A Grounded Theory Approach to Defining Fragmentation and Unification in the Rehabilitation Counseling Profession

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Abstract — Fragmentation has been identified in the rehabilitation counseling literature as the cause of a crisis, and unification is forwarded as the cure. However, these terms are not well defined. Definitions are proposed here, providing a framework for a grounded theory study of inter- and intra-organizational communications among thirteen professional organizations via their websites. Two network models emerged from the analysis. The first described a political network that advocates for the profession. The second described a service-based network that responds to customer needs. The meaning of unification and fragmentation within these two models is explored. Authors find that the profession is more thoroughly unified in political advocacy than it is for advancing practice.

Rehabilitation counseling is not a monolithic profession. Its evolutionary history (see Jenkins, Patterson, & Szymanski, 1997; Sales, 2002) describes a growing network of agencies, alliances, associations, commissions, councils, and departments based on geography, expertise, function, politics, race, ethnicity, and gender. It is not a corporation; it is a community. From a community of practice perspective (Wenger, 1998) diversification is an expected and healthy response to organizational expansion (Olson, 1965) and complexity (Aldrich & Ruef, 2006; Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1991; Tirole, 1986).

Current leadership views some aspects of this growth with great concern. They believe that some emergent structures have fragmented the profession with overlapping missions and competing agendas (Kuehn, 2005; McFarlane & Sax, 2005; Mpofo, 2000; Shaw, 2006), resulting in programmatic isolation, inefficiency, and conflict (Shaw, Leahy, Chan, & Catalano, 2006). They call for community-wide unification in a community resistant to change (Leahy & Tarvydas, 2001) and in a time of programmatic retrenchment. The implication of existing literature and popular opinion is that fragmentation is an existential threat of crisis proportions.

Anecdotal, it is obvious that the profession is challenged by external events. It is also apparent that cur-

rent structures are insufficient to deal with the problems faced. However, the intuitive assumption that fragmentation is the cause and unification is the solution to vaguely defined organizational woes has not been subjected to scientific scrutiny. The argument has only been made in the forum of opinion and in the vernacular. If fragmentation is as serious an issue as it appears to be, it deserves serious, applied, and scientific study. Unification, diversification, and fragmentation must become exacting terms of art. Once defined, they must be observed and theories developed. Thus, to initiate empirical study on this matter we address two questions. What do we mean by unification and fragmentation? How are they expressed in the rehabilitation counseling community?

Defining Terms

Unification is motivated by the rehabilitation counseling community's need for an over-arching identity. In the ideal, it is characterized by (a) a unifying fundamental mission (full community inclusion for people with disabilities); (b) a concise set of unique, stable subgroups that negotiate their individual authorities and responsibilities under the fundamental mission; and (c) active, frequent, interdependent, and mutually beneficial transactions between the subgroups in service of the mission. We can think of

unification as the constant pursuit of community through improvements made in ethics, structures, and relationships.

Diversification is a means of unification that articulates identity through the creation of new groups. For example, the National Association of Multicultural Rehabilitation Concerns (NAMRC) emerged from the National Rehabilitation Association (itself a subgroup in the professional community) because people of color did not feel that their voices were properly heard or represented. NAMRC has established itself as a legitimate institution and now provides added value to the parent organization through its collaborative efforts. Unification is advanced because (a) there is less isolation and alienation among community members, and (b) a new perspective deepens everyone's understanding of the profession and its mission.

Fragmentation is the antithesis of unification and may be characterized along the same dimensions. Ethical fragmentation occurs when subgroups do not share the fundamental mission of the profession. Structural fragmentation occurs when redundant subgroups emerge. Transactional fragmentation occurs when subgroups do not effectively participate in community. We can imagine examples for each. There is an ethical fault line between the fundamental values of state and worker compensation systems. There is no discernible organizational difference between the Vocational Evaluation and Work Adjustment Association (VEWAA) and the Vocational Evaluation and Career Adjustment Professionals (VECAP). The disconnect between research and practice is evidenced through the lack of a body of evidence-based practice. Fragmentation, thus defined, is a larger, more systemic phenomenon than initially conceived.

To move unification and fragmentation from tentative terms of art to workable constructs will require a body of empirical study. The first step on this path is to ground our terms in experience. We posit that if there is merit to the constructs, unification and fragmentation should be expressed in the inter- and intra-organizational communications (see Charmaz, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Glaser, 2001) of the rehabilitation counseling community. The purpose of this grounded theory research was to explore the relationships between organizations and let their words dictate the deeper meanings of the terms.

Methodology

Grounded theory is a constructivist approach to research (Hunt, 1997; Phillips, 1997) that allows investigators to build constructs from a personal, yet disciplined, interpretation of a corpus of qualitative data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). It is particularly useful when there is little or no theoretical basis for building hypotheses; when the phenomenon is poorly understood and in need of rich description (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The grounded theory process begins with the selection of a representative corpus of documents. For this study, we identified 553 documents on the websites of thirteen organizations affiliated with rehabilitation counseling organizations (see Table 1). The or-

Table 1
Organizational Contributions to the Corpus of Documents (N = 553)

Organization	no.
American Association of State Counseling Boards	8
American Psychological Association (Division 22)	66
American Rehabilitation Counseling Association	26
Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs	3
Council on Rehabilitation Education	28
Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification	7
Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation	143
National Council on Rehabilitation Education	40
National Clearinghouse of Rehabilitation Training Materials	10
National Rehabilitation Association	47
National Rehabilitation Counseling Association	50
Rehabilitation Services Administration	90
Veterans Benefits Administration Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment Service	35

ganizations in the study were chosen not as an exhaustive set, but as a core group of organizations whose communications would appropriately reflect their histories and current concerns. Organizations representing the insurance (worker's compensation) sector were consciously excluded because the for-profit context added an additional and unnecessary level of complexity.

The data collected represents all public documents made available on the selected websites in late June, 2006. While this data does not represent all forms of communication among the organizations in question, it does represent an important public interface. What appears on these websites arguably represents how they wish to be seen and how they mean to network with others (see Castells, 1996).

Instrumentation, Reliability, and Validity

Grounded theory is a disciplined approach to content analysis with special considerations for reliability and validity. In grounded theory research the investigator is the instrument. Reliability is a function of the investigator's mastery of qualitative techniques, discipline in application, and fidelity to the data (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Reliability is established through the documentation of the process and the investigator's justifications for decisions made along the way. The primary investigator approached the corpus of study with no direct experience within the constellation of contributing organizations. As an outsider to the profession, the primary investigator provided an etic perspective to the study to minimize the risk of bias. The primary investigator directed all processes and initiated all interaction with supporting investigators. Supporting investigators, who have extensive backgrounds in the profession, assisted in creating organization lists, clarifying definitions, and providing feedback on structures and models upon request (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Constant comparative process. The analysis began with a point-by-point coding of individual documents, creating codes for individual concepts encountered in the material and arranging these codes into semantic hierarchies. Initially, many codes were generated. As patterns began to

emerge, earlier assumptions and codings were reconsidered (Charmaz, 2006) and adjustments were made in light of the new understanding of the material (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/1999). When existing codes and text could not be linked, new codes were created, resulting in finer and finer levels of model granularity and density.

Axial coding. Eventually, no new codes emerged and attention shifted to axial coding to distill and simplify data as theoretical models emerged (Charmaz, 2006). Existing codes were rearranged, renamed, merged, eliminated, or disregarded. Initial validity is dependent upon the meaningfulness of the axes, or categories, that explain the data. In establishing this critical stage of theory development, the researcher must depend not only on the thought processes that lead to determining the axes of the study, but on semantic relationships within the models and their potential to support study, reflection, and relationships with existing theoretical models (Strauss, 1987).

Saturation. Saturation of categories constitutes the culmination of a grounded theory project (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/1999). Saturation is reached when no new codes emerge and the model become coherent and stable. This is the point at which theory can be said to be grounded in the data and defensible in the face of alternate explanations (Morse et al., 2002).

The Reflexive Journey

The primary investigator kept a reflexive journal to document experiences through the grounded theory process. The journal includes impressions from the data, decision rationales, and the interactions with the other investigators (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). The contents of this journal are integrated into the following narrative. Because the grounded theory development process is a personal recollection, we make a conscious shift at this point to a first-person narrative.

The corpus of documents used in this analysis represents all of the documents that were publicly available on the websites of the thirteen identified organizations during the last week of June, 2006. Initial coding continued for approximately one month. The task was to understand and to reflect on issues as they were presented by the organizations and their representatives and leaders. Atlas.ti software was used to collect and manipulate codes. Over 350 codes were compiled.

Axis 1: The Emerging Political Network

The first and most prevalent theme to emerge from the data was institutional coordination (125 codes). Typically, these references revolved around action steps towards organizational objectives, thus linking goals and ultimately mission to collaboration with one or more of the other organizations. The most pure representation of this theme is reflected in codings drawn from the Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE) website. CORE mission documents identify virtually all of the other organizations

in the study in some form of coordinated activity or partnership. In another case, federal legislation was circulated that included directives for providing support to service organizations across the spectrum to facilitate their ability to serve people with disabilities. A similar pattern among leaders of the organizations represented in the corpus was observed. There is a great deal of crosstalk for the purpose of collaboration. The institutional coordination code is embedded in editorials, mission statements, and policy statements throughout the corpus. It's prevalence across settings suggests that it is a central value. The concept is further articulated and illustrated through related codings that surfaced including knowledge sharing (100 codes), explicit/document-oriented forms of knowledge (90 codes), communication (77 codes), and lobbying (73 codes). In contrast, codes for competitive objectives, knowledge hoarding, or exclusive singular activities/objectives were so rare as to fail to develop into a recognizable theme.

At this point, I felt compelled to address a personal reaction to the juxtaposition of the issues of fragmentation identified in the literature and the publicly expressed unity of the corpus. Coming from a commercial business background, I am comfortable with the concept of competition in a zero-sum (Thurrow, 1980) game where the ultimate objective is to maximize market share at the expense of others; where alliances are temporary, strategic, and based on maximizing profit, not community values. I was prepared, perhaps even inclined, to find it in this study. The only example of this type of behavior came from a handful of documents discussing the ownership of intellectual property developed under federal grants or contracts. Particularly where missions overlap, the absence of overt conflict surprised me.

Comparative Policy Environment model (CPE) analysis. Resolving this paradox required the construction of a new, better articulated model. After considering different approaches to interpreting codes, I decided to adapt Comparative Policy Environment (CPE) model analysis (Braun & Guston, 2003; Hicks, 1995; Johansson, 2003; McCubbins & Shirk, 1989) for this purpose. In its full application, CPE is a six-step process derived from rational choice and agency theories (see Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1991; Olson, 1965; Palmer, 1995; Shugart, 1996). It is used to elucidate political and economic decision frameworks in international policy. The first three steps were sufficient for our analysis, inasmuch as the international aspect of the CPE is not relevant. The three initial steps of CPE analysis are (a) discerning who has the decision-making power, (b) evaluating the importance of the interests and values that shape the decision maker's choices, and (c) understanding how conflicting interests and values are reconciled (or not) in different kinds of bargaining situations (McCubbins & Shirk, 1989).

The ultimate decision maker (18 codes) is Congress (Sales, 2002). A focus on Washington is clear in the formal documents outlined in the corpus, in newsletters and position papers, and in the sites dedicated to the federal rehabilitation process: the Council of State Administrators of

Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), and the Veterans Administration (VA). The RSA and the VA serve in decision and allocation roles once funding has been authorized, but in the corpus of documents, lobbying to Congress is the activity that gets attention. As a body, Congress is subject to decisions by individual representatives and senators who have agency responsibilities within the legislature. Thus, an understanding of agency issues with respect to Congress as a whole and its subbodies is importantly derived from agency issues at the individual level (Cobb & Elder, 1975).

Evaluation of the interests and values of Congress was coded 34 times. This does not represent the degree to which it appeared in the corpus, only the saturation point. The corpus returns again and again to the values of full community inclusion, perhaps because they are fundamental ideals of the republic, but most certainly because they are the rationale behind the legislation that supports the profession. In one code, disability is cast as a natural and normal part of the human experience that cannot be used to diminish a person's right to fully participate in society. In another code, the policy goals of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are espoused: (a) equality of opportunity, (b) full participation, (c) independent living, and (d) economic self-sufficiency. However, the publication of these core values by rehabilitation counseling organizations does not constitute commitment by Congress and its agents. Campaign promises are negotiable after the election. The continued promotion of core values by representatives of the rehabilitation counseling profession is an act of advocacy meant to influence the aggregate work of Congress through its representatives. The history of legislation and court decisions (Melnick, 1989) are the artifacts of the professions' successes and compromises.

Political negotiation and bargaining (27 codes) take place in executive and legislative contexts at both federal and state levels. CPE codes center on the efforts of organizations to gain a forum of influence. Codings in this area include political presentations to congressional committees and political organizations. The rehabilitation community was represented in these presentations by a diverse group, including testimony by people with disabilities, service providers, and academics. Content covered regulatory monitoring issues and enabling legislation. With a strong message and a broad institutional approach, the rehabilitation counseling community knows how to effectively engage government entities in critical negotiations. This engagement is a skill learned through years of continuous political advocacy where rehabilitation organizations compete with other interests for limited resources in an adversarial and competitive federal policy arena (see Eyestone, 1976/1982).

The key to this success appears to be a well formed and directed nationwide issue network (see Berry, 1989; Shafritz, 1988) in which individuals and organizations coordinate action, share knowledge, communicate across boundaries, and lobby as a unified interest. This network is reflected in the corpus codings to this point. The rehabilita-

tion counseling community has demonstrated an ability to bring large numbers of people and organizations together for significant levels of political and economic support. How this came to be is of particular interest to this study and can provide insight into the issue of fragmentation.

In the review of the corpus, no statements were encountered that supported the idea of a diverse institutional environment comprised of many organizations with similar missions, with separate charters, and similar messages, yet such characteristics match those of the rehabilitation community. The CPE model points to this situation as having been socially constructed. Although diversification has not been documented as a political strategy, when faced with the realities of attracting the attention of Congress and bargaining effectively for financial and other forms of political support, organizational leaders have stopped short of actual merger in favor of collaboration as a technique to achieve political advantage over competing movements. ARCA and NRCA can attempt to merge, publish a combined newsletter entitled *With One Voice*, and work to consolidate their operations, but when faced with political realities of advocacy they fall back on what has served them well over the decades – many voices, many charters, many boards of directors, many membership drives, many conferences, but one message, that of inclusion for people with disabilities.

Schroeder (2005) referred to a situation in which legislation was under consideration involving activities in the Executive and Legislative Branches of government where the breadth of reach of the rehabilitation counseling community served to reverse legislation that was judged to be damaging to rehabilitation counseling as a profession and to outcomes for people with disabilities. Schroeder's narrative describes the rehabilitation counseling political issue network in action:

I talked with the [Congressional] committee staff. They said, yes, this is a done deal. The deal was cut in secret with the administration. The Congress and leadership was [sic.] on board. Forget it. It was going to happen . . . Well you did call and write. Many others did as well. On the 16th the full committee did not include the [unwanted parts of the bill]. Now staffers were saying it's going to go to the House next week. I'll spare you the civics lecture about how the House does business and open rule and closed rule, but they said it's a done deal. Tell people not to bother calling. So you started calling. Remember what happened in HR16-17? Mr. Goodling said he had many calls but they were all from rehab counselors and supervisors who were only protecting their own jobs. It was not enough that we called. Our constituents had to call. Well I will tell you I don't know why but our most vocal disability group out there typically is the blind. So by that Friday I got a call from a senior staff person in the house. She said call the blind off. She said we're not going to include [unwanted the bill]. It's dead and off the table. Call the blind off. Now it wasn't

just the blind. There was [sic.] a lot of us . . . But when consumers call up and say you're tampering with a program that changed my life and I don't want you to do it, that is hard to marginalize. So on Friday, they asked me to call the blind off. I said I'd do it to the extent that I can. But however many blind people beyond that I don't know. I called everyone I knew and said if you've called, call again. I did. Because people in Washington are dishonest. They are. I can't think of another way of saying it. I was afraid if the calls stopped coming, they might be able to go back to the key members and say well, there was a bit of furor but it's died down, we can go ahead. But if they're swamped now, let's get them more swamped. So it didn't go into the House bill. (pp. 13-15)

This is the most graphic illustration of unification that emerged from the corpus. Here we see shared value, diverse groups, and collaborative effort for common cause. Unification is most apparent in the face of an external threat.

Axis 2: The Emerging Practice Network

Line of business segment debate (28 codes) provided the central organizing theme of a second set of codes that arose from the data. There was less concurrence among stakeholders in this emerging axis regarding the service categories that rehabilitation counselors are – or ought to be – in. While they differed in the particulars, they all tended to define a large number of potential services with varying levels and areas of expertise. A CSAVR document listed sixteen different kinds of support services. A CRCC certification document listed just fewer than one hundred specific knowledge subdomains that rehabilitation counselors are expected to master. Other codes evolved with related practice themes including responsiveness to customers (55 codes), compliance – lines of business, (55 codes), professional preparation (35 codes), assessment (34 codes), research (32 codes), and primary line of business success (32 codes). These codes form a network of practitioners and practice unified through service but differentiated by professional identity in tasks and standards of performance.

Saturation and Synthesis

We have identified two network themes in the corpus representing two distinct practices (i.e., political advocacy and professional service). When the profession is threatened by the machinations of Congress, the network of rehabilitation organizations responds fast and decisively. The organizations act as information and command gateways that inform and mobilize their membership in a classic and efficient social networking strategy. Once informed, responses are coordinated across organizational boundaries with ease, united in a common cause. The large number of organizations makes them a formidable advocacy force because every individual organization is em-

powered through its membership and no group can be ignored. There is no loss of cohesion because that which differentiates the individual organizations is beside the point. The threat is external and aimed at the two things that unite them all: the politics of community inclusion for people with disabilities and funding at the highest level. From the political perspective, this is a unified community of practice.

There is less evidence of a unified community of practice in the service network. The practice network lacks the active, frequent, interdependent, and mutually beneficial transactions that defined the relationships between organizations in the political network. There was no equivalent recounting of community efforts in advancing the cause of service as was evinced in Schroeder's quote. The emphasis is on the inter-organizational rather than the intra-organizational relationships. The boundaries appear to be rather insular between service groups. This is suggestive of transactional fragmentation.

While these network themes are functionally distinct, they are interdependent. Political advocacy provides the resources and legislative space for professional service. Professional service provides the rationale for advocacy through its results. Fragmentation in one impacts the other. Fragmentation is *de facto* inefficiency and practice is diminished in its presence. Where practice is diminished the argument for advocacy is diminished as well. Thus the pursuit of service excellence is a political necessity. A unified network is a best practice, and in a time of contracting resources and growing competition, the best argument for professional legitimacy.

Conclusion

We can point to what might be called fragmentation, such as the splintering of professional organizations representing rehabilitation counselors, and rightfully call it a crisis of identity. But without a clear definition of terms and an understanding of how it is expressed in the field, we cannot study the phenomenon. We cannot know if it is cause or consequence. We cannot respond strategically. We cannot measure the effect of our interventions. Without the discipline of science, we could actually cause more harm than good in our attempts to collapse identities within the professional community.

Based on grounded theory analysis of vocational rehabilitation organizations, we have found unity of political purpose among these organizations. There was evidence of fragmentation, but in service delivery, not political and social identity. These are findings that warrant reflection and additional study. The time has come to turn our science on ourselves and to resolve our professional identity crisis by making a study of our own behavior. This grounded theory research has begun the process by observing how the community of vocational rehabilitation organizations communicates and by identifying and defining structures in the process. We have made progress toward

turning fragmentation and unification into legitimate terms of art. It falls to future research to explore their agency.

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