The Paradoxical Nature of Disability Services: Illustrations from Supported Employment and Implications for Rehabilitation Counseling

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Paradoxes are common in disability services and present challenges for rehabilitation counseling. Failure to reveal and address both poles of paradoxes can result in unintended consequences. The concept of paradox is illustrated in supported employment. The following two paradoxes are discussed: (a) organizational productivity versus supported employee self-actualization, and (b) support organization survival and profit versus supported employee independence and interdependence. Implications for rehabilitation counseling are discussed.

Rehabilitation counseling is confronted by a major challenge, which appears to be going unnoticed. This challenge results from the combination of the paradoxical nature of human services (Rappaport, 1981) and the tendency toward positivism in the educational preparation of professionals (Armour & Fuhrmann, 1993). The purposes of this article are (a) to explain the paradoxical nature of disability services, (b) to illustrate operation of paradoxes in supported employment, and (c) to speculate on implications for rehabilitation counseling.

The Paradoxical Nature of Disability Services

The history of disability services (e.g., rehabilitation, special education) has been checkered by apparent conflicts and contradictions. For example, independence and community integration have been generally regarded as important rehabilitation goals (DiMichael, 1969; Jenkins, Patterson, & Szymanski, 1992; Wright, 1980). However, it has been suggested that some disability services can isolate consumers from normal activities and supports (Ferguson,

Hibbard, Leinen, & Schaff, 1990; Scott, 1969; Szymanski & Trueba, 1994) and that the financial policies related to disability can actually impede independence (Berkowitz, 1987). Similarly, during the 1980s, conflicts in special education and rehabilitation policies and procedures appeared to produce unintended obstacles for students with disabilities in transition from school to work (Bullis, & Foss, 1983; Szymanski, 1994). Such apparent contradictions have often confused practitioners and consumers while providing fodder for academicians who write eloquently on the various sides of the debates.

The apparent conflicts in disability services reflect the paradoxical nature of the field. Paradox is inherent in human social systems, and, one social imperative (e.g., equality) is often neglected at the expense of another, related and equally binding imperative (e.g., freedom) (Rappaport, 1981). Institutionalization of unidimensional solutions to multifaceted problems often turns paradox into conflict (Rappaport, 1981) and produces unintended consequences. It is our contention that these conflicts could be minimized or at least anticipated through examination and acknowledgement of fundamental paradoxes and consideration of a relativistic or phenomenological approach to rehabilitation counseling.

Paradoxes are composed of antinomies, which are equally binding, intimately intertwined, yet contradictory social laws (Rappaport, 1981). To exemplify the development of paradoxes in disability services, we will examine some of the antinomic values that entered into supported employment in its development and institutionalization.

Flexibility, accountability, and efficiency are prime examples of antinomies. Supported employment was introduced to rehabilitation in the 1970s as a value-based, flexible service delivery option for people with severe disabilities (Bellamy, Mank, Rhodes, & Albin, 1988; Rusch & Hughes, 1990). It was believed that by using ecological analysis, supports could be designed for the individual and the environment that would result in effective work performance (Szymanski & Parker, 1988, 1989). In 1986, it was institutionalized on the rehabilitation landscape with the Rehabilitation Act Amendments (Hanley-Maxwell, Szymanski, Parent, & Schriener, 1990), and its core features (i.e.,

integration, paid employment, ongoing support, targeted services to persons with severe disabilities) were placed into statute (Rehabilitation Act Amendments, 1986, Section 7). Along with institutionalization came **accountability**. Support organizations are currently required to (a) deliver services in specified time frames, (b) assure that services are provided at least twice monthly at the work site (unless specifically requested by the client), and (c) document that consumers need ongoing support in order to remain in employment (Rehabilitation Act Amendments, 1992).

The challenge of balancing flexibility with accountability was then complemented by the fiscal requirement of **efficiency**. In order to survive, organizations needed to find optimal balances of consumers, which enabled them to effectively distribute resources. (Kregel & Wehman, 1989; Mank, Buckley, & Rhodes, 1990). It is not surprising that, in various settings, supported employment has been criticized for (a) service to persons with mild disabilities, who may not need its characteristic ongoing support (Patterson & Curl, 1990); (b) continued limited access of service to persons with severe disabilities (Kregel & Wehman, 1989; Rusch, 1990); (c) systemic and financial disincentives to consumer independence (Hanley-Maxwell, Szymanski, Parent, & Schriener, 1990); and (d) limited consideration of consumer choice and preference (Martin & Mithaug, 1990; Schaller & Szymanski, 1992). These criticisms can be considered evidence of the interactive effect of the antinomies of flexibility, accountability, and efficiency.

Two other root values that appear to constitute antinomies in supported employment are societal contribution and integration. Vocational rehabilitation had often been advocated on a cost benefit model in which the financial benefits or **societal contributions** (e.g., tax savings, tax benefits) were claimed to offset the programmatic expenditures (DiMichael, 1969; Rubin & Roessler, 1987; Wright, 1980). Early cost benefit approaches in supported employment suggested similar possibilities while cautioning against the tendency toward quantification of societal and personal benefit. Later cost benefit studies suggested that the benefits of supported employment were more complex (Conley & Noble, 1990) and that traditional approaches to simple cost versus benefit comparisons might not afford true representations of program benefit. Actual program efficiency was also questioned in some cases (Noble, Conley, Banjeree, & Goodman, 1990).

Integration in community settings emerged as an important consideration in special education in the 1970s (Brown et al., 1983; Bruininks & Lakin, 1985) and in rehabilitation in the 1980s (Jenkins, Patterson, & Szymanski, 1992; Szymanski, Hanley-Maxwell, & Parker, 1990). Pioneers of employment training for persons with severe disabilities demonstrated that such individuals could be trained to perform relatively complex job tasks (Bellamy, Horner, & Inman, 1979; Rusch & Mithaug, 1980; Snell, 1987) and to perform effectively in integrated employment settings (Bellamy, Rhodes, & Albin, 1986; Rusch, 1986; Wehman,

1981). This led to a whole technology of support developed to facilitate the participation of persons with severe disabilities in integrated employment (see e.g., Hagner, Rogan, & Murphy, 1992; National Association of Rehabilitation Facilities, 1990). Meanwhile, the potential conflict of societal contribution and integration was evidenced by literature suggesting that the very support provided to enhance societal contribution (e.g., to increase worker accuracy and productivity) may simultaneously limit integration (Hagner et al., 1992; Udvari-Solner, 1990).

Paradoxes in Supported Employment

Institutionalization of unidimensional solutions (e.g., supported employment) to multidimensional problems (e.g., employment of persons with severe disabilities) tends to create conflicts (Rappaport, 1981; Schein, 1992). We contend that the unintentional consequences of supported employment result from such institutionalization in the face of fundamental antinomies. The results include the following paradoxes, which if not understood will ultimately extinguish the beneficial aspects of supported employment: (a) organizational productivity versus supported employee self-actualization, and (b) support organization survival and profit versus supported employee independence and interdependence.

Productivity versus Supported Employee Self-Actualization

The productivity of the employer and of the support agency may conflict with self-actualization of the supported employee. The paradox results from the fact that both poles are considered inherently good. At one end, the productivity of the employer and of the support organization is an important economic force in the business component of supported employment. At the opposite end, the self actualization of the supported employee is an important force in the human service component.

Self actualization of the supported employee is complicated by a variety of disability related factors. Interest development can be problematic in persons with disabilities due to limited experiences (Turner & Szymanski, 1990). So, too, expression of preference can be difficult for persons with severe disabilities (Ip, 1991; West & Parent, 1992). Consequently, persons with disabilities are often placed in supported employment jobs, which they later find that they don't like. According to Martin and Mithaug (1990), problematic matches of individuals with jobs and limited opportunities for career advancement are not uncommon in supported employment situations.

Although consumer choice and career advancement are now considered important goals in supported employment (Schaller & Szymanski, 1992; West & Parent, 1992), the options of dissatisfied supported employees are often limited to staying on the job or leaving. The individual pole of this paradox is complicated by the fact that the person with

disability really cannot leave the job without personal degradation. In order to get out of an unsatisfactory placement, many individuals must either quit and risk being labeled uncooperative or demonstrate challenging behavior and risk being labeled socially maladjusted (Negri, Shoultz, & Majure, 1990; Patterson, Buckley, & Smull, 1989; Patterson & Curl, 1990).

Organizational productivity of the support organization, the opposite end of the paradox, is complicated by the consequences of consumer choice for the support organization. Organizations serving persons with developmental disabilities are often bound by regulations regarding hours of vocational programming (Bannerman, Sheldon, Sherman, & Harchick, 1990; Heal, Haney, & Amado, 1988). Thus, expressions of individual choice that disrupt placements could result in financial or regulatory consequences for support organizations.

Another illustration of the organizational productivity versus supported employee self-actualization paradox relates to conflicts of individual job satisfaction and career goals with business productivity. Attention to organizational productivity without regard to individual satisfaction and growth has produced alienation in production workers without disabilities (Blauner, 1964; Peters & Waterman, 1982). The lack of individual satisfaction is a well documented problem for low status and marginal jobs (Rothman, 1987). Interestingly, many countries, including the United States, have responded to this difficulty with the importation of persons from other countries to fill these positions (Trueba, Rodriguez, Zou, & Ima, 1993).

Supported employment has provided an alternative source of people to fill marginal positions. Whitehead (1990) noted that "too often the jobs secured have been entry-type, dead-end jobs with little or no opportunity for upward mobility or promotion" ... (p. 345). Supported employee self-actualization is thus potentially compromised both by the productivity needs of the support organization and by the economic needs of businesses with marginal jobs. The pull against the individual pole of the paradox is further exacerbated by the potential synergistic relationship of the support organization productivity and the economic gain of businesses with marginal positions. It seems that it is often easier for support organizations to develop and maintain marginal jobs, which are otherwise difficult for the business to staff.

Support Organization Survival and Profit versus Supported Employee Independence and Interdependence

A second paradox in supported employment is the potential conflict between the goals of independence or interdependence for the supported employee and survival and profit of the support organization. Increasing the independence of supported employees or their interdependence on naturally occurring supports has been a major goal of supported employment since its inception (Hanley-Maxwell, Szymanski,

Parent, & Schriener, 1990). However, rehabilitation has increasingly become a business with clients and their needs becoming commodities to be brokered (Albrecht, 1992; Amado, 1988; McKnight, 1977). In this business environment, the independence or interdependence of the supported employee can naturally conflict with the profits of the support organization.

Supported employment instruction, which is directed toward rapid acquisition of skills for specific job tasks, may actually mitigate against long term retention of those skills and generalization to related work tasks. Focus on single skills rather than families of related skills can create difficulty in generalization or adaptability. So, too, can instruction in which unnatural cues or reinforcers are used to trigger or reinforce performance (Hanley-Maxwell, Szymanski, Seay, & Parker, 1990). Instruction, which is not planned to address generalization and maintenance of learning, can actually contribute to dependence of the supported employee on the support organization.

Similarly, the nature of services provided by the support organization can also mediate between the individual and support organization poles of paradox. Although support can facilitate work performance, it can also hinder the assimilation of the supported employee into the organizational culture and the use of available natural supports (Hagner, Rogan, & Murphy, 1992). Specifically, while support can facilitate the inclusion of the supported employee into the social and cultural milieu of the organization, it can also establish the support agency's importance in maintaining the functioning of persons with disabilities in the workplace. Through the action of their personnel, support agencies can potentially establish themselves as necessary agents for enabling people with disabilities to function in the workplace.

The potential for support agencies establishing themselves as a necessary experts to be consulted when employers hire people with disabilities is very real, especially in the context of implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. In fact, observation of this tendency inspired the current article. We witnessed a support agency marketing in a manner that implied that businesses hiring or wishing to hire people with disabilities needed the support agency. The implicit problem here is that such an approach actually can serve to (a) deter employers from hiring persons with disabilities, or (b) to promote the dependence and isolation of persons with disabilities in order to advance the needs of the support organization.

Policies related to supported employment seem to have shifted the paradox toward the needs of the support organization. There is minimal financial incentive for support organizations to promote independence, interdependence, and assimilation. It appears that support organizations must demonstrate that the supported employee continues to need and does receive their services in order to continue to receive fees for services (Hanley-Maxwell, Szymanski, Parent, & Schriener, 1990).

Implications for Rehabilitation Counselors

Ignoring the paradoxical nature of supported employment can result in serious consequences due to the fundamental power relations involved in disability services. Several authors have suggested that institutions (e.g., disability services systems, schools) and professionals (e.g., rehabilitation counselors, special education teachers) can function as agents of the societal status quo, helping society to control persons considered to be different or undesirable (Apple, 1990; Scott, 1969; Stubbins, 1988). Support organizations, by their very nature, may be quite susceptible to attending to their own, organizational needs at the expense of concerns relating to the self actualization, independence, or interdependence of supported employees.

Supported employment can become a mechanism of oppression of people with disabilities if attention is not continually directed to the individual direction of the inherent paradoxes. For example, in the current service economy, unscrupulous support organizations could, theoretically, perform the following functions, which would tend to enhance organizational growth: (a) deliver service in a way that maintains the dependence of people with disabilities, (b) supply business with a ready market of workers for undesirable positions or marginal jobs, (c) receive payment from government funding sources to maintain and support people with disabilities in these undesirable jobs, and (d) simultaneously claim to be empowering people with disabilities through employment services. There is ample precedent for the use of persons considered as different or undesirable to foster economic gain. Consider, for example, the importation and subjugation of immigrant minorities for farm, domestic, and factory work. Often, agents or brokers have profited by facilitating the exploitation of such individuals in jobs considered undesirable by American workers (Blauner, 1972; Trueba et al., 1993). Thus, it is important to guard against such exploitation of workers in supported employment.

The illustrations provided in this paper have been from supported employment. However, there is ample evidence of paradoxical problems in other aspects of rehabilitation (see e.g., Salifos-Rothschild, 1976; Stubbins, 1988). The potential for paradox in rehabilitation is compounded by the ecological nature of rehabilitation, which addresses the complex interactions of diverse individuals with varied environments (Szymanski, Dunn, & Parker, 1989). The infinite possible combinations of individuals, environments, and contexts of intervention suggest the existence of more than one acceptable course of action in rehabilitation. Interestingly, this possibility exists in contrast to logical positivism, which is the foundation for professionalism. Professional autonomy is based on the premise of an objective reality, of one right answer, that can be learned. Thus, "professionals know what is best for their clients because they have access to the profession's specialized knowledge and skills" (Skrtec, 1991, p. 90).

It would seem that the positivist nature of professionalism could obscure the inherent paradoxes of the field. To guard against this tendency, rehabilitation counselors must be sure to evaluate the multiple dimensions of the situations that they and their clients face every day. Key questions to be used in such evaluation include the following. What are the competing values in this situation (e.g., independence, security)? Who will benefit from possible alternative courses of action, and how will they benefit? What long term provisions can be included in the rehabilitation plan to assure client benefit? Consideration of these questions should assist rehabilitation counselors in detecting paradoxes and considering them in rehabilitation planning.

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