

The Dynamics of Race and Identity in Vocational Rehabilitation Settings: A Systematic Comparison of Closure Rates Among Blacks and Whites

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By every measure including employment rates, occupational standing, and wage rates, the labor market status of racial minorities has deteriorated relative to whites . . . Not only are minorities twice as likely as whites to be unemployed, they are more likely to work in dead-end jobs. (Zinn & Eitzen, 1998, pp. 235-236)

There are two major socioeconomic shifts in the U.S. that have an implicit effect on cross-cultural interactions in the workplace and are a direct commentary upon the intersection between federal policy and "negotiated identities" (Jackson, 1999; Wilson, Jackson, & Doughty, 1999). These shifts are President Clinton's "welfare to work" program and U. S. demographic alterations. Clinton's "welfare to work" program has countered the public sentiment that there are unemployable citizens (Pavetti & Wemmerus, 1999; Solomon, Bassuk, & Brooks, 1996).

With the activation of the federal welfare reform legislation initiated on August 22, 1996 (the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996), the government has called for a nationwide transformation of welfare assistance for impoverished families. While this may lower the overall national welfare caseload over the next five years, it has many implications for U. S. Americans either going to work for the first time or returning to work after a government-supported hiatus. This metamorphosis significantly alters the workplace and leaves two major alternatives for U. S. Americans attempting to move from welfare to work: Either try to enter the workforce as unskilled and untrained communicators without proper skills or search for vocational rehabilitation or vocational training outlets to enhance skills and work-readiness (Wilson, 1999b).

Given these alternatives, it would make sense to expand the amount of resources currently placed in vocational rehabilitation programs to facilitate the transition and offer skills training and career counseling for long-term employment. Although this seems plausible, there has been little to no

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consideration for how race and culture function as mediating variables of human interaction and overall employment success. The question this study seeks to establish a foundation to question whether communicated cultural identities and social status (related to race) factors influence outcomes of rehabilitation training and workplace success (Amason, Allen, & Holmes, 1999).

Specifically, we compare closure rates of White and Black vocational rehabilitation clientele. Closure refers to the completion of services, whether successfully or unsuccessfully. Unsuccessful completion can mean premature termination due to such factors as lack of transportation. Successful closure is a term designated for those who are effectively rehabilitated; and consequently have been employed for at least 60 days (RSA, 1995). Closure rates are a major indicator of social support and treatment in VR service environments. They foretell who will be well equipped to find employment. One of the most obvious ironies of the labor industry is that people who have never worked, who have disabilities (mental or physical), or are legal aliens are being forced to seek job training and yet they are infrequently closed successfully (Wilson, Jackson, & Doughty, 1999).

The second of the two major socioeconomic shifts in the U. S. mentioned earlier is demographics. The U.S. population is faced with a significant demographic shift in racial and ethnic composition. By 2010, approximately one third of the populace will be people of color. Furthermore, by the year 2040, 50% of the populace is projected to be people of color. As expected, a normal increase in the labor force will also translate to mean more people of color in the workforce (U.S. Department of Labor, 1987; Fullerton, 1999). While it appears that we should celebrate this expansion, it could mean increased discrimination toward minorities in every area of employment from vocational rehabilitation programs to retirement.

This is compounded by Zinn and Eitzen's (1998) study, which reported that "race alone is significant because white job applicants continue to be disproportionately chosen over equally qualified minority ones" (p. 235). Racial discrimination in employment affects all minority applicants. As the racial minority population expands, so does the population of those with disabilities. Moreover, among people with mental and physical disabilities (Ficke, 1992), minorities are represented in greater numbers than non-minorities (Marshall, 1987). As a result, the vocational rehabilitation (VR) system is more likely to see an increased number of people of color seeking VR services than in previous years. Obtaining gainful employment is only half of the struggle. A study completed by Amason et al. (1999) suggests that in the absence of emotional social support from persons in positions of guidance and leadership, minorities tend to be more stressed, less successful, have poor job satisfaction and security, and have a lowered sense of self-worth or self-efficacy. Consequently, groups marginalized by race tend to be affected by employment circumstances, and by extension, so are their identities.

Defining Vocational Rehabilitation Terms

There are four common closure statuses in vocational rehabilitation: 08 (closed not accepted for VR services), 28 (closed for other reasons after the initiation

of the Individual Plan for Employment [IPE]), 30 (closed other reasons before the IPE), and 26 (successfully rehabilitated). One of the first studies investigating closure statuses by race was completed by Ross and Biggi (1986). They reported "whites show a higher trend towards closed rehabilitated" (p. 44) when compared with their non-white counterparts. Because Ross and Biggi reported only proportional differences, it was not clear, whether these differences were statistically significant or not.

Landmark Studies of Race and Closure Status

Herbert and Martinez (1992) sought to determine if the ethnicity Anglo (White) and non-Anglo (Black) of vocational rehabilitation customers would differ based on case service outcomes. "Significant difference in service outcomes between non-Anglo and Anglo groups were found across the four closure Statuses" (Herbert & Martinez, 1992, p. 11). Specifically, Herbert and Martinez concluded that "on the basis of the data, it seems that persons of color as a group, are more likely to be found ineligible for services and less likely to be successfully rehabilitated than Anglo clients" (p. 12). Additionally, they reported that among the four groups (Anglo, Black, White Hispanic, Black Hispanic and Asian Pacific Islander), Anglo customers were always found to have a higher acceptance rate when compared to their counterparts in the investigation.

As Herbert and Martinez's (1992) study suggests, European Americans tend to be closed successfully rehabilitated (status 26), whereas, African Americans tend to be closed ineligible for VR services (status 08). In 1995, Feist-Price was one of the last studies to examine closure Statuses (08, 26, 28 and 30) among African Americans and European Americans from a large southeastern state. She reported that "a statistically significant proportion of cases of European Americans as compared with cases of African Americans were closed more often in competitive employment" (p. 124). In addition, she reported that African Americans were more likely to have their cases closed for reasons other than being successfully rehabilitated, which included not being eligible for VR services (Status 08). There is a noticeable pattern here, in that African Americans were proportionally more likely to be closed in statuses other than successful rehabilitated. In comparison, European Americans were more likely to be closed successfully rehabilitated (status 26).

There have been several research teams that investigated VR acceptance looking only at closure status 08 (Atkins & Wright, 1980; Wheaton, 1995; Wilson, 1999b). However, there have been fewer researchers to investigate closure statuses 08, 26, 28, and 30 by race (Wilson et al., 1999), and almost none that explicitly make mention of cultural identity negotiation as a component of rehabilitation success. In this regard, this study attempts to provide new information on which closure statuses (08, 26, 28, and 30) African Americans and European Americans are more likely to have when seeking VR services from a midwestern state.

In this study we make the argument that the closure status of Blacks seeking vocational rehabilitation is closely tied to informational social support, employment success, and identity negotiation. House (1981) identifies informational social support as helpful advice that facilitates knowledge and

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understanding of resources and "tools" necessary to obtain gainful employment. Consequently, we are proposing an additional category labeled "cultural support" to refer to the acknowledgment and valuation of cultural difference that impacts how human interactants see the world. That support can make the difference between a successful career and positive outlook beginning with successful closure as opposed to an externally placed locus of control that leads to lowered self-efficacy and self-worth and begins with unsuccessful closure. First, we offer a brief explanation as to the methods of the study. The second part of our article explores the potential impact of several communication-related concepts to our findings.

Method

Research Questions

This study set out to answer the following two research questions:

- RQ1: Is there a difference in closure statuses between African Americans and European Americans in the vocational rehabilitation system?
- RQ2: Is there a difference in educational status between African Americans and European Americans who enter the vocational rehabilitation system?

Data Collection

The study relied on archival data available through a mid-western state. In order to reduce coding errors, the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) utilized 18 cross checks (RSA, 1995). The data conformed to coding procedures of the RSA-911 federal guidelines established by RSA in 1995. However, in any large archival data set the potential exists for miscoding. We assumed that these errors were randomly distributed and examined descriptive statistics for outliers and suspicious patterns. None were discovered.

Sample

The sampling frame included 62,178 customers who sought services from the state/federal vocational rehabilitation agency in a large midwestern state. The subsample included of 42,574 African Americans and European Americans who sought VR services from October 1, 1995, through September 30, 1996. The final subsample included 17,466 African Americans and European Americans customers who did not have missing values on the variables under investigation (race and closure status). Because of the low numbers of Latino and Native Americans in the database (less than one percent of the total population), these groups were excluded from the final subsample.

Variables

Racial status. Race served as the categorical explanatory variable with two levels (African American or European American) as reported by customers on their application for VR services. The authors excluded Asian Americans and Native Americans because of inadequate sample sizes. No category existed for multiracial designations.

Table 1

Closure Status by Racial Group

	Closure Status							
	Status 08		Status 26		Status 28		Status 30	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
African Americans	818	21.0	878	22.5	984	25.3	1,162	29.8
European Americans	2,642	19.5	4,216	31.1	3,091	22.8	3,471	25.6
Total	3,460	19.8	5,094	29.2	4,075	23.3	4,633	26.5

Note: (χ^2 , $n=17,466$)=109.28; $p < .001$; Cramer's $V=.079$. Status 08 = closed and not accepted for VR services. Status 26 = successfully rehabilitated. Status 28 = accepted for VR services, but closed unsuccessfully after the initiation of the Individual Plan for Employment (IPE). Status 30 = accepted for VR services, closed unsuccessfully prior to the development of the IPE.

There was also a small but statistically significant association (.08) between race and closure status as well. African Americans were more likely to be closed in statuses 08 (closed not accepted for VR services), 28 (closed for other reasons after the initiation of the Individual Plan for Employment [IPE]), and 30 (closed other reasons before the IPE), whereas, European Americans are more likely to be closed in status 26 (successful rehabilitated). A pattern appears to surface as African Americans with disabilities tend to be closed in the unrehabilitated statuses (08, 28, and 30). Whereas, European Americans with disabilities are more likely to be closed in the rehabilitated closure status (Status 26). It is also evident from the past literature that African Americans are proportionally found ineligible for VR services (Status 08) when researchers include race and closure statuses in their statistical analysis.

Discussion of Implications

Accessibility, cultural orientation, and communication competence are principal concerns in the VR context, and in many human relationships within the workplace. In an effort to understand the growing employment trends as well as the needs and the influence they have on minorities in the workplace, the present study compares current VR service delivery for Blacks and Whites and discusses its implications.

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Accessibility

Alston and Bell (1996) contend that accessibility is a concern of both the federal government and VR customers who have a disability. The accessibility and equity of rehabilitation services offered to African Americans have been identified as priorities in Section 21 of the 1993 amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The inclusion of emphases for ethnic minorities in federal rehabilitation legislation is warranted given the disproportionate number of minorities with disabilities in relation to their overall representation in the general population (Wilson et al., 1999).

It appears that minorities with disabilities face the double challenge of having to contend with discrimination on the basis of both their disability and minority status (Wright & Leung, 1993). Historically, minority access to resources has been limited and continues to be challenging when minority status is associated with disability status. Vocational rehabilitation outcome discrepancies are clearly reflected in the comparisons between the types of services received by African Americans and European Americans, respectively.

The top three services African Americans are likely to receive as demonstrated by the present study and others are: (a) maintenance (Atkins & Wright, 1980; Wheaton, Finch, Wilson, & Granello, 1997; Wheaton, Wilson, & Brown, 1996); (b) transportation (Belgrave & Walker, 1991; Brown, 1993; Wheaton et al., 1997; Wheaton et al., 1996); and (c) adjustment training (Atkins & Wright, 1980; Spitznagel & Saxon, 1995; Wheaton et al., 1997; Wheaton et al., 1996). The top three services European Americans are likely to receive as demonstrated by the present study and the review of literature are: (a) diagnostic (Wheaton et al., 1997); (b) college training (Atkins and Wright, 1980; Feist-Price, 1995; Peterson, 1996; Wheaton et al., 1997), and (c) physical and mental restoration (Feist-Price, 1995; Wheaton et al., 1997; Wheaton et al., 1996). Several studies reported that European Americans are more likely to receive business/vocational and on-the-job training, than Blacks (Atkins & Wright, 1980; Feist-Price, 1995; Peterson, 1996; Spitznagel & Saxon, 1995). Naturally, this enhances White VR clients' credentials and employability, while preparing them for the workforce much better than their Black counterparts who rarely receive college or vocational referrals from their VR counselors. The differences in salary and hours worked (see Wilson, 1999a), employment mobility, and overall achievement in the workplace begins with access.

Cultural Orientation

As previously noted, Blacks are at a greater disadvantage than Whites with regards to potential biases for receiving services. It is no secret that Blacks also bring a different set of expectations and cultural orientations to human interaction settings. Several researchers have found that identities tend to be negotiated within interactions with others (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; Jackson, 1999; Orbe, 1996). The VR contexts only serve to reinforce these differences and identity negotiations between Blacks and Whites. This point is best illustrated by Geert Hofstede (1980), who is responsible for introducing

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the individualism-collectivism construct to explain cultural differences. His research goal was to identify work-related values as observed cross-culturally at a multinational corporation. This company had chains in over forty countries with over one hundred thousand employees. He reported clear distinctions in the organizational and cultural behavior of the diverse personnel. Particularly, this behavior reflected that representatives of individualistic cultures (such as Whites/European Americans) tend to be primarily preoccupied with autonomy, independence, and competition. In comparison, representatives of collectivistic cultures (such as Blacks/African Americans) would accent connectedness, relational harmony and group success. The result was that managers and organizational leaders were least successful in collectivistic settings when individualistic values were assumed and enacted. To extend this to the VR context, if an individualistic VR counselor wants to achieve the greatest success with a collectivistic client, then she must be willing to accent the relationship over the end objective, which, in this case, is to procure or maintain employment. If the relationship is undermined, disregarded or fragmented at any time, the chances of successful completion of VR service delivery (e.g., successful closure) is lessened significantly. It is critical that cultural orientation is factored into counselor training, closure success and overall cross-cultural counselor-client interaction. We strongly suggest that cultural orientation may explain differences in VR outcomes between Blacks and Whites who seek services.

Communication Competence

It would seem that regardless of access and culture, people can still be successful if they are motivated to succeed. According to O'Hair, Friedrich, Wieman and Wieman (1997), in order for two or more people to achieve a mutually satisfying relationship, they must construct appropriate and effective messages. That involves behavioral flexibility, interaction management, expressiveness, empathy, altercentrism and often times nonverbal immediacy skills (Spitzberg & Hecht, 1984). Ultimately, as Gudykunst and Kim (1984) suggest, effective and competent communication minimizes misunderstandings and promotes relational satisfaction. So, motivation alone is significant, but insufficient if communicative skills and knowledge are absent. Communication competence makes no difference whether it is the VR counselor or client; if one of the two is lacking in communication skills, knowledge and/or motivation, the closure outcome is likely to result in a negative sequel for the dyad.

In addition, communication competence must be mutual and relational (Spitzberg & Hecht, 1984). It is least effective when one expects the other to completely converge to his/her worldview or means of understanding. As Smith (1998) suggests in her explanation of intercultural communication competence, people have multiple identities in operation within any given context. These identities are negotiated within interactions with others. Within any service-related episode, identities (e.g., the perceived self-definitions, identifications and values) are negotiated, reproduced or maintained. It is this movement in identities that shifts the foundation of the

relationship and influences the outcome and positive possibilities for all involved in a particular interaction.

As revealed in the present investigation, African Americans are statistically more likely to be closed ineligible for VR services (status 08), closed for other reasons after the initiation of the Individual Plan for Employment [IPE] (status 28), and closed for other reasons before the initiation of the IPE (status 30). In comparison, European Americans are statistically more likely to be closed successful rehabilitated/closed (status 26). There could be a possible communication problem between the VR counselor and customer as Herbert and Martinez (1992) suggested back in 1992, in which, "if client values are ignored or misunderstood by the counselor, it is possible that person of color may be denied service" (p. 13). Herbert and Martinez maintain that race is a significant feature in employment settings: "[A]s a result of racism, persons of color have experienced numerous occasions when condescending, ignorant, or indifferent attitudes have played a prominent role in how social interaction evolves" (p. 13).

Conclusion & Implications for Future Research and Practice

Because most of the previous research looking at VR closure statuses did not used multivariate analysis to investigate VR outcomes between African Americans and European Americans, it is recommended that future researchers consider the use of multivariate techniques to account for some of the unexplained variance that is typically not reported in many univariate statistical techniques. Although not investigated, type of disability and age may have influenced the results of the present investigation. Type of disability, age, and education could be controlled to weed out variables with a substantial correlation with VR closure status. Statistically controlling explanatory variables in a regression equation is another way to only account for those variables of interest in an investigation.

Pragmatic Utility of This Study

Our exploratory discussion of the findings presented here is primarily concerned with altering how marginalized group members are vocationally counseled and rehabilitated. In the 1970s, African American members of the American Psychological Association decided that they would no longer accept universalized models for managing cultural particularity among clientele. Their efforts led to what became known as "Black liberation psychology" – a movement designed to accent and value difference rather than treating it as an anathema. Likewise, this study, and others like it, is insurgent in principle and liberatory in practice. If properly understood, this study may contribute to increased counselor training on diversity, increased success in closure statuses among Blacks, higher job satisfaction and self-efficacy and as a direct consequence, a higher number of qualified Blacks entering the labor force in upwardly mobile positions of employment. Race, gender, age, and disability do matter. These characteristics are visible and subject to discrimination. The more that we know about them and how they have been socially constructed in ways that function to isolate rather than connect, hinder rather than help, the better we are able to manage unfair outcomes.

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