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, Mpofu, 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.

Anecdotally, it is obvious that the profession is challenged by external events. It is also apparent that current 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. This is a means of unification that articu- lates identity through the creation of new groups. For ex- ample, the National Association of Multicultural Rehabilitation Counselors emerged from the Na- tional Rehabilitation Association (itself a subgroup in the professional community) because people of color did not feel that their voices were properly heard or represented. NAMRCC itself is another legitimate institution and now provides added value to the parent organization through its collaborative efforts. Unification is advanced precisely because of the 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 fragmenta- tion occurs when subgroups do not share the same purpose. Transactional fragmentation occurs when subgroups do not effectively participate in community. We can imagine ex- amples for each. There is an ethical fault line between the fundamental values of state and worker compensation sys- tems. There is no discernible organizational difference between the Vocational Education and Work Adjustment Association (VEWAA) and the Vocational Education and Career Adjustment Professionals (VECAP). The discon- nect between research and practice is evidenced through the lack of a body of evidence. Unification, thus defined, is a larger, more systemic phenomenon than initially conceived.

To move unification and fragmentation from tenta- tive 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 communica- tions (see Charmaz, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Glaser, 2001). The construct is established through a dia- logue that involves understanding. The purpose of this grounded theory research was to explore the re- lationships between organizations and let their words dictate the deeper meanings of the terms.

Methodology

Grounded theory is a constructivist approach to re- search ( Hunt, 1997; Philips, 1997) that allows investiga- tors 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 phe- nomenon is poorly understood and in need of rich descrip- tion (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 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 re- habilitation counseling organizations (see Table 1). The or- ganizations in the study were chosen not as an exhaustive set, but as a core group of organizations whose communica- tion would appropriately reflect their histories and current interests. Frameworks that emerged from the data, decision rationales, and the interactions with the other investigators (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). The framework is an integrated part of 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 interviews used in this analysis repre- sent all of the documents that were publicly available on the websites of the thirteen identified organizations during the last quarter of 1996. The coding process lasted for ap- proximately one month. The task was to understand and to reflect on issues as they were presented by the organiza- tions and to represent the process as a whole. In short, it was used to collect and manipulate codes. Over 350 codes were compiled.

Axi 1: The Emerging Political Network

The first and most prevalent theme to emerge from the data was one related to the process in organizational decision-making (152 codes). Typical- ly, these references revolved around action steps to- wards organizational objectives, thus linking goals and ultimately mission. However, the context of this theme is reflected in codes drawn from the Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE) website. CORE mission represents the primary theme that emerged from each of the other organizations in the study in some form of coordinated activity or partnership. In another case, federal legislation was circulated that included changes to the program review process. Some specific actions across the spectrum to facilitate their ability to serve people with disabilities. A similar pattern among leaders of the organizations represented in the corpus suggests that it is a central value. The concept is further articu- lated and illustrated through related codes that surfaced within the text. The organic, implicit, and explicit-oriented forms of knowledge (90 codes), communica- tion (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 emerging theme of fragmentation identified in the literature and the publicly expressed unity of the corpus. Coming from a commercial business back- ground, I am more comfortable with the concept of competitive and explicit-oriented forms of knowledge (90 codes), communica- tion (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.

Comparative Policy Environment model (CPE) analysis. Resolving this paradox required the construction of a new, better articulated model. After considering differ- ent approaches to interpreting codes, I decided to adopt a Comparative Policy Environment (CPE) model analysis (Braun & Guston, 2003; Hicks, 1995; Johnston & McCubbins, 1995). In its full ap- plication, CPE is a six-step process derived from rational choice and agency theories (see Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1995). The first step was to identify current legislation that lead to elucidate political and economic decision frameworks in international policy. The first three steps were sufficient for the further developed a constructivist model. However, 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 drive the policy process, and (c) determining how conflicting interests and values are reconciled (or not) in different kinds of bargaining situations (McCubbins & Shirk, 1987).

The ultimate decision maker (18 codes) is Con- gress (Sales, 2002). A focus on Washington is clear in the formal documents outlined in the corpus, in news position papers, and in the sites dedicated to the federal re- habilitation process: the Council of State Administrators of
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 that, it is hard to justify. Sometimes, when 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 consider. Sometimes, 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 we're swamped now, it's better to drown them off, and then they go back and ask for 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.

Axi s 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 codes in this line of the code dictionary compared to the categories that rehabilitation counselors are—ought to be—in. While they differed in the particulars, in the last three lines of campaign statements, they were nominally equivalent in level and areas of expertise. A CARC document listed sixteen different kinds of support services. A CRC certification document listed just fewer than one hundred specific knowledge areas that rehabilitation counselors are expected to master. Other codes evolved with related practice themes including responsiveness to customers (55 codes), leadership (44 codes), community (30 codes), medical (11 codes), and professional (30 codes), assessment (34 codes), research (32 codes), and primary line of business success (32 codes). These codes form a network of professional 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 to the House. They call their members, they call the House. Each of these organizations makes them formidable advocacy force because every individual organization is empowered 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 for the CARC. These network themes are functional and not constituency based, on the active, frequent, interdependent, and mutually beneficial transactions that define the relationships between organizations in the political network. There was an equivalent reassertion of community efforts in advancing the cause of service as was evinced in Schroeder's quote. The emphasis is on the intra-organizational rather than the inter-organizational relationships. The boundaries appear to be rather insular between service groups. This is suggestive of transactional fragmentation.

Conclusion

We can point to what might be called fragmentation, such as the splintering of professional organizations representing rehabilitation professionals. 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 caused by factors in the external environment or by internal dynamics. We cannot measure the effect of our interventions. Without the discipline of science, we could actually cause more harm than good as we continue to collapse identities within the professional community.

Based on grounded theory analysis of vocational rehabilitation organizations, we have found unity of political advocacy and professional service. 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 caused by factors in the external environment or by internal dynamics. We cannot measure the effect of our interventions. Without the discipline of science, we could actually cause more harm than good as we continue to collapse identities within the professional community.
turning fragmentation and unification into legitimate terms of art. It falls to future research to explore their agency.

References


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