
Evaluation of Career Development Programs from an Action Perspective

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Abstract

An action-theoretical approach to the evaluation of career development programs is based on a constructionist epistemology and extends recent developments in the career and program development fields. Propositions for an action-theoretical perspective centre around career and action as related, interpretative constructs. These propositions give rise to implications and questions for the evaluation of career programs that address, among others, the ongoing nature of programs and career processes, and the social bases for career action that occurs in career programs.

Résumé

Une approche d'action théorique, pour évaluer les programmes de développement de carrière, est basée sur une épistémologie constructionniste et poursuit les développements récents sur le plan de la carrière et des champs de développement de programme. Des propositions pour une perspective d'action théorique se concentrent sur la carrière et l'action comme présentées, construits interprétatifs. Ces propositions soulèvent les implications et les questions pour l'évaluation des programmes de carrière qui adressent, entre autres, la nature continue des processus des programmes et des carrières et les bases sociales des actions carriéologiques qui se présentent dans les programmes de carrière.

In the past few years, new approaches to career development involving narrative (Cochran, 1990; Savickas, 1989; Young, Friesen & Borychi, 1994), constructionist (Peavy, 1992), and hermeneutical (Collin & Young, 1992; Young & Richards, 1992) perspectives have been introduced. These approaches are not theories in the traditional sense. Rather they represent efforts to provide contextualized, subjective perspectives on career phenomenon. They also allow researchers and practitioners to see career development as part of the reform of social science. This view, as Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence (1989) proposed, deflects researchers and theorists away from quantifiable concerns and cause and effect explanations to a greater interest in the relativity of knowledge about career development, the context in which it arises, and the purpose the career construct itself serves in language and meaning. This reform is in synchrony with broad shifts within the social sciences generally and beyond.

These perspectives, constructionist, hermeneutical, narrative, ecological, and others, are interconnected and have arisen in response to more traditional and positivist perspectives in the social sciences. As they

use the concept of intentionality extensively and have relevance for career counselling, these perspectives have coalesced for the authors in an action-theoretical approach to career development (Valach, 1990; Young, Valach, Dillabough, Dover & Matthes, in press). Action theory is another way of addressing the issues that constructionism, hermeneutics and narrative attempt to speak to.

There is a similar and parallel reform in the field of program development (Greene, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Rist, 1994). Specifically, there have been efforts to go beyond simply qualitative methods in program evaluation to an approach that is based on a constructionist epistemology.

In this article, we will examine these alternative perspectives for both career development and program evaluation with a view to drawing implications, questions and suggestions for the evaluation of career programs.

CONSTRUCTIONIST, QUALITATIVE PROGRAM EVALUATION

Unlike other kinds of research, evaluation is intended to assist directly in improving human services. Typically evaluation is tied to programs that are themselves intended to assist people and can be distinguished from research which asks more theoretical questions. It usually addresses issues that are of concern to practitioners, program developers and administrators. The evaluation of career development programs is of specific interest because career development represents and encompasses a domain that is intended to foster human development both remedially and preventively.

Posavac and Carey (1993) identified four common types of evaluations: the evaluation of need, process, outcome, and efficiency. Clearly all these types of program evaluation are appropriate to career development programs. Within this range of program evaluation types, some recent efforts have been made to argue for a qualitative and constructionist approaches (Greene, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

The constructionist epistemology proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1989) for program evaluation also provides a framework for action theory. Essentially, this epistemology is concerned with the meaning of experience. It suggests that people use a variety of constructs to interpret their own and others' behaviour. Moreover, what is considered as social reality is viewed as significantly socially constructed "based on the process of interpretation and reinterpretation of intentional meaningful behavior" (Smith, 1989, p. 85). The implications of a constructionist epistemology for program evaluation is that evaluators must understand the context in which the program operates, look at how it is meaningful to participants, and see the evaluation process as inherently political. However, the constructionist epistemology is centred around the process of

meaning building and is less helpful in differentiating the particular constructs of interpretation. An action theory for career developed in a constructionist framework allows evaluators, researchers and practitioners to furnish this view with theoretically meaningful, empirically sound, and practically usable constructs.

Greene (1994) suggested that qualitative evaluations are frequently oriented toward program developers, directors, and beneficiaries and answer questions about how the program is experienced by various stakeholders. Typically, these answers are of interest to counsellors as program developers and group leaders and, as Greene pointed out, can foster understanding, pluralism, diversity, and solidarity in program development. She also argued that some qualitative program evaluation can assume a more participatory perspective by greater contextualization of the program, that is, by examining, from the stakeholders' perspectives, how the premises, goals, and activities serve to address how power and resources are distributed in our society. One cannot look at the outcome of programs as "hard facts" without realizing that they (the programs and the outcomes) are constructions of the stakeholders involved and are used for a variety of purposes.

It is in actual programs that the interdependence and complexity of variables are often present, at least it is more likely the case than it is with more contrived settings of "pure" research where any number of variables can be controlled. The purpose of program evaluation is not only to get at the outcomes, needs or other dimensions of a program, but also to address the multiplicity, complexity and interdependence of variables. It is also important to make the evaluation part of a particular process and program. Constructionist epistemology makes evaluation outside of particular processes and programs meaningless.

A critical issue for qualitative program evaluation is that it is seen as dealing primarily with program beneficiaries and as not of use to policy planners and program funders. Rist (1994) suggested that links between qualitative program evaluation and social policy is more potential than actual. In the field of career, the action-theoretical view may offer enough specificity, rigour, and conceptual clarity to enhance the link between qualitative evaluation and policy considerations.

PROPOSITIONS FOR AN ACTION-THEORETICAL CAREER PERSPECTIVE

In addition to a shift in framework in the evaluation literature to more qualitative approaches, there has been an equal shift in the career literature to postmodern approaches (Peavy, 1993; Savickas, in press). Among the authors that are taking these approaches are Cochran (1990) and Savickas (1989) who emphasize narrative; context (Vondracek, Lerner & Schulenberg, 1986), and the social context of career (Young et al., in press).

The following propositions provide an introduction to an action-theoretical view of career and some of its language and logic.

1. Career is a construct that people use to interpret their own and others' behaviour. It is seen in action-theoretical terms. Action is also a construct used to interpret behaviour.
2. Frequently behaviour is constructed as intentional and goal-directed using career or action constructs.
3. Action is frequently used as a construct pertinent to short-term behaviour, career to long-term behaviour (a series of actions). People construct social meaning not only within the frame of present and moment-to-moment action, but broadly within the longer frame of one's life.
4. The term "career" does not have precise meaning. Rather, it is given meaning in social situations and is used in the creation of meaning (Shotter, 1993; after Bakhtin, 1986).
5. Career and action address self-organizing and self-active systems.
6. Other superordinate constructs are used by people to organize actions and sequences of actions, for example, narrative (Sarbin, 1986), lifestyle (Giddens, 1991), flow of experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and project (Karlsson, 1992).
7. As a construct subsumed by career, career development refers to the process that people intentionally engage in to acquire social meaning within the frame of their lives.
8. Career has the advantage of linking actions.
9. The construction of career is intimately linked to social discourse.
10. Action, including the action of discourse, is the basis for constructing career. It is in engaging in action that career and other constructs are formed.
11. Goal-directed action and career can be seen from the perspectives of manifest behaviour, conscious cognitions, and social meaning (Cranach, Mächler & Steiner, 1982). Manifest behaviour refers to the explicit course of action, for example, a career counselling session. Conscious cognitions refer to the thoughts and feelings of the participants while the action is occurring. Social meaning refers to the meaning that the action or career has for self and others and accounts for the influence of society and culture.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EVALUATION OF CAREER PROGRAMS

An action-theoretical perspective contributes to the evaluation of career programs for two reasons. First, it refers to the action that individuals engage in relative to career, which frequently is the focus of such pro-

grams. This reference to action and career does not simply mean external behaviour, but personal and social constructions. Second, in describing the career processes, it uses concepts which are closer to the lived experience of people, but substantial enough to provide a conceptual framework for work in this area. It encourages the description of what happens in the program in words that are related to what the person or persons are doing as goal directed and intentional. Thus, an action-theoretical perspective can be used in planning as well as evaluating career programs. Participants' language and experience, such as getting a job, being independent of parents, or feeling successful need to be considered in program development and evaluation.

This approach holds that while the constructs of stakeholders are important, sole reliance on retrospective accounts of career programs are not sufficient in program evaluation. As Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest, the construction of the evaluand (the program itself), which will access social meaning, is of primary relevance. It is also recognized that different constructions will be elaborated within and across stakeholder groups. It is equally important that dimensions such as manifest action and conscious cognitions be gathered as well. For example, asking participants and counsellors to keep a journal for the purpose of evaluating the program provides access to conscious cognitions. Recording verbal and other interactions during the program documents the participants' manifest action.

Another shift that an action-theoretical view offers career is the notion that career is socially and dynamically constructed. The usual understanding of career is that it is located in the person. Intentional action in systems suggests that career is also located between people. It is constructed socially. Thus, it is not sufficient to look at the outcomes of programs as they come to reside in persons. It is important to examine specifically the social construction of career that occurs in programs and in the policy that supports them. Particularly relevant here is an examination of the interpersonal interaction that is the focus of many career development programs. This interaction can be considered as joint action (Shotter, 1980), that is, as a third category of activity that lies between personal agency and external events. Personal spontaneous conversations frequently arise in career development programs (career counselling is an excellent example). These conversations may be different than the intentions of any of the participants; in a sense, a new thing (or joint activity) arises in the interaction. This third kind of activity is the proper subject of program evaluation and can be accessed through an action-theoretical perspective. Evaluators of career counselling programs, for example, may ask what the counsellor and client are doing together (joint activity). In this way, what is actually "created" in counselling can be identified.

Evaluative researchers are expected to do more than what the classical scientific stance allows. The task of checking hypotheses is only a small part of the evaluation. To a certain extent an evaluator has to become a part of the ongoing process involving program planners and career participants. In this approach, program evaluation can serve the internal and/or external adaptation of the program. Internal adaptation would facilitate the monitoring and communication within the system. External adaptation is able to monitor the program using standards respectable for the external side of the program-system.

It is well recognized that setting a goal and implementing an action to attain it is not the sum total of career development. Career is an on-going process which is continually influenced by cognitive and communicative processes. The same is the case with programs, thus the need for work on the nature of explicit and tacit program goals on an on-going basis.

Useful evaluation of career development programs are dependent upon having a language and logic that is related to various forms of action, presuming that career programs often involve action. A language useful to career development program evaluation needs to be able to describe and name the various forms of action appropriately, and study the relevant processes associated with them. Although such a language and logic is not firmly in place, there is no need to assume that it cannot arise from program evaluations as well as from people's everyday experience and from conceptual and applied research. The main advantage of using the action frame of reference in this context is not to introduce intentionality into the evaluation. The construct of goal is present in all evaluations. The primary benefit is to remind evaluators of all the other constructs of which the target systems are composed.

Valach (1990) identified a number of constructs that may be helpful in the evaluation of career development programs. Among the most salient action-related constructs are the following:

1. The construct of agency, including the agency of those who developed, implemented and evaluated the program, and the program clients. This construct involves reflexivity and perspectivity which are not often the subject of evaluation studies.
2. The construct of perspectives mentioned earlier, including the perspectives of manifest behaviour, social meaning, and internal cognitions. Manifest behaviour is frequently the focus of career development programs. Evaluators also need to consider the social meaning and internal cognitions perspectives.
3. The constructs of individual and group action. Career is often considered as individual action yet career programs frequently involve group action, for example, counsellor-participant and participant-participant action. The student dyad interaction in

Hutchinson and Freeman's (in press) *Pathways* program and referred to in Hutchinson (1994) is a useful example of joint action that could be the subject of a program evaluation.

4. The construct of the level of organization. Career is a superordinate construct used to organize other constructs such as action. Programs typically involve action, career steps or projects (as intermediate constructs), and career.
5. Self-monitoring constructs such as cognition, emotion, knowledge, pain, and one's reaction to the group atmosphere.

The action-theoretical perspective encourages several questions that may be profitably addressed by career program developers and evaluators:

1. What goal-directed, intentional action is the program intended to foster?
2. How is the short-term action fostered by the program related to long-term career action? More specifically, how do program clients make the connection between action and career?
3. How are career and action related in the mind of the program developer and evaluator? To what extent does the program represent a conceptualization of career or action that is distinct from intentional, goal-directed action?
4. What role is attributed to goal-directed action?
5. To what extent does the evaluation measure the intensity (how much) of dimensions such as career maturity rather than activities?
6. What are the relative roles of observable behaviour, conscious cognitions and social meaning in the program evaluation?
7. Where is the locus of career and action? Is career located in the person (as is often thought to be exclusively the case) or is it located in some respects between people?
8. How do the program evaluators account for on-going change as the program activities proceed?

Questions may also address the domain of performance which is pertinent to both career programs and an action-theoretical stance. Evaluators can pick out a problem defined in the action theoretical terms and check it from the perspective of the target career type, target action, the connectedness between action and career, and the social (group or joint) action. Each of the preceding can be described as seen by program developers, as presented in the program, as seen by participants and as represented generally in society.

CONCLUSION

Career development programs present a number of interesting challenges to program evaluators, not the least of which are to frame the evaluation so that it is meaningful to the range of stakeholders and to be able to evaluate on-going processes such as career. Basing itself on a constructionist epistemology, action theory proposes to address these and other issues in the evaluation of career development programs. Instead of relying on and borrowing from career theory for its constructs, action theory uses the everyday language of participants, and focuses on constructs they use to interpret behaviour. The opportunity for program evaluators is to operationalize this perspective in the evaluation of career programs.

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A version of this manuscript was presented at the symposium on Issues and Solutions for Evaluating Career Development Programs and Services, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, March, 1994.