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"DOWN TO REALITY": ECOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS OF VOCATIONAL EVALUATION

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Abstract

Using a qualitative research approach, the authors examined the ecological factors surrounding the process of vocational evaluation. The study was conducted in six assessment centers serving persons with various kinds and levels of disability. It was found that assessment outcomes were closely associated with intra-organizational and inter-organizational factors and staff ideologies. These determinants served to narrow the focus and scope of evaluation and to provide specific direction for client socialization efforts. Recommendations for reforming evaluation policy and practice and pre-service education were discussed.

Over the years much investigative attention has been given to the content of vocational evaluation, and very little to its context. However, vocational assessment doesn't occur in a social vacuum. It occurs within a complex social environment which itself is embedded within a larger human service delivery system (Dunn, et al, 1975). Thus, it is likely that a variety of ecological factors such as organizational structure, physical-spatial features, intra and inter-agency relations, economic elements, and professional-client beliefs significantly affect the manner in which assessments are conducted, the outcomes which accrue, and the manner in which evaluation participants view and behave within the assessment situation.

In two recent reviews of the assessment literature, Berven (1983), and Sherman & Robinson (1982) indicated a need for investigators to focus more intently on the contexts within which evaluations of handicapped persons occur. This study represents an attempt to build upon the earlier work of Murphy & Ursprung (1983), and to examine the ecological determinants of vocational assessment.

Method

The investigation relied on two qualitative research techniques: participant observation and semi-structured interviewing. Six evaluation centers serving persons with disabilities in Upstate New York were selected for study. The selection criteria was their geographic location and the different clientele they served. Three of the six evaluation centers were located within urban environments while three were located in small cities and served rural populations.

A series of participant observations and semi-structured interviews were conducted over an eight month period at the six centers. A total of 43 visits were made which amounted to about 145 hours of observations and interviews. During that period 26 clients received vocational evaluations. Observations were made at different hours of the day, different days of the week, at various settings used within the centers, and at various stages of the assessments. Interviews were held with 34 different individuals who were part of the assessment program, including 22 clients, 5 administrators, and 7 evaluators.

Field notes were analyzed using a constant-comparative, emergent theme approach (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Schneider & Conrad, 1985), in which line by line analyses of field notes were made by the researchers who formulated themes as they conducted their study. These themes were placed on index cards, and beneath each theme were observations and quotations which reflected those themes. Every observation and quotation was assigned a theme and placed on a coding card. A total of 75 themes were developed. As coding categories and themes emerged, observations and questions in the field became more directed toward these

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themes. Thus, as the study progressed, the observations and questions of the researchers became more focused.

The researchers independently collected and analyzed field notes and interview data for three centers, and came together at the end to combine their themes into one set of results which are represented by the major themes in the Results section of this article.

#### Evaluation Center Types

The terms vocational assessment and evaluation will be used interchangeably in this paper to refer to the process of measuring an individual's potential for employment using a variety of methods, but characteristically through the observation of behavior in work-related or work-like activities (Gannaway & Wattenbarger, 1979). In the current study all of the evaluations were conducted in assessment centers which were located within a host agency that served as a kind of umbrella organization. The relationship between the center and its host agency followed one of three types of schemas: 1. the vocational services assessment center; 2. the quasi-independent center; and 3. the school-based center.

The vocational services center was a standard model for providing assessments to mentally retarded and mentally ill persons, and for conducting assessments in rural areas. Four centers, which we will call East, West, North, and South, fell under this classification. Within this model, evaluations were conducted within the context of a sheltered workshop/work activities facility. North served persons labelled mentally ill, was located within an urban setting, and operated as part of a sheltered workshop program attached to a large, residential institution. The other three were located in small cities, and all were the major sources of vocational services for mentally retarded persons, and most other disability groups in their geographic area.

The second type of evaluative model in the study consisted of an assessment center located in an institution which offered very few other services for persons with disabilities, or which clearly separated the other services physically and socially from the evaluation center. This type of host facility might be a university, hospital, or adult education program. Central Center fell into this model. Within this model the clients had relatively mild physical and/or emotional problems, and once evaluated, generally moved on immediately to some other program.

The third model was a school-based model in which assessment was conducted for selected students within the school district who had physical and/or mental disabilities. This model was represented in the study by an assessment program in which ninth and tenth grade students, referred by their home schools, were bussed to a center and placed in exploratory classes such as food services, automobile maintenance, building trades, cosmetology, etc. After their class they were bussed back to their home schools where they resumed their regular academic schedule. They followed this schedule for one academic year, switching the type of class they attended every six weeks, and receiving a formal assessment sometime during that year in addition to the assessments

provided by the instructors in their various classes. At the end of the year all of the instructors and the evaluator met to discuss each student and decide where he/she would be placed for the following year. The students in the school model were described as learning disabled, mentally retarded, or emotionally disturbed.

The evaluator's credentials varied considerably between agencies. Each agency employed one evaluator except Central, which had three. West Center's evaluator had a Bachelors degree and ten years experience; South and East evaluators had Masters degrees in Counseling and Guidance; the staff member at North had a Masters degree in Vocational Evaluation and Work Adjustment; the School Center employed an evaluator with a Masters degree in Special Education; of the three evaluators at Central, two had Masters degrees in Rehabilitation Counseling, and the third had a Masters degree in Vocational Evaluation and Work Adjustment. All of the evaluators claimed to have had additional credentials and experiences such as in-service, staff development, and professional workshops in vocational assessment, and specific curricular concentrations in testing and/or measurement.

#### Results

##### Predictability of Assessment Results

Perhaps the most consistent finding across all the settings was the predictability of the assessment outcomes. Except for one assessment facility, nearly every client who underwent assessment in a given facility was recommended for training or employment in that facility. Individuals who were evaluated in centers attached to sheltered workshops, were invariably placed in the workshop. Persons assessed in a school-based program were consistently referred to one of several vocational training classes, or back to their home school. This outcome occurred irrespective of evaluator credentials, work experience or education, irrespective of evaluative materials used and despite demonstrated client abilities, and interests.

Such an outcome might be explainable if the stated goals of evaluation were to screen persons to enter a workshop. However, such a goal wasn't evident in the materials provided by the facility to describe their program. Each of the centers had published, formal goals which were quite similar. As described in the South Center materials, the assessment services were designed to: 1. gain a better understanding of personal abilities, capacities, and potential; 2. develop realistic vocational aspirations and goals; and 3. identify a goal attainment plan.

The program goals inferred that evaluation would lead to a vocational plan, and that the vocational recommendation would reflect the results of the assessment. On the surface this presumption appeared to be operational since all of the placement recommendations appeared to emanate logically from the evaluation process. Ecologically, however, there appeared to be very different forces operating on evaluation and placement recommendations than client characteristics, and/or community service opportunities and/or job markets.

##### Intra-Organizational Forces

Within the vocational facility model the asses-

sment functions of all the centers were closely tied to other intra-organizational rehabilitation services, namely, work adjustment and training, and/or sheltered employment. The assessment, though conducted separately in a designated area, was intimately tied to the sheltered organization in that the staff members were employees of the same organization, clients were always placed in the workshop as part of their assessment experience, client transportation and attendance schedules were virtually the same, and lunch and breaks were taken at the same time and in the same places.

It was common for the type and scheduling of situational assessments to depend upon the production demands of the agency's sheltered workshop. If an important contract was received, evaluation clients underwent situational assessments sooner, and for longer periods, coinciding with the contract period. If work was slow in the workshop, situational assessments were minimized, or involved make-work materials.

Within the assessment room itself, it was common for evaluators to assign clients to in-house work samples that were either previous workshop contracts, or were developed from past contract materials. Therefore, a great deal of the information collected on client behavior reflected their performance on workshop jobs and activities. In fact, in all of the centers studied, a high priority was placed on collecting information on client productivity consistent with the workshop's wage and hour reporting. Thus, much behavioral information was collected and reported in terms of an individual's ability to fit into the existing workshop environment.

The Central Center offered work adjustment services in addition to their assessment program. About 25% of the clients were referred to the work adjustment program, far less than the percentages referred to the intra-organizational services of other centers. This may have been due to the relative independence of this center; also to the fact that the center served a wide variety of clients for whom such work adjustment services were thought to be inappropriate by the referring counselors, evaluators, and the clients themselves. This referral policy was underscored by the fact that there were virtually no staff available to supervise in-house work adjustment, and the host institution was reportedly not supportive of such a program on a large scale.

The School Center referred all of their evaluatees to classes within the pre-determined, school based vocational program. The decisions to place an individual in a particular class was based primarily on the student's stated interest and an instructor's willingness to accept him/her, especially the latter. Several students were recommended for placement back in their home schools because no instructor would accept them, even though the students expressed interests which coincided with existing classes. In numerous instances students expressed vocational interests in areas which were not offered by the school, and would have required a placement in a community work site, something the school was not equipped or willing to do. In short, the assessment data appeared to be clearly secondary to pre-existing professional expectations and program expediency.

In all of the centers studied it was not sur-

prising that the evaluator so infrequently recommended community placement for their clients. As they noted, there was almost no one to carry out such recommendations. The vast majority of staff at the agencies were involved in in-house programming, and very few had regular, sustained contact with community employers. The individuals who had the most such contact were the contract procurers whose job it was to bring work into the agency, not place people out in the community. Resources devoted to analyzing the community labor market, developing community work sites or competitive jobs, and/or supporting clients in work outside of the center were relatively few. In fact, of the six agencies studied, only two had full-time placement specialists; two didn't employ a placement specialist, relying on other agencies to do placement, one had a half-time position which was reportedly filled by a person with other full-time duties, and one position was vacant, and had been for several months. In short, many intra-organizational factors mitigated against a community placement recommendation unless the evaluator was willing to do the placement him/herself.

#### Inter-Organizational Factors:

The relationship of primary importance to the assessment center was that of the referring organizations and their representatives. In five of the six agencies studied, this was the state vocational rehabilitation agency (OVR), an organization upon which the centers were financially dependent. OVR was not only the major source of evaluation referrals, but also was the major contractor for vocational services after evaluation. Evaluators took their instructions from VR counselors; it was to these individuals that evaluators were primarily accountable, not their clients. Clients had little or no say in how the evaluation was structured, had no choice in where the assessment was conducted or who the evaluator was, and frequently had no specific idea about why it was being done, or in what specific ways the information was to be used. Several clients when asked why they were being evaluated replied that "it was part of my program", that "it was to see what work I can do", that it "was to find out where my strengths and weaknesses are", or that it was "to measure if I could go to college or not".

In contrast, referring counselors communicated in written and verbal form the specific reasons for the evaluation, and the particular questions the evaluator should answer. All of the evaluators reported that they looked for cues from the referring counselors and would modify the assessment to conform to their requests. As one evaluator noted: "(referring agency) wants the information, and they are the ones that are buying services, and they want something in return".

In many cases the counselor's wishes did not have to be explicitly stated, but were inferred by the way in which a referral was made. For example, in one situation when the VR counselor failed to specify that competitive outcomes were to be considered, it was taken as a "green light" for a sheltered closure. When competitive employment was a counselor preference, evaluators reported that more justification was required in the evaluation report for a sheltered recommendation.

Most of the agencies had a clear financial in-

centive for keeping clients as long term employees of the agency. Both state and local funding was available on an ongoing basis, but only if the agency retained the clients in the workshop program. In addition, client employees earned contract income for the agency, and evaluators were keenly aware of these financial realities as they applied to their activities. As one evaluator observed: "There is no where else (to refer clients). If I did that though, the bosses would be pretty upset. They'd probably say I'd be taking away their bread and butter".

It should be noted that the relationship between evaluation centers and referring agencies under the conditions described above was one of mutual dependence. Certainly the assessment centers needed funding. However, OVR needed placements, and had neither the manpower or money to attain them unassisted. Thus, they could not press their interests beyond a certain point since in many of the communities studied, there was an absence of any evaluative or placement alternatives.

The one agency which was not dependent on OVR for referrals was North which obtained their clientele from the large residential facility of which they were a part. This center seemed self-contained and insulated from inter-agency influences and pressures.

#### Staff Ideologies

Evaluators believed that they were discovering and making recommendations based on real intrapsychic traits of their clients in an objective manner. They also felt that whatever gaps existed in their technical measures was filled by their ability to assess client motivation - a key ingredient in predicting vocational potential. As one evaluator noted, "...commitment to a program of evaluation and training that would lead to employment (involves) two things really: 1. motivation to work; and 2. motivation to the rehabilitation process... We have to find out what's motivating the person... if you don't know what's motivating the person, he may tell you one thing and do another."

They believed that the ultimate goal for each client was community employment, and that their assessments helped clients toward that goal. However, they also believed that most of their clients were low functioning and unemployable in the competitive world. The primary needs of their clients were thought to be: a) a structured program; b) protection from failure; and c) protection from stress. They believed that clients should start out on simple, undemanding tasks in very restricted settings until they "do well" or "prove themselves".

Much evaluator-client interaction was designed to channel a client's vocational aspirations towards the small number of options prescribed by the agency. Whenever possible a client was recommended to which ever in-house option was thought to most nearly match his/her needs, even though that match might be remote. Clients who did not readily accept workshop employment or other training or employment suggestions, were "counseled" concerning the wisdom of the option, its proximity to their expressed interests, and/or the unrealistic nature of other alternatives. Evaluators called this process "bringing clients down to reality"

or helping them "make realistic choices". At times this evaluator response seemed unconscious, such as when he/she responded to an "unrealistic" client statement by remarking "let's put a question mark by that one". Another way of dealing with such a situation was to refer to a number of alternatives but never specify any of them except the desired one, or leave the others vague. Clients who persisted were often presented the possibility of no services, though this action was viewed as much less desirable than a negotiated decision. Some clients resist being congregated with large numbers of other disabled people, and specific desensitization strategies are employed during evaluation to reduce or eliminate resistance. The personal influence of the evaluator is used to insure that such clients learn to "fit right in".

To a great extent staff ideologies appeared to be maintained by professional and organizational isolation from the community and from innovative programs occurring elsewhere. There were few challenges to the evaluators recommendations that a client's behavior would not be acceptable in competitive employment, because no one: 1. worked closely with community employers; 2. was cognizant of programs which proved otherwise; or 3. were involved with other professionals who saw things differently. Thus, the four or five alternatives offered by evaluators were presumed to represent a realistic appraisal of client employability, and of local occupational opportunities.

Since resources were directed overwhelmingly towards in-house programming, there were no support services available for community placements, and the only type of placement considered was that which required minimal/short term on-site assistance. The prophecy that only the high functioning client could work became the self-fulfilling rule of thumb. When discrepancies between officially stated goals and actual practices were pointed out, they tended to be excused as temporary anomalies no matter how frequently or consistently they were observed.

#### Client Perceptions

The backgrounds, experiences, skills, and vocational goals of the clients in the study were rich and varied. Many individuals had multiple problems, minimal education and work experience, and difficulty with the routine tasks of everyday life. However, many others lived independently, were married, and did their own budgeting and shopping. Many used public transportation without assistance, and had held competitive jobs. In fact, one individual was holding a part-time job at the time of his evaluation, which, incidently, recommended sheltered employment. Despite such diversity all of the clients in each center received virtually the same evaluation. In some cases where people couldn't read or were obviously not responding to the tasks at hand, paper and pencil tests were omitted. However, all clients received the in-house work samples and were placed in situational assessments within the agency setting. In many instances such placements were clearly inappropriate and neither reflected the individual's skill level or interests. In one instance, a young woman who had 21 credits of college was assigned to a jig designed for persons unable to count to 100. In another situation a young man who wanted

to be a carpenter and who had a year of college was assigned to sand wood. None of the clients in the study were assessed within a community setting at any time, even though the vast majority expressed a desire to work in "real jobs".

Within the Central Center the situational assessments were conducted in real work settings within the host institution. However, clients were placed in those situations for only half of a day, far too little time to demonstrate any level of competence or to get a good sense of what was involved in the job. The evaluators were dissatisfied with this arrangement, and frequently requested that the on-site supervisors provide more time to the disabled evaluatee. However, often the supervisors were resistant to assuming these duties and were neither paid nor trained to conduct such training. According to the evaluators at Central, when the on-site supervisors did extend the time for the situational assessment, they often relegated the clients to some peripheral activity.

#### Summary

It certainly appeared that ecological factors profoundly affected the vocational assessment process, determining how evaluations were conducted, outcomes which accrued, and staff ideologies toward their clients and service priorities. Despite the belief that evaluation is an objective, impartial process which assists clients in expanding their options and achieving community employment, there is evidence to suggest that assessment outcomes were determined by organizational needs, the impact of evaluation environments on client behavior, and staff ideologies. The primary objectives of assessment appeared to be: a) to acclimate and socialize clients into a predetermined employment framework, most frequently segregated; and b) provide the practice of sheltered services with an aura of legitimacy and scientific respectability. It should not be inferred that evaluators favor segregated, sheltered services. Rather, the entire system surrounding the assessment process is so organized around this service model, that it is virtually impossible to circumvent, except in those instances where evaluation centers maintain considerable independence, where clients are sufficiently well versed and/or assertive, or where referring professionals do not favor such alternatives for specific clients.

#### Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to address the ecological imbalance which favored a restrictive, segregated orientation toward employment and led to assessment recommendations consistent with this orientation.

1. Evaluation should be conducted independently - apart from an agency with vested interests in the outcomes. If such agencies conduct assessments, they should clearly label them screening devices specific to the agencies and not generic appraisals.

2. Evaluators need to be more accountable to clients regarding both the specific purpose of the assessment, the recommendations, and the rights of the individual undergoing evaluation.

- a) Before the assessment clients should be provided a written statement indicating

very specifically, the reasons for the appraisal, the specific ways in which the information will be used for decision making, and the role the client, parent, or advocate should play in the process.

- b) Vocational evaluation reports and outcomes should undergo periodic review by an impartial, independent body. Community review boards should be established by local governments to review randomly the files of all agencies serving persons with disabilities, and to make recommendations for change at whatever levels are necessary; these boards should be comprised of professionals, parents, advocates, and disabled consumers, to examine evaluation reports, and to conduct follow-up reports of individual clients. The board would also be available to hear appeals and concerns of parents, disabled persons, advocates, and professionals, functioning in much the same way as Boards of Visitors do for residential institutions. Currently, no such bodies exist for OVR, not-for-profit private agencies or for profit making organizations.
  - c) Specific procedures should be delineated concerning the dissemination of recommendations to clients and counselors. Such things as how the recommendations were formulated, what information was used and considered most important, who will have access to the information, and what the client's rights are in developing and approving the final recommendations should be spelled out and operationalized.
3. Evaluators and evaluator educators need to become far more active in reforming the way in which vocational assessments are conducted. Certainly they should assume far more leadership in acting on the preceding recommendations. Beyond this, however, they need to address a number of other important issues at both national and local levels:
- a) They should make a commitment to teaching and providing least restrictive assessments and recommendations. There should be a moratorium placed on the use of segregated, highly restrictive settings for situational assessment. Community job tryouts should become as integral a part of the assessment process as are work samples, and recommendations for sheltered placements should be viewed only as a last resort. The specialty of evaluators should become the vocational integration of even the most severely disabled persons into mainstream society. This goal would require that evaluators spend as much time assessing community vocational situations as they do conducting person-centered evaluations.
  - b) Educators of evaluators should go beyond a person-change orientation and provide their students with the professional philosophy and skills which can address the ecological variables that will affect the work of practitioners, can maximize their professional autonomy through community organization, and can assist them

in assuming positions of leadership in providing and developing least restrictive, community-based services.

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