college students used undergraduates only and/or either used non-standardized measures of student alcohol abuse or did not assess for alcohol abuse (Kelley, Cash, Grant, Miles, & Santos, 2004). Our study focused on college students in a mid-western university setting. We recruited a wide age range of students, we screened for alcohol and other substances of abuse, and we used a screening instrument that included college students in the normative sample. By doing this we were able to add a new level of investigation to the previous research conducted on college students who identify as Adult Children of Alcoholics.

For me this helped to highlight how research on a particular topic moves forward and expands upon previous efforts to gain new insights into a particular subject. We recognized the limitations of our study and offered suggestions for future research on the topic to help the research on this subject continue to move forward.

Our Results

We discovered in our sample no statistically significant differences between ACOAs and non-ACOAs existed on the traits being investigated: substance abuse, co-dependent behaviors and defensive response styles. This sample’s data failed to support the hypothesized traits associated with Adult Children of Alcoholics. Many ACOAs may be familiar with the Adult Children of Alcoholic literature and may begin to create a self-fulfilling prophecy including the belief they will perpetuate the cycle of alcoholism or be doomed to adhere to the broad qualities described in the ACOA literature.

This study indicates to me that caution is needed in stereotyping college students who grew up in homes with the presence of chemical dependence. It seems that careful assessment with a client is necessary to determine if the traits described in the ACOA literature are good descriptors for the client’s life experiences or if other factors have a stronger influence on the client’s experiences in life. After making this determination, a decision can be made on what may be the most helpful for the client. For example, a client who feels the ACOA traits fit his or her life experiences may find Al-Anon or Codependents Anonymous helpful. If clients do not feel the descriptors are a good fit, they may be comforted to know that research exists suggesting that ACOAs are no different than their non-ACOA peers. Either way, clients can be encouraged to expand their sense of self and discover their own unique personality, strengths and potential.

Learning About Research

The process of working on this project with other counselors helped me to learn more about Adult Children of Alcoholics and the research process in general. The role that conducting research plays in continuing to advance the counseling profession and meeting client needs became more tangible. In addition, this experience helped reinforce the relevance of using research to guide clinical practice.

References


