An integrative theory-driven framework for evaluating travel training programs

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Since the 1970s, travel training programs, which provide a short-term training to people with disabilities and older people to teach them independent travel skills required to use fixed-route transportation, have spread across the United States. But the authors note that currently, there is no integrative framework for evaluating the training programs, although it is crucial for improving program implementation and developing knowledge and theories related to travel training. Therefore, this research aims to build an integrative theory-driven evaluation framework of the programs on the basis of prior studies on travel training and the literature on program evaluation and learning and training theories. The framework considers (1) a wide range of key elements related to the delivery systems and outcomes of travel training; (2) diverse stakeholders that engage in designing, operating, and assessing travel training; and (3) the short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes of the programs. Based on the framework, the authors develop a flexible logic model for travel training programs to help scholars and practitioners design and conduct actual evaluation studies. Thus, this research is expected to make theoretical and practical contributions to theory-driven program evaluation and travel training programs.

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1. Introduction

All levels of government provide a wide range of public programs and services, including human and social services, economic development, public research and development (R&D) investment, public education, and environmental protection. These programs aim to prevent social problems and meet unmet social needs. In the dynamic policy process, program evaluation is "the conduct of systematic inquiry that describes and explains the policies' and programs' operations, effects, justifications, and social implications" (Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000, p. 3). The ultimate aim of program evaluation is to assist decision-makers, public agencies, the public, and relevant stakeholders to better make sense of social problems and design, implement, and oversee public programs and services (Mark et al., 2000).

In this study the authors are interested in evaluating one type of non-standardized human and social program that is created and carried out at the local level: travel training for people with disabilities or older people. Unlike federal governmental programs with rigid regulations and detailed practical guides (e.g., Head Start to provide early childhood education to children in poor or low-income families), there is high variability in program context, program content, delivery system, and outcome. Moreover, the authors note that over the past three decades, a wide range of actors from the nonprofit and for-profit sectors have engaged in designing and implementing public programs and services, particularly in the field of human and social services, as public agencies have introduced a variety of collaborative arrangements across the sectors to deliver public programs and services more effectively and efficiently.

The authors contend that theory-driven evaluation can be useful and appropriate for evaluating these non-standardized human and social programs in which multiple actors are involved (Chen & Rossi, 1980; Chen, 1990; Walshe, 2007). Theory-driven evaluation is "*any evaluation strategy or approach that explicitly integrates and uses stakeholder, social science, some combination of,*

or other types of theories in conceptualizing, designing, conducting, interpreting, and applying an evaluation" (Coryn, Noakes, Westine, & Schroter, 2011, p. 201). Such an approach to evaluation "first attempts to map out the programme theory lying behind the intervention and then design a research evaluation to test out that theory" (Walshe, 2007, p. 58). Theory-driven evaluation aims to not only determine whether a program works, but also understand when, how, and why a program works. In other words, this approach to evaluation seeks to unpack "the complex relationship between [program] context, content, application and outcomes, and to develop a necessarily contingent and situational understanding of effectiveness [and efficiency]" (Walshe, 2007, p. 58). In particular, *Evaluation and Program Planning* has contributed to the theoretical and practical development of theory-driven evaluation by publishing many studies over the last three decades based on this approach in diverse contexts, such as mental health care systems and higher education (e.g., Bickman, 1989, 1996; Brousselle & Champagne, 2011; Chen & Rossi, 1980, 1989; Donaldson & Gooler, 2003; Lipsey & Pollard, 1989; Nesman, Batsche, & Hernandez, 2007).

Among non-standardized human and social programs in which a wide range of individual and organizational actors engage, the authors focus on travel training programs which are short-term, intensive instructional programs that teach people (students in particular) with disabilities and older people the skills required to independently and safely use fixed-route public transportation (Easter Seals Project ACTION, 2004; Groce, 1996b). Over the past four decades, travel training programs have spread across the United States due to a variety of benefits for trainees, parents, guardians, and caregivers, public transportation agencies, schools, and the community at large (AECOM, 2011; Baginski, 2008; Ride Connection, 2009; Wolf-Branigin & Wolf-Branigin, 2010). While most prior studies on travel training have focused on the development of practical guides, some scholars and practitioners have sought to develop evaluation models or tools and conduct evaluation studies to examine the effectiveness and efficiency of the programs. But the authors note that currently, an integrative theory-driven evaluation framework of travel training programs does not exist. Thus, information and knowledge about the programs and the methods for evaluation are fragmented. In this research, the authors review prior studies on travel training (both practical guides and evaluation research) and the literature on learning and training to create an integrative theory-driven evaluation framework for travel training programs. This framework is aimed at contributing to the integration of prior knowledge about the programs, but also provide theoretically informed, practical guidance on how to design and conduct evaluations of the programs.

This framework includes three key dimensions: the production and delivery of travel training (types of training providers, instructors' skills, and training models and contents); outcomes (benefits for trainees, parents, guardians, and caregivers, schools, training providers, public transportation authorities, and the community at large); and moderators and mediators that influence the relationship between travel training and its outcomes (travel infrastructure, trainees' characteristics, involvement of parents, guardians, and caregivers, and collaboration and partnership within the government and across the public, nonprofit, and private sectors). Also, based on the framework, the authors suggest a comprehensive logic model of travel training consisting of resources, activities, outputs, and short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. The framework and the logic model can be useful for evaluators and practitioners to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of travel training (summative evaluation), to modify and improve travel training (formative evaluation), and to conduct ongoing oversight.

The remainder of the article illustrates travel training programs in terms of the contents, phases (or process) and outcomes of travel training. Then, prior evaluation studies on travel training are reviewed and assessed. After that, the paper presents a theory-driven framework for evaluating travel training and a logic model of travel training to help evaluators and practitioners actually design and conduct evaluation research. Lastly, the authors provide theoretical and practical implications for evaluating travel training programs.

2. Travel training programs (TTPs)

According to the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), in 2013 Americans took approximately eleven billion trips (thirty five million times each weekday) on public transportation, including buses, light rails, subways, and commuter trains (Neff & Dickens, 2013). Public transportation provides individuals with opportunities to travel from and to their homes, schools, workplaces, restaurants, hospitals, shopping malls, and other places. But, some groups of Americans such as people with disabilities and older people have difficulty using public transportation, thus these groups of people are likely to be excluded from the conveniences of public transportation. People with disabilities and older people are often in need of assistance in using the public transportation system because of the complexity in understanding the schedule (cognitive), accessing the system (physical), and transferring within the system (spatial and temporal). These factors lead to decreased mobility for these groups of people. Such mobility issues are also associated with the inequality of opportunity for work, leisure, education, and socialization. In an effort to address such social problems related to the mobility and inequality issues, several federal laws and regulations have been enacted in the United States. Importantly, under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), any person with a disability has a right to access to transportation. Also, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires public schools to provide transportation services for youth with disabilities to help them prepare for the transition from school to adult life. Similar laws and policies exist in other developed countries. For examples, the United Kingdom's Equality Act 2010 is aimed at supporting and "promot[ing] equality for disabled people, which includes mobility as a key component" (AECOM, 2011, p. 17). Also, the United Kingdom's Education and Inspections Act 2006 requires local education authorities (LEAs) to assess the transport needs of students with disabilities and provide suitable transport arrangements to these students for free.

As a result of those laws and regulations, paratransit, which is a type of on-demand special public transportation services, becomes the main mode of transportation for people with disabilities who have difficulty using the public transportation system. But paratransit services have several disadvantages. First, to use the services, a passenger is required to reserve a ride in advance (e.g., one day before his/her use). Hence, this reservation-only system is likely to be inappropriate in an unforeseen or unplanned situation. Moreover, from a perspective of transportation management, a paratransit trip is very costly for local transportation authorities, compared to a fixed-route trip (Balog, 1997; Maryland Transit Association, 2007).

In addition to people with disabilities, older people are likely to have mobility issues, when this group of people begins to reduce driving. "The prevalence of driving [declines] sharply with increasing age, ranging from 88% of men [and 70% of women] in their early 70s to" 55% of men and 20% women aged 85 years or older (Foley, Heimovitz, Guralnik, & Brock, 2002, p. 1285). Older people's driving cessation tends to hinder access to vital services and social and other activities and to cause social isolation and