Evaluating Career-Development Programs for Women: Critique and Recommendations

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Abstract

A descriptive overview of five recently published evaluations of career-development interventions designed specifically for women suggests that these programs need to be more systematically evaluated and reported. Given the limited extent to which existing substantive and methodological knowledge appear to be informing practice, two major strategies are recommended that may be useful to those evaluating future career-development programs for women.

Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est de présenter un survol descriptif de cinq évaluations récemment publiées d'interventions d'orientation professionnelle conçues spécialement pour les femmes. Le présent exposé a pour but de démontrer qu'il serait utile que ce type d'intervention soit plus systématiquement évalué et publié. Compte tenu de la faible mesure où les connaissances théoriques et méthodologiques sont prises en considération par les évaluateurs, deux stratégies possiblement utiles sont suggérées à l'intention de ceux qui procéderont à de futures évaluations dans le domaine de l'orientation professionnelle pour les femmes.

A substantial portion of the now abundant theoretical and empirical literature dealing with women's career-development has addressed what counsellors and others can do to facilitate the career development of women. It is the twofold aim of this paper to bring to the awareness of counsellors and researchers what has been done recently in the field of *evaluation* of career-development interventions for women and, based on an assessment of the extent to which recent efforts have been informed by existing substantive and methodological knowledge, to make recommendations for future practice. First, a descriptive overview of recently published evaluations of career-development interventions designed specifically for women will be presented. Second, based on a critique of the articles, two major strategies for improvement will be recommended. An effort will be made to refer practitioners / evaluators to high-quality resources from the program-evaluation and women's career-development literature, upon which they may draw in the future.

Although school- and organization-based career-development programs abound, reviews indicate that most have either not been evaluated or have been poorly evaluated. London and Stumpf (1982) found a lack of control groups, an overreliance on self-report measures, and a scarcity of longitudinal studies to be among the numerous problems plaguing early evaluation research. Fretz (1981) noted that the majority of all published evaluations of career interventions had focused on only one

type of intervention and had only rarely attended to client attributes that might differentially affect the results of the intervention. In a recent 20-year review by Russell (1991), research evaluating the effectiveness of career-development programs in organizations was characterized as "sparse" (p. 271).

In light of these findings, it comes as little surprise that evaluations of career-development interventions designed specifically for women are not found in great abundance. In fact, on-line searches of the Psyc-Lit and ERIC databases for journal articles reporting such evaluations identi-fied only *five* in the recently published literature (i.e., since 1980—the period to which the search was limited). A descriptive overview of these five U.S. studies in which career-development interventions designed for women were evaluated, is presented to follow. Though sparse and some-what flawed, this research illustrates what can be done and offers practi-tioners a base on which to build.

DESCRIPTIVE OVERVIEW OF FIVE EVALUATIONS OF CAREER-DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN

Deutsch and Wolleat (1981) evaluated a school-based intervention de-signed for gifted, fifth-grade girls. Six program objectives that focused on career and lifestyle plans and options for women were developed, based on theoretical and empirical literature on counselling women and gifted students. Five outcome measures (all clearly linked to the program objectives), were: perceptions of career-family role options, personal role options, general sex roles, "who should" (referring to home and family responsibilities), and psychological androgyny. Evaluated using a pre-post test/control group design, 7 of the 13 participants were randomly assigned to an experimental group and 6 to a no-treatment control group. Three major evaluation questions answered via t-tests ($\alpha = .05$) were: (a) Did each group change during the intervention? (b) Did the experimental group change more than did the control group? (c) Were there significant experimental versus control group post-treatment dif-ferences on all variables?

Seligman (1981) evaluated a program aimed at meeting the needs of re-entry women in the community. Conducted at George Mason Univer-sity, the program was open to both sexes and to students and community members alike. No specific program objectives were elaborated; ten-stages according to which counselling generally proceeded were listed. Evaluation was based on a follow-up questionnaire designed to provide "some answers" to eight "broad questions" (p. 27). Although the rele-vance of the questionnaire to women was not articulated, it was "devel-oped following a thorough review of the literature on career counseling with adults and assessment of counseling outcome [*sic*]" (p. 27). Data were collected on demographics, client views concerning career counsel-

ling and their counsellors, help they had wanted and had received, changes in career development since counselling was sought, evaluation of the counselling received, present feelings about their careers, and modifications they believed would improve the counselling. Among the various data gathering techniques used were semantic differentials, ranking agreement with statements, and pre-existing instruments. It is unclear how many of the 43 participants were re-entry women (vs. male/female university students). The number of participants who completed a pre-test is also unclear. Evaluation findings from the comparison of pre- and post-tests were reported in the form of percentages. Certain relevant details of the evaluation were absent, such as the length of the semantic differential scales and the content and quantity of items on the questionnaire subscales. The differing amounts of elapsed time since clients had completed counselling were not controlled for.

Fort and Cordisco (1981) evaluated a program, jointly designed by Gulf Oil Corporation and Chatham University faculty, in which 50 women Gulf Oil employees participated. Aimed at meeting the women's career-development and educational interests, the program provided career-planning support via assessment, individual advising, and a career-planning workshop. The authors did not detail the program's theoretical framework; however, the stated dual-emphasis: the assumption of an active personal role in planning for the future and the productive use of information in the planning and implementation processes, has particular relevance for women's career development. Findings were reported only for the first of three evaluation components: pre- and post-program questionnaires completed by participants, a summary evaluation conducted by an outside academic, and informal evaluations by participants and facilitators. The design of the evaluation questionnaires corresponded with the program goals in assessing the degree of change in the motivation for and ability to conduct career and educational planning. Given the limited detail presented concerning instrument content and design, the relevance of the evaluation to women was unclear. Percentage findings from the pre-tests were compared with post-program questionnaires administered at two different time points — one at the end of the eight-week workshop and the other five months later. The proportion of respondents surveyed at either time point was not indicated.

Melber and McLaughlin (1985) evaluated a career-development and assessment centre for librarians, conducted by the University of Washington. The centre's major purpose was "to improve the relative position of women in the library profession by providing librarians with an assessment of their management skills and potential and by providing career development guidance" (p. 159). After one-and-a-half days performing simulated work situations at the centre, participants received a profile of

their performance ratings and met with a centre administrator to discuss the development of career goals. Neither the theoretical framework of the centre nor its relevance to women was detailed. In an elaborate evaluation, participants were compared with a control group of wait-listed applicants and analyses of variation within the participant group were conducted. Multiple analyses of variance ($\alpha = .05$) were employed to assess between-group differences on ten outcome variables that dealt with a wide range of characteristics, behaviours, and attitudes (e.g., employment status, perceived likelihood of attaining the ideal job). Differing amounts of elapsed time since individuals had participated were controlled for (i.e., entered as a covariate). Variation within the participant group was assessed on four evaluative outcomes (rated on five-point scales): objective assessment of strengths and weaknesses, identification of steps for goal attainment, usefulness for current job, and assistance in development of career goals. Analyses were also conducted to determine whether evaluations of the program varied either as a function of time since assessment centre participation or overall assessment centre performance ratings. The number of participant versus control subjects was not stated (approximately 90 in total).

Kingdon and Blimline (1987) evaluated two programs offered to women in the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture between 1978 and 1982. Program objectives, apparently derived from the women's career-development literature, were based on the following six behavioural standards: decision making, decisiveness, planning and organizational ability, perception and analytical ability, oral communication, and persuasive ability. These standards formed the framework for three basic program phases: self-development, on-the-job training, and formal training. Forty-six women in higher-level positions participated in Program 1; forty-five women in lower-level positions participated in the evaluation of Program 2. The control groups (wait-listed applicants) numbered 44 for each evaluation. Evaluation assessed achievement of program objectives as well as the relative effectiveness of the program components. Differences on the primary assessment instrument—the Personal Skills Map (Nelson & Low, 1981)—were assessed via multiple t-tests. A career-development questionnaire gathered personal and demographic information related to educational level and educational and career goals. Pre-post and participant-control differences in these data were reported via comparison of percentages.

A CRITIQUE OF THE EVALUATION STUDIES WITH RECOMMENDATIONS

Evaluations of career-development interventions for women have the potential to offer a wealth of knowledge based on which future programs can be built and improved. Quality research is essential to determine whether separate programs designed for women are effective in

meeting their career-development needs. The foregoing overview suggests that career-development programs for women need to be more systematically evaluated and reported. Given the limited extent to which existing substantive and methodological knowledge appear to be informing practice, the discussion that follows presents two major strategies from which future evaluations of women's career-development programs may benefit. We shall begin with methodological criticisms and recommendations, followed by a theory-based critique that deals with both program-development and program-evaluation issues. For clarity, development and evaluation issues are presented separately, although the two are inextricably linked. Just as the needs of the target group must serve to generate program goals—program goals serve to generate program development—of which one important component is the design and implementation of a pertinent and specific *evaluation.*

Evaluation Methodology

Apparent in the above overview are several methodological concerns that have been addressed in earlier reviews, including lack of control groups (London & Stumpf, 1982), overreliance on self-report measures (Russell, 1991), and inadequate consideration of client characteristics (Fretz, 1981). Specifically, two of the five studies (Fort & Cordisco, 1981; Seligman, 1981) failed to make use of a comparison or control group. Only three of the five (Deutsch & Wolleat, 1981; Kingdom & Blimline, 1987; Melber & McLaughlin, 1985) employed statistical analyses to evaluate program effectiveness and none of these controlled for inflated Type 1 error due to multiple testing (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). Failure to control for differing amounts of elapsed time since participation (Seligman, 1981) and reporting results only as percentages (Fort & Cordisco, 1981; Seligman, 1981) were other problems evidenced above.

Interpretation of the evaluation findings was complicated when authors failed to report the number of subjects in at least one cell of the design. Specifically, the number of participant versus controls were not identified by Melber and McLaughlin (1985); Seligman (1981) did not indicate how many completed pre-test questionnaires, and Fort and Cordisco (1981) did not relate the proportion who completed post-tests at two follow-up time-points. This lack of detail imposed definite limits on the interpretability of these studies, particularly when results were as percentages of the total sample, only.

Well-structured career-development programs for women with measurable objectives can be evaluated and their impacts' assessed. In order for this to be accomplished, however, evaluators must clearly articulate what the program objectives are *and* successfully demonstrate that these objectives are, in fact, being evaluated. A case in point is the major objective stated by Melber and McLaughlin (1985), "to improve the

relative position of women in the library profession" (p. 159). Although some progress toward this goal may have been achieved, it is not readily apparent from their evaluation report that any concrete attempt was made to evaluate the participating women's progress toward this primary goal.

Whenever possible, evaluation reseach should employ standard research methods that lend themselves to establishing the validity of findings. Subjects should, for example, be randomly assigned to treatment conditions, and the reliability and validity of instruments should be assessed and reported. Evaluations need to be better designed, using control groups, a variety of criteria (e.g., learning, behaviour, results) and data from multiple sources. Multiple criteria suggested by Russell (1991) include such variables as absenteeism and job satisfaction, in addition to job performance. In accordance with Fretz's (1981) recommendation that more systematic evaluative attention be paid to participant attributes, Betz and Fitzgerald (1987) identified four categories of variables with particular importance for women, namely, individual, background, educational, and adult life-style variables. Examples from these four categories are self-esteem, female role-models, continuation in mathematics, and number of children, respectively.

Theoretical Framework

Women's career-development literature. Given that program design and program evaluation are intimately linked, one way to improve the pertinence and specificity of program evaluation is to improve program development. One way to improve program development is to make it more theory-based. Based on the sample of studies reviewed above, greater effort is needed in designing career-development programs for women that are anchored in the most up-to-date theoretical literature. Although one program was clearly theory-based (Deutsch & Wolleat, 1981), others lacked a theoretical framework (Melber & McLaughlin, 1985), presented a theoretical framework with no particular relevance to women (Seligman, 1981), or left the inference up to the reader (Fort & Cordisco, 1981; Kingdon & Blimline, 1987).

Two extensive reviews of the research data on specific sex differences in vocational behaviour have documented women's career development to differ from that of men both in terms of *process* and *outcomes* (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Fitzgerald & Crites, 1980). Based on these differences, positive steps that can facilitate women's career development have been identified. Career-development practitioners in industry, schools, counselling agencies, etc. need to be informed by this theory and research and to work more closely with academia to build programs tailored to meet client needs, for, it is only when women's specific career-development needs are considered during program development that they will be-

come incorporated into the program goals, and can subsequently be evaluated.

It is important to consider potential forms of bias, such as stereo-types, environmental barriers, discrimination, etc. when the objectives of women's career-development programs are being developed (Herr & Cramer, 1988). Betz and Fitzgerald (1987) provide a thoughtful critique of the literature on sex bias and sex-role bias in career counselling. Therein, an appropriate goal for career counselling with women is "seeking to expand women's options, success, and satisfaction in the occupational structure" (p. 91). At the very least, the counsellor (or program developer/evaluator) needs to avoid being another barrier to women's career development (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). This message is echoed in Canada's guidelines for the professional practice of career counselling with girls and women, which state that responsible practice "requires counsellors to be knowledgeable about the effects of gender in human development and to apply such knowledge in career counselling with girls and women" (Ward & Bezanson, 1991, p. 478).

Program-evaluation literature. Another way to improve evaluation quality is to rely on the best and most up-to-date program-evaluation literature. Evaluations must be effectively planned; every evaluation should be tailored to the specific program being designed and implemented. The most advanced and universal program-evaluation theories are those that tailor practices to specific situations, programs, and evaluators (Shadish, Cook & Leviton, 1991). An evaluation's design and implementation will depend upon its purpose, the type of questions being asked, and the stage the program is in (Rossi & Freeman, 1989). Early on, for example, the evaluation might take the form of a case study, then multiple case studies, and finally controlled outcome studies in which the treatment is compared with other viable alternatives. Ultimately, component analyses (conducted above only by Kingdon & Blimline, 1987) will provide in-sight into the program's most effective aspects.

Evaluation designs and techniques must be appropriate to the evalua-tion questions posed (Chen, 1990). Evaluators must resist the temptation to evaluate what can be readily evaluated (as did Melber & McLaughlin, 1985), rather than what should be evaluated—that is—attainment of program goals. It is essential that outcome measures be clearly defined and explicitly linked to program objectives (as in Deutsch & Wolleat, 1981; Fort & Cordisco, 1981; Kingdon & Blimline, 1987). When program objectives are not stated (as in Seligman, 1981), the utility of the evalua-tion is gravely reduced.

The collection of papers in this special issue offer the practitioner seeking to evaluate a school- or industry-based career-development pro-gram a wealth of strategies and considerations for the design and imple-

mentation of the evaluation. Here and elsewhere, innumerable suggestions have been offered regarding criteria that should be considered when evaluating such programs (see Feldman, 1988; Greenhaus, 1987). In the case of career-development programs designed specifically for women, if one accepts the proposition that women's career development differs from men's, and that programs designed for women should, therefore, focus on issues that are of particular relevance to women, then the evaluations of such programs must ask: *Did this women's career-development program target and meet objectives (goals) that a program aimed specifically at women should?* Given that the process and outcomes of women's career development have been shown to differ from traditional male-based models (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Fitzgerald & Crites, 1980), process-oriented evaluation strategies (Kirschner, 1988) are recommended in addition to traditional outcome-oriented evaluation strategies.

CONCLUSION

In sum, a broader, more global perspective is needed as a bridge between theory and application and to document accurately how career-development interventions for women enhance their individual and organizational effectiveness. As noted by Russell (1991), sociologists, counselling psychologists, human resource professionals, and industrial/organizational psychologists are among those conducting evaluation research on career-counselling programs. These practitioners need to look to other disciplines and build on previous theory and research in an effort to increase the integration that exists within the field.

When a methodologically sound, applied evaluation of program efficacy has been built into an intervention, program administrators are placed in a position of strength from which to comment—to all of the stakeholders involved—on the program's utility and effectiveness. In light of this, evaluators of women's career-development programs would do well to ask themselves a few simple evaluation questions:

1. Are the needs addressed by this intervention, as well as the goals, content, and procedure of the intervention informed by the best and most up-to-date theoretical and empirical research available in the field of women's career development and the career counselling of women?

2. Are the goals and objectives of this intervention clearly stated?

3. Does the proposed program evaluation actually evaluate these goals and objectives?

4. Are the proposed evaluation strategies and methodological procedures the most appropriate possible given the goals and objectives and the level of sophistication of the intervention?

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