

## A REAPPRAISAL OF VOCATIONAL EVALUATION FROM AN ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

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**ABSTRACT:** This article will present a critical review of the practice of vocational evaluation from an ecological systems perspective. The intent will be an integration of both areas leading to a new model of the vocational assessment process. A description of traditional practices of vocational evaluation will be followed by an overview of emerging system approaches. Issues of environmental resources, vested interests, and bias will be discussed along with potential alternatives, their implications, and systematic tactics for application.

Vocational evaluation grew out of a traditional psychological approach which emphasized one to one contact in a therapist's office and located the source of distress within the individual. Stubbins (1982) expressed concern that use of the traditional model by rehabilitation psychologist presented consideration of the ecological aspects of disability. Galvin (1983) noted that the clinical attitudes in rehabilitation fail to address the personal, social, and economic problems of disabled individuals. Stubbins (1983) recommended a systems approach which looked at behavior from the perspective of individual interaction with the environment.

Stubbins' (1983) suggestion parallels trends in the clinical literature (Seidman, 1983; Jeger and Slotnick, 1982; Schleser and Rodick, 1982; Rappaport, 1977) which reflect movement away from the traditional clinical model to an ecological systems perspective. Ecological system perspectives stress the interaction or "fit" between the person and the environment. Individual human behavior is seen as a function of the mutual interaction of various sub-systems (e.g., physiological and psychological) and supersystems (e.g., family, medical, community). Dysfunctional behavior results from faulty interactions within or across systems.

Van Bertalanffy (1968) defined a system as a complex set of components which interact in a predictable manner, are hierarchically related, and can be found in all areas of nature. Human beings can be thought of as a system composed of atoms, cells, and organs. In turn, the complete human organism can be seen as a simple component of a higher order system (e.g., family community). Changes within any component of the system affects the entire system and a range of systems in the hierarchy.

Seidman (1983) noted that an implication of a system approach is the recognition and varied effects of stakeholders or individuals with

divergent values, cultural backgrounds, roles and vested interests. Definitions of and solutions to problems must be based on a synthesis of key stakeholders to assure long term change. Systems approaches have been utilized in community mental health by Jeger and Slotnick (1982), in family therapy by Schleser and Rodick (1982), and in medicine with Engle's (1982) proposal for a biopsychosocial model.

### **Vocational Assessment**

An essential element of the rehabilitation process is the determination of individual capacity for work (McGowan, 1969). Vocational evaluation provides a significant source of information for such a decision. The practice of vocational evaluation consists of a comprehensive process involving in part the systematic utilization of real or simulated work situations to assess vocational potential. Sources of data include medical status, psychological adjustment, social skills, vocational history, educational level, cultural background, and economic factors (Tenth Institute of Rehabilitation, 1972). Common assessment techniques, such as psychometric testing, work samples, situational assessment, on the job evaluation (OJE) and on the job training (OJT), provide a means for individual or group measurement of vocational interest, aptitude, and behavior within simulated or actual employment settings. The issue is whether vocational assessment provides appropriate data for accurate vocational appraisal.

Gellman (1968) identified four goals of vocational evaluation. The main goal was the provision of data contributing to vocational development for successful rehabilitation. A second goal was an indication of future work behavior along with a prediction of the nature and extent of vocational development. Third, vocational evaluation should specify behavior patterns in various work situations. Finally, the evaluation

should result in the preparation of a treatment plan. Although vocational evaluation provides a means to collect, process, and act upon vocationally relevant information about an individual, it relies on a limited approach regarding determination of ability to work. Gellman's (1968) primary goal of providing vocationally related information doesn't address the work place, availability to work, or incentive to work. Vocational evaluation may encourage earning money to become independent but it does not consider the financial hardship of forfeiting disability insurance and beginning employment at a lower income rate. The previous limitations should not detract from the general value of vocational evaluation and its necessity in the rehabilitation process. Rather they should enlighten practitioners and consumers of areas requiring further refinement.

### **Ecological Systems Perspective**

An ecological systems approach explains behavior as a multisystem interaction involving the individual, family, school, occupation, and society. The defining attribute consists of concerns with effective coping strategies, through the development of strengths, instead of focusing on maladjustment or pathological conditions (Jeger and Slotnick, 1982). The ecological systems perspective encompasses three areas. Cultural relativity demands that individual differences be viewed from their cultural context. Diversity requires respect for personal discomfort. Finally, person-environment fit concentrates on the identification of key variables which contribute to the best adjustment between the person and the social/physical environment (Rappaport, 1977).

Several implications emerge out of the ecological systems perspective. First, behavior can best be understood only by assessing how individuals interrelate with their environment. Second, identification

of the systems most important and most troublesome to the individual must precede any effective intervention. Third, faulty interaction between a person and the environment leading to adjustment problems can be modified through competency development.

An ecological system approach differs from a traditional rehabilitation perspective by placing emphasis on showing people how to acquire the necessary, social, political, or psychological resources to improve their condition as opposed to provision of treatment and services. As a result rehabilitation may foster an attitude of personal dependence instead of offering a catalyst for individual responsibility. The key point from an ecological systems perspective for vocational evaluation is the incorporation of the three areas of relativity, diversity, and person-environment fit as an operational philosophy towards the disabled.

### **Integration**

Vocational evaluation viewed from the ecological systems perspective takes on new emphasis and depth. The ecological viewpoint, stressing proper fit between a person/setting, can serve as a validity criterion by identifying the content appropriate for assessment. One example from this perspective is the increasing reliance on environmental measurement. However, often neglected areas include blame, decision-making, and the predominance of a clinical attitude.

### **Environmental Assessment**

Environmental assessment is critical for the assurance of maximum person--environment fit. Situational assessment, OJE/OJT, and labor market surveys are current examples of measuring proper adjustment. Job analysis provides one of the best examples of measuring environmental characteristics for a particular job. But these examples are not enough. Other factors such

as accessibility, public transportation, and employer/employee attitudes must be part of a thorough environmental assessment.

### **Blame**

One potential criticism of vocational assessment is the tendency for the attribution of blame based on personal deficit. Individuals with disabilities may unconsciously be viewed as responsible for their disability or the conditions maintaining it. Ryan (1976) described this rationale as "Blaming the Victim." Well meaning individuals attempt to justify inequality in life by searching for deficits in the actual victims of inequality. He felt the process occurs due to conflict of self-interest. The solution is to blame problems on the past experience of individuals instead of inequality and then offer solutions through social programs. The result is a diversion of attention from and avoidance of the actual source of the problem.

In a sense, rehabilitation functions in a victim blaming mode because its central purpose is the provision of services for amelioration of disability related deficits of a physical, social, or emotional nature. However, the goal of increased self-sufficiency helps one break out of the deficit cycle. The danger from a vocational evaluation position is to view the problems of a disability solely of individual origin. As Stubbins (1982) noted, "the natural way of studying disability and the way adopted by virtually all rehabilitation professionals is to locate the problems in the client" (p. 14). Reliance on blame allows procedure failure to be shifted from the evaluator to the alleged personal weakness of the client.

Alternative to this situation involve a change of perspective. Vocational evaluators must realize the multideterminant nature of problems associated with disability. Second, periodic self-evaluation is needed to separate client interest from

self-interest and to determine attitudes towards the source of client adjustment problems. These goals could be accomplished through education, peer groups, self-help groups, and role playing.

### **Decision-Making**

Another concern is the neglect of socio/political and self-interest variables in decision-making. Stubbins (1982) felt a reason for this is that students are indoctrinated with the belief that institutional goals are compatible with helping roles. They then expect to meet disabled individuals in a social context free of the influence of political-organizational pressures.

Rappaport (1977) has observed that science and scientist are affected by social forces mediated through personal values and beliefs. As a consequence, the collection of supposedly empirical facts as well as their application are directly influenced by culture and values. The emergence of rehabilitation reflected a variety of trends. Initial emphasis on services for World War I veterans was extended to civilians followed by emphasis on the blind. Legislation in the 1970's created the definitions of developmental and severe disability. The point is to acknowledge the effects of the socio-political sphere of influence on public social policy.

The previous discussion dealt with political/social influence in rehabilitation on a global scale. However it is also found in the assessment process. In a qualitative study on the vocational evaluation process, Murphy and Ursprung (1983) used the term "politics of evaluation" to describe the phenomenon that decisions are a function of clinical judgement as well as an awareness of the consequences for one's career and within the professional community. The authors reached several conclusions including that the needs of the agency or professional took precedence over those of the clients, the evaluators seemed to use a devalued and ill defined

ideology especially regarding motivation, and both clients and staff shared the same conceptions of their respective roles. The former were to cooperate in a predefined manner while the latter maintained control through interpersonal communication and gate-keeping. Two general implications raised were that commonly accepted terms such as "unmotivated" or "clinical decision" should be carefully examined and that practitioners should pay attention to the social, economic, and professional influence which affects decision-making.

One alternative to increase decision-making is the exposure of vocational evaluators to the reality of social, political, and personal influence on judgement in the rehabilitation process. Desmond (1982) felt such an approach would teach professionals how these forces could provide rather than deny opportunity for individuals with disabilities. A partial impetus could come from self-help and peer groups. Second, vocational evaluators must realize that successful divisions, result from satisfaction of as many stakeholders as possible. Third, evaluators and disabled individuals must learn how to use the socio-political process to their advantage. Attainment of the previous two goals could be facilitated by advocacy training.

### **Clinical Attitude**

Stubbins (1982) attempted to analyze the clinical methods in rehabilitation to reveal their foundation in an ideology of individualism. He defined "clinical attitude" as a predisposition towards a model in which individuals come to a clinic to be treated on an individual bases through testing, interviews, and treatment plans. The problem with the clinical approach, according to Stubbin (1982), is that it ignores socio-ecological factors such as federal fiscal policies, business cycles, disincentives to work, and employer prejudice.

One effect of the clinical approach in vocational evaluation is the reliance on job placement as the primary outcome of success. Compliance with a single norm restricts alternatives and encourages poor adjustment. Another consequence of the clinical role is that problems such as stigma and social exclusion might be seen as natural rather than a function of socio-ecological factors. A final point concerns evaluator/client roles. The evaluator is perceived as the all knowing authority figure in direct control of the presumably dependent and compliant disabled individual who possesses minimal decision-making responsibility.

The clinical model can be modified through alternative procedures. Vocational evaluators have shown the capacity for organization by adherence to the clinical approach and a preference for self-interest. What is needed is a change in issues of organization from self-interest to client interest. Second, evaluators must become aware of the various levels of systems such as the individual, family, and community which affect the interaction between a disabled person and the environment. Third, evaluators need to become more flexible in operationally defining assessment goals to avoid stereotyping outcomes by expected behavior or employment. Fourth, vocational evaluators need to relinquish some of their power to disabled individuals and offer them a greater chance for self-development through empowerment.

Empowerment refers to the creation of programs or policies which assist individuals to acquire and control resources which affect their lives (Jeger and Slotnick, 1982; Rappaport, 1978). This method implies present competence or future potential based on opportunity and it would place evaluators in a new role as collaborators rather than experts. The best current example of this thinking is the emergence of Independent Living. This movement seeks to first develop personal responsibility for one's life and second to encourage participation in the

daily life of the community (Cole, 1979). The unique element is the minimal reliance on professional assistance and the strong reliance on peers. Initial personal success in Independent Living concerns can serve as a power tactic to demonstrate self-confidence leading to the feeling of self-efficacy.

### Implications

The general theme of the following implications is the call for a new model of vocational evaluation based on the ecological systems perspective. One implication for vocational evaluation is a redefinition of the purpose of the assessment process. The evaluation should be an attempt to match the individual in the best way with the environment based on identification of existing skills and a thorough system assessment, and development of effective coping strategies. Second, the evaluator would now be seen more as a collaborator instead of an expert with primary consideration for client interest over self-interest. Third, the graduate training of evaluators would require curriculum modification regarding definition and application of systems theory, development of advocacy skills, socio-political awareness, and the capacity to recognize professional bias. Finally, a change in attitude and a new source of power would evolve over time. Disabled individuals will realize they have power to take control of their lives regardless of the setting. Vocational evaluators will realize their reluctance to acknowledge socio-ecological factors contributed to their negative view of the disabled as well as constrained their professional growth.

### Summary

This paper was an attempt to analyze the process of vocational evaluation from an ecological systems perspective, discuss the emerging implications, and offer various alter-

natives. The integration of an ecological systems approach within the vocational assessment process suggested three issues. First, respect for person--environment fit requires greater use of environmental measures. Second, practitioners must be cognizant of the tendency for blame and the influence of the clinical attitude. Third, service providers and recipients must realize that the mechanics of the decision-making process involve a constant interaction of social, political, economic, and self-interest variables.

Proposed alternatives were based on education. A variety of tactics and strategies were described for individuals with disabilities and vocational evaluators. The overall implication of this paper was the suggestion of a new model of vocational evaluation.

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