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The Art of Managing Expectations: Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors as Mediators of Expectations between Clients who are Deaf and Potential Employers

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Cover Page Footnote

The goal of the vocational rehabilitation (VR) process, from a public agency perspective, is to facilitate successful employment outcomes for clients who may not otherwise have access to opportunities for training and job placements (Elliott & Leung, 2005). For individuals who are deaf[i], VR services include services similar to those provided to other clients[ii], such as tuition support, developing relationships with employers, and/or career counseling (Buys & Rennie, 2001; Stewart, Law, Young, Forhan, Healy, Burke-Gaffney et al., 2014). Yet individuals who are deaf often face negative attitudinal barriers, are given limited opportunities for full communication access, and are often under-employed as a result of their level of training and experience (Cawthon & RES team, 2012; Houston, Lammers, & Svorny, 2010; Lindsay, McDougall, Menna-Dack, Sanford, & Adams, 2014). In many cases, advances in technology have created pathways for successful employment not previously available. However, shifts in the types of jobs that will support independent living and a continued competitive job market have resulted in an even greater need for VR services that promote successful and sustainable employment outcomes for deaf individuals (McCrone, 2011).

VR has made strong strides towards supporting job placement and career development among deaf individuals. In an analysis of data from over 11,000 deaf individuals who received services ending in 2012, Walls & Dowler (2014) found that deaf individuals had the highest proportion of successful case closures. Furthermore, deaf clients who received services earned more than double the annual salary of those who did not receive services, albeit still only to an average income of $25,000 a year. Benefits of VR services extend to individuals who are deaf and are enrolled in college or university; these "contributing services" include job placement, rehabilitation technology, and job search assistance (Boutin & Wilson, 2008). However, there are differences in receipt of services related to gender that are not accounted for by level of

education or degree of preparation; men appear to receive greater levels of job placement services than women (Bradley, Ebener, & Geyer, 2013; Mohr et al., 2000). This gender discrepancy is consistent with findings from Moore (2002), in which women were three times more likely to be homemakers at case closure, and the average salary for men was significantly higher than that of women.

Because of the complex nature of the VR process, professionals in the VR field must balance the needs and expectations of multiple parties. For any given case, a VR counselor (VRC) may be working to satisfy the needs and expectations of, at a minimum: (a) the client and his/her family, (b) his/her supervisor and colleagues, (c) the employer, (d) themselves, and (e) state and federal mandates. In some cases, issues related to non-closure or under-employment can be attributed to differences in expectations related to behaviors or outcomes. For example, Rosengreen, Saladin, and Hansmann (2009) discussed a severe mismatch between the types of issues that employers saw as critical to job success, and those of the deaf employee. This mismatch may be based on different cultural norms about how expectations are shared, or anxiety over what is required to be a successful site (from the employee's perspective) or worker (from the deaf individual's perspective). When communication access is already compromised, deaf individuals may not have the opportunity to learn about the nuances of employer expectations, nor to practice sharing their own within an employment context.

In the growing research investigating factors that influence placement and case closures for individuals who are deaf, there is a strong, although often unarticulated, emphasis on the VRC's role in managing expectations across participants. This paper delves further into this concept of managing expectations, from the VRC's perspective as guided by the lens of the Expectation Confirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980). The Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT)

is an applied cognitive theory that examines the role of expectation in later satisfaction with a product or experience. This theory originally drew from research on customer satisfaction as well as applied and social psychology. Viewed in the context of VR, this model is used to provide a framework for analyzing the ways in which VRCs approach managing expectations when they have clients who are deaf.

ECT Components and Vocational Rehabilitation Process

ECT is built upon four components: Expectations, Perceived Performance, Disconfirmation of Beliefs, and Satisfaction. Although not all components will be directly addressed in this analysis, it is important to understand the overall context of this theory in applying it to the VR context. The reader is referred to Figure 1 to help guide the connection between ECT and its application in this study.

The *Expectations* component refers to the outcomes, characteristics, or behaviors that one anticipates as he or she enter into a process. These views may come directly from an individual's prior experience, or from information gained from family, peers, or colleagues. It is assumed here that clients, VRCs, and potential employers have some shared, but also some divergent, expectations about the VR job placement process and outcomes. This model also assumes that expectations flow in multiple directions (Figure 1). This illustration represents three chief entities: the client, the VRC, and the employer, and depicts expectations that the client has directly of the VRC and the employer. The figure also depicts expectations that the client has of the employer *through* the VRC, or as mediated by that relationship. This same dynamic is represented in the figure for the employer to the client, also both direct and mediated by the VRC. The mediated expectations should be seen as including the VRCs' own expectations for

both parties, and, although not illustrated here, for themselves. Both conceptually and chronologically, the trajectory of the VR process is influenced by the expectations of all parties.

The *Perceived Performance* component of ECT is one's activity or contribution to the process or outcome. Perceived Performance is most closely connected with an actual activity, which in VR can take on a range of definitions depending on the types of services included. For example, one could make a judgment about the quality of the communication between the client and the VRC, which may vary depending on the language modality and proficiency of an interpreter if utilized. Although a default position might indicate that Perceived Performance resides only within the VRC as provider of services, in reality it is actualized across all components of the study model in Figure 1. Clients also "perform," or contribute, to the VR placement process, as do employers in their hiring practices, mentorship, and supervision of new employees. The directional arrows in Figure 1 used to illustrate Expectations are applicable to Perceived Performance.
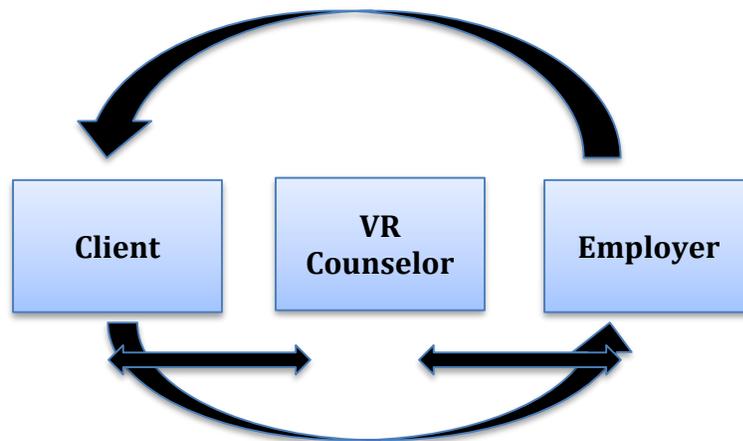

Figure 1. Directional relationship of components of Expectation Confirmation Theory for clients, VR counselors, and potential employers.

Disconfirmation of Beliefs is the third component of the ECT framework, one that plays a meditational role across each of the other three. Disconfirmation of Beliefs refers to how much the Perceived Performance matches up to the incoming Expectations about a product or process. If a client enters the VR process with very low expectations, and then sees the VRC and employer working collaboratively and effectively towards a successful outcome, the Disconfirmation of Beliefs is a positive one and should result in greater client satisfaction with the process. On the other hand, if the Perceived Performance is lower than the initial expectations, even if those initial expectations were unreasonably high, the result is a negative Disconfirmation of Beliefs. Disconfirmation of Beliefs is thus affected by both the Expectations and Perceptions of Performance, and can occur in each of the proposed relationships illustrated in Figure 1.

In ECT within a business setting, *Satisfaction* is the primary outcome of interest, where the consumer is pleased with a purchase, service, or product. The ECT model posits that the level of Satisfaction is influenced by both the Perception of Performance (e.g., was the activity of low or high quality?) and the Disconfirmation of Beliefs (e.g., were my Expectations exceeded, met, or not met?). Within VR, however, the outcome of interest is more nuanced than the consumer simply being content with the process. Satisfaction resides within all three entities in Figure 1, but may have both short-term and long-term manifestations. Second, in addition to considerations that relate to federal and state guidelines for compliance, thinking about Satisfaction may include a more in-depth critique of the process, emphasizing not only "what is working?" and "why did that work?", but also "what needs to be improved to optimize success?" Since much of the research, including the current study, is retrospective in nature and from the

VRC perspective, Satisfaction is related to VRCs' reflections and views on the VR process with their deaf clients and potential employers.

Methods

The focus of this study was on VR professionals' views of the role that expectations played in the VR experiences of clients who are deaf. More specifically, this analysis was guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What factors do VRCs see as important in understanding the VR placement process for deaf clients and potential employers?

Research Question 2: What is the role of VRCs in managing the expectations of clients and employers within the VR process with deaf individuals?

Study Design

This qualitative study focused on gathering information from VRCs with experience working with deaf clients.

Instrument development. Interview questions were drafted, reviewed by an expert panel of current and former VRCs, and piloted for feedback before development of the final interview questions. Interview questions were semi-structured and organized around broad topics including agency structure and procedures, experience with deaf and hard of hearing individuals, professional development, and accommodations or services. Interview topics were also guided by a larger needs assessment undertaken by the research team; a list of finalized semi-structured interview questions is in Appendix A. Interviews were flexible in that interviewers were encouraged to explore issues as they arose within the interviews and to follow up with additional communication (such as via email) where necessary for clarity.

Participants

Sample. A total of 10 VRCs with a diverse range of experiences (e.g., working with deaf clients with additional disabilities, transitioning youth, and advocacy) participated in this study. To maintain confidentiality, individual participant demographic information is not reported here; instead, it is provided in summary form. VRC participants included two men and eight women, and individuals who were deaf, as well as those who were hearing. Eight of the 10 interviewees had at least five years of experience in VR, with the majority holding over 15 years of experience in VR or a related field. Participants worked in nine states across the country (two in Maryland) including states in the west, midwest, northeast and southeast regions. Participants served in varying capacities as statewide coordinators for the deaf and hard of hearing, transition specialists, and current VRCs.

Procedure. Individuals were interviewed either in person or through web-based video software. Although an effort was made to match the preferred communication modalities of interviewer and interviewee (e.g., speaking interviewer with a speaking interviewee or signing interviewer with a signing interviewee), this was not always possible. In these cases, an interpreter mediated communication between the researcher and the interviewee. All sessions were recorded using audio or video and transcribed by the interviewer. If a video interview was conducted in American Sign Language (ASL), a native ASL user transcribed the video into written English. In the case of a mediated interview session, the audio recording was transcribed. The finished transcripts were distributed to the study participants to double-check content and provide additional clarity to participant responses. Member checking was completed with the participants themselves as well as with three professionals with experiences in public rehabilitation services to provide an additional check to researcher bias.

Data Preparation and Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed as they were collected. This method of analysis is known as the constant comparison method, which allows for a continuous and evolutionary understanding of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data analysis and coding occurred in two phases: exploration and confirmatory analyses. In exploratory research, the researcher often begins with no fixed framework for organizing the information and only ends after achieving "crystallization" (Fetterman, 1989). This point in the study, when the detailed exploratory analyses form a coherent whole, can then lead the confirmatory analysis.

For the exploration phase of analysis, this project utilized grounded theory technique according to the Strauss & Corbin (1990) approach. The aim of grounded theory methodology is to understand and establish plausible relationships among patterns between various types of social units ("actors"). This process identified several main themes that arose from the data, including the focus of this paper: Managing Expectations. Once the theme of "Managing Expectations" was identified from the initial exploratory phase, analysis moved to the confirmatory phase (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Throughout both phases of this project, this study utilized three different types of coding processes: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Results

Study participants responded to the interview questions with a broad range of examples and experiences. The following discussion focuses on key themes that related to both research questions that guided this analysis: What factors do VRCs see as important in understanding the VR placement process for deaf clients and potential employers? What is the role of VRCs in managing the expectations of clients and employers within the VR process with deaf

individuals? The discussion section then synthesizes the results in relation to the ECT as well as the overall goals of VR process for individuals who are deaf.

Communication as a Vehicle

The first theme that arose in this analysis, and across the entire project, was the foundational role of effective communication in a successful placement process and outcome for individuals who are deaf. The VRCs in this study conceptualized effective communication and its impact on the process in a number of ways. The first is what one might categorize as "accessibility": does the client have access to the information from the persons within VR or the workplace, and vice versa? Sometimes this is achieved via direct communication between parties, other times with the assistance of technology or an interpreter, or both.

Effective communication was also characterized as part of how VRCs began the dialog surrounding client expectations. For example, one interviewee said, "If there's a communication breakdown then you can't develop the relationship that's damaged. You can't communicate continually and you can't get clarification. Then you can't meet the client's needs." This recognition that communication needs to happen deeper than at a surface level may be why several interviewees emphasized the need for access in the client's *preferred* language modality. If the client can function orally (voices for himself and can read lips) but would prefer to use ASL, the preference for ASL is honored within the client-counselor relationship. This open communication may have an impact on the success of the process, because, as another interviewee said, "If the client has clear communication and they understand you well, they are more likely to follow through and work with you." The VRCs recognized the role that quality of communication played in the development of a positive relationship between the client and VR.

Previous challenges surrounding access has led, in some states, to the creation of more formalized rules surrounding language and communication with clients who are deaf. Although effective communication is essential for all VR clients, when there is a language modality difference between the client and the VR counselor, greater attention must be paid to language supports. For example, although clients are assigned to counselors based on mode of communication, there aren't sufficient quantities of counselors specifically trained to work with deaf clients. In one state, the VR counselor said that there were no professionals on staff who were qualified to assist with psychological evaluations for deaf clients, and that they flew in staff from a neighboring state to conduct those assessments. The participants in this study often combined knowledge of language with knowledge of issues that clients face: "The client might not be successful in that job because of other factors outside of the hearing loss, so we made it a rule in VR that all deaf and hard of hearing clients are served by counselors for the deaf who know other issues to address to avoid the revolving door."

Challenges within VR surrounding communication may be amplified within the business or employer context. VR as an agency was often a model for how to "problem-solve" harnessing resources and providing sufficient access in areas with few qualified providers. One VR counselor directly discussed how the state was looking to build their own staff of interpreters due to these challenges:

> …because in the state of [state], there aren't that many licensed interpreters and when you're up in rural [state], with a population of maybe 10,000 people, you just don't have the interpreters available to drive 2-3 hours portal to portal at $75 an hour, and then they have to do the interpreting. Then the employer is thinking, "Gosh, every time I interact with this person, I'm going to have to do that."

The VR agency typically knows from experience what is necessary to ensure sufficient communication access, and from this vantage point can effectively engage with employers about the broader process of placing their deaf clients.

Historical Context

The interviewed VRCs were often acutely aware of the historical context of employment outcomes for individuals who are deaf. They conveyed both a sense of change, what has shifted over the years, as well as recognition that there are still many challenges due to societal attitudes and limited opportunities for deaf individuals.

> When people ask me, what kind of jobs do deaf people do? Well if you asked me when I first started in this agency in 1986, I would have said post office, printing, IRS, large companies. Now, it's like I. King Jordan said, deaf people can do anything except hear! You know they are in ALL jobs.

By invoking I. King Jordan (the first deaf president of Gallaudet University), this professional connected with the broader deaf community in explaining how deaf individuals have changed expectations by taking opportunities outside of "traditional" fields. Once the frame is shifted from specific jobs to an open field, the role of the VR counselor becomes at once more complex and tailored to the qualifications and skills of the individual. One respondent said, "We don't do that anymore, now we just match up the skills and qualifications with the job. And *you gotta take the hearing loss out of it* and then come back and look at, Okay, how can I accommodate if there is required hearing?" (emphasis added). Within this frame, finding a job becomes about the person, and accommodations are about working with language modality and communication— a bona fide person-first approach.

The VR professionals continually face challenges to the idea that deaf individuals can do anything, even from people who are closest to them. Although sometimes a surprise at first, this challenge was not seen as a burden, but as a given part of their job.

And when I have a client and a mother in my office and the mother says, "Oh no, my son can't work, he's deaf." And then you know after being shocked, I will say, "You know my parents were deaf, and my father worked 40-some years before he passed away and my mother worked 30-some years before she retired. Deafness is not a barrier to employment."

Another respondent said:

I had a staff person [name withheld] tell me that a deaf person couldn't be a counselor. . . After I picked up my chin from the floor, and I just said "That's kinda interesting because we have [deaf] rehab counselors for the deaf in the field, working."

Responsibility for accommodations was another arena where historical precedence (of not having legal requirements for accommodations) sometimes continues in ways that people may not recognize. A VR counselor worked with a business to help them think through what it meant to provide equal access via the Americans with Disabilities Act:

So you know, she kept trying to think of ways to get around it. And she was with a law firm, I don't know how big or small the law firm was but I said, "Well, I don't really know for a consult, the legalities, but ADA doesn't say you have to provide an interpreter. ADA says you have to provide effective communication. How effective communication is defined is between you and the deaf individual, but are you going to sit there and write for 30 minutes, back and forth, is that

effective communication? Probably not, that's going to eat into that 30 minutes."

She said, I still can't believe she said this "Oh that's not a problem, we'll just put the cost back onto their fee." Oh no, you don't! I said, "When you renovate a building and put in a wheelchair ramp, do you charge the person in the wheelchair the cost for the ramp?" She replied: "Oh no, that's different." No, it's not! Then bump up your hourly rate to everybody across the board to cover the cost for the interpreter, you can do that. But you cannot just bump up the cost for that one individual.

One participant summed up their experience in this way: "Anyhow, in the world today, people think, 'It's 2013, we are so advanced,' but sometimes their thinking is still very behind the times."

Defining Success

The larger goal of this project was to identify factors that affected transition from high school to employment for individuals who are deaf. What does a successful VR placement outcome look like? VR plays a very specific role within the transition process, one that is defined by federal and state level mandates and practices, and implemented on a local level by individual VRCs and allied staff. When discussing their work within this context, the VRCs interviewed provided multiple perspectives on the definition of "success" in their work. These perspectives often reflected the vantage point of the person: the individual client, the VR professional, and, at times, the VR agency (or related agencies) at a systemic level.

The clear starting point for defining success was the VR 90-day closure rule: The client has the opportunity to get and maintain employment without support for 90 days or more (Rehabilitation Act, 1973). VRCs were clear that a client's goal was to get a job—even if the

kind of job may be varied, the function of VR is to support transition to employment. If a client is not interested in that outcome, it is unlikely that he or she will come to VR for support, as one counselor said:

> They're learning, and if they're a student and they're receiving [Supplemental Security Income or SSI], then they don't have much motivation there. They talk about wanting to work but they really, you know they get a $600 SSI check every month so there isn't really any motivation there.

However, from that starting point, there are different expectations for length of time that services are provided or the amount of follow-up that may be leveraged to support the client. Some of these extended timeframes include shifts from VR to other agencies that can provide support. One participant stated: "Well it depends on the user, really. It might be a long-term follow up on work adjustment. That can really go through mental health." Another emphasized the importance of building a foundation when considering length of time a case is open:

> I mean, we have cases that have been open for several years. The individual has such a need for building a foundation, as you put it before, and we don't, I know some VR programs really push for a quick resolution.

Also related to markers of "success" is the issue of "Status 28" (Rehabilitation Act, 1973):

> We have Status 28, which is "un-rehabilitated" and we hate that status and nobody wants to get anybody there but it happens that we have students that we spend a lot of money on and send them to college but then don't want to go to work, and there's nothing we can do about that, so we try to do the upfront work to make sure they are dedicated and they do want to get off of SSI and they want to get to work once we give them the services. This is for all clients, not just

college bound students. But we do try to track how many are successful (Status 26) and we track them and document the date. It doesn't look good for the counselors if they have too many status 28s, so they try to avoid that and stay in contact with their client so that they don't lose contact.

Even in the face of situations that appeared to be failed attempts at placements, the participants were committed to the possibility of success in the future. For example, one participant said, "There are some of those things that just are beyond our control so we just have to say 'this one is not successful at this time,' but we are always available later." This sentiment seemed to be a coping strategy among VRCs in dealing with the disappointment of a closed case, by adjusting their own expectations about what was in their control, while simultaneously leaving the door open for that person to come back.

The individual connection also came into play when VRCs explained their views on what made for a positive client-counselor experience. This is a more intimate definition of success, one that includes but then goes beyond the actual outcomes that are measured by status codes and workplace results. Counselors focused on honesty, transparency, and opportunities for growth for their clients (and, at times, themselves). One VRC said,

> In my perspective, a positive experience with a client is to be working and maintaining their employment, and if possible, to refer other people to us as needed. Also, a positive experience I see is in a situation in which a client will come and ask us for support or just reinforcement, resources. Or a positive experience will be where a client will send us a thank-you note.

Realities of Underemployment

Deaf individuals are searching for work within an already complex employment environment: job demands are growing and technology advances are changing the types of skills that are needed, while at the same time there is increasing economic volatility and reduced job security and benefits. VRCs recognize this, and pay particular attention to market trends when making recommendations about career options that fit with their clients:

> . . . today just having a bachelor's degree isn't going to cut it. You almost have to start with a master's degree. That's another challenge. I tell my clients that for every one thing you know, you need to learn four new things, especially for job security. Employers today are looking for employees who have multiple skills and knowledge.

One of the realities of an ever-changing and demanding job market is that many individuals will find it challenging to find a strong entry-level position immediately after completing their training. Unfortunately, not only unemployment, but also *underemployment* is a reality for many deaf individuals. For example, one interviewee said:

> For me, one of my biggest concerns is when my clients tell me they got a job, and it's a place like McDonald's. Some may only be qualified for that type of job, but I believe [in] placing my clients in employment situations where they can use the best of their abilities. So if they have that capability, you want them to reach the highest level possible... So my goal was always to bring them to the highest-level possible given their functional capacities. And that's pretty much it, it can vary from being a janitor in an office building to being a CEO of some company, you know.

Sometimes underemployment emerges only later, far after a placement. When thinking about a career, one that often includes changing jobs either within an organization or in a new work setting, it is rare that an initial placement will function as a successful fit for an individual's entire working life. If the placement remains static, underemployment may become a greater issue as deaf individuals age, as one VRC explained:

> One thing that people have to understand is that they have to work their way up. And sometimes with deaf people, they may be overlooked because the manager maybe likes what they're doing at this second level and they don't want to promote them because it might be hard to replace them at the current level they're at.

Challenging and Changing Expectations

Advocacy was at the core of the work of the VRCs in this study. Although advocacy for all parties was certainly included in the overall strategy, the main focus identified in this research about factors related to transition for clients who are deaf was client advocacy with potential employers. There is a strong need for advocacy to "get the foot in the door" for deaf clients. One counselor described the process:

> Well, you go in and you tell them all the benefits of hiring a person with a disability. You tell them that you will provide accommodations for a period of time, that you will work with them; you give them the data on the success of individuals who are deaf. There are studies out there that point out that deaf people by and whole make excellent employees. You just do a selling job. Sell, sell, sell! Sometimes you can use the job-targeting credit from the government for hiring those with a disability; sometimes you can get a tax credit. Sometimes it's

just a selling job, sometimes, like I mentioned with Toyota, it took years before Toyota would ever hire a deaf person. But you want to get into a situation like that; you want to get the best candidate as possible because then they are like, "wow! Deaf people really do make good employees!" And then they hire 5 more deaf people. So you want to get someone in there who is really good to get that door open. And sometimes it's the reverse, you put someone in a position and you sell them, and then they just totally bomb. As an employer they are not going to be very willing to work with you in the future. So, it's a challenge, its everyday.

A later step in advocacy is in working with businesses on problem-solving once there is a client placement process underway. Several VRCs mentioned strategies, both formal and informal, that they employed to facilitate the process of a successful placement. For example, one said:

If there's still some resistance, that's when you go in and do some trainings, sensitivity training. You know all of those videos that [federal organization] has developed over the years of showing professionals who are doing different jobs." This emphasis on role models applies both to deaf employees and other companies that have hired deaf clients: "But that's how you show employers, but maybe also hooking them up with another employer or hooking them up with an accommodation network. So maybe there's a question they're afraid to ask me, ask us because they know it would be offensive, but they can ask an employer.

Working with Clients

The last theme explored in the dataset is that of working with deaf clients. While it may seem as if this would have been the starting point for analysis, in reality, all the prior themes

serve as a foundation for the actual process of serving as a VR counselor for deaf clients. This section addresses VCR perspectives on what expectations deaf clients have as they participate in the VR placement process. This can be examined from three levels: expectations about oneself, expectations about VR, and expectations about the work environment.

The client-counselor relationship is defined, in part, by the process of the client sharing their perspectives on his or her own goals, and the counselor working with that information to help shape an actionable plan for employment (Elliott & Leung, 2004). The VRCs in this study described client perspectives about themselves as often out of sync with reality, but in very different directions: either that they had goals that were very far beyond their skills and resources, or that they felt that jobs they wanted were unattainable when in fact, they were not. VRCs often described the dialog and shaping of expectations involved in this process:

> Right, or if they want to be a doctor or a nurse, but they don't have a GED or a high school diploma. We try to identify, we help them reassess and face reality related to their limitations in that area. And then try to identify a job in the medical field that they could do, and sometimes that's all they really wanted to do was dress up in scrubs and go to the hospital, it depends. But we do have to have documentation and evidence of potential success before we can set a goal and move forward with it. . .

> So we've had conversations about these kinds of things and it was just hard to get him to realize that college was not out of reach, he just thought it was. It just wasn't something that he had ever entertained. But she spent quite a bit of time trying to get him to understand his skills and his abilities.

VRCs were generally positive about the expectations that their deaf clients had about the process. One said, "I think overall, the majority of people who come to us are really interested and motivated to work at some point. They may need training but their goal is to have a good quality of life based on some kind of job goal that they are interested in." VRCs also expressed a great deal of accountability for their own actions, for the agencies' work, in the experience that deaf clients have with the process. This was true even if the client started with a negative view; participants said that it was still their responsibility to follow through and fulfill their role in good faith. One specific example was when describing frustrations that deaf clients had about the types of services and support they received compared with their friends or others in their community. One participant said, "So there are some misconceptions. I lay a lot of that responsibility on our shoulders. I think it's our responsibility from when they apply for services to be very upfront and clear from the beginning of the program what we can and can't do. What their responsibilities are, what our responsibilities are." This idea goes back to the first theme of the analysis: effective communication, which lays the groundwork for subsequence interactions between the client and the counselor.

VRCs saw an important part of their role as providing a place for deaf clients to learn about what is seen as a reasonable accommodations process in the workplace. This is often different than what the client has experienced in school, and thus may require some further attention. A VRC said:

> What we find that has more to do with people who are deaf is really helping them
>
> to understand is that they're not going to have an interpreter at a business, sitting
>
> next to them, or standing next to them, depending on what they're doing 95% of
>
> the time. Nor is the business legally required to do that and we do have folks who,

one gentleman just lost his job because he was so adamant that the business

needed to give an interpreter to him 100% of the time and he was not our client at

the time when we got involved in that, and we really helped him understand that

no, this is when the business needs to have an interpreter there and this is when

you need to be working independently without an interpreter.

The deaf client's expectations about what constitutes access and participation in a

predominantly hearing workplace environment is often more reflective of past employment

environments or of others' experiences than the more current realities of some workplaces today.

A related component to this is the persistence that the deaf client has in working through the

process of obtaining accommodations. While the VR counselor certainly advocates for the client,

in the end, the process requires a great deal of effort and energy on the part of the deaf client. As

one participant reflected:

And I think the students themselves don't realize… how much time it will take for

them to get all their accommodations, it takes two or three times longer for them

to get their needs met. And many of them don't know that they do have to be very

assertive and many of them just aren't aware of the frustrations they are going to

face when they try to get those accommodations. And sometimes VR will say

well we're willing to support you if you go here but only if those accommodations

are going to happen.

Many of the participants in these interviews were reflective about their own roles and their own

journeys with their deaf clients. One said:

I've learned a lot because I believe that a lot of times what I can share with them

whether it's. . . their work condition, or helping them to understand themselves

better. I believe that they can find their own resources within themselves, and then they can contact me, I can be a resource and I can contact them at any time and they can answer my questions.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how VRCs viewed the process of working with both clients who were deaf and their potential employers. Many of the themes raised in conversations with study participants related to the Expectations Confirmation Theory: Expectations, Perceived Performance, Disconfirmation of Beliefs, and Satisfaction. In this discussion ways are synthesized in which these participants navigate managing expectations, the role of communication in achieving these goals, and ways in which VRCs seek to improve the system in which individuals who are deaf seek opportunities for career development.

Acknowledging and Managing Expectations

The participants in this study were aware that expectations influence the VR process even before the VRC and consumer (or VRC and employer) meet to establish their relationship. VRCs realized that many times, these expectations were formed and shaped by the consumers' and employers' previous interactions with people who have utilized VR services. For a deaf individual, previous interactions can fuel the expectation that the same VR services for their friend or colleague will be automatically available for themselves. Similarly, employers may connect their previous experiences with deaf employees and assume that future placements will have similar (for good or ill) results. VRCs were aware that these expectations, and others like them, serve as a yardstick by which the consumer and the employer measure the success of his or her VR experience.

Once expectations were identified, VRCs reported expending a great deal of energy and care into managing and even molding expectations. This active process achieved three goals: (a) facilitating the individual moving towards a set of expectations that will more closely align with what the VRCs anticipate the clients or employers will experience; (b) developing strategies for ameliorating potential barriers to success; and (c) reducing the frustration that may come from what would be unmet expectations without these efforts. Effectively managing expectations requires a unique skillset of interpersonal skills, tenacity, and patience. For example, in the case of a consumer whose goals are not a good fit with their training and aptitudes, the VRC must be able to take a client's expected career goals, critically analyze them to ascertain the underlying factors motivating that particular career goal, and then propose a realistic, sometimes different, course of trainings and career trajectories that can fulfill the client's needs.

Managing expectations includes problem-solving on an individual and a systemic level. VRCs must also be able to anticipate a variety of consumer characteristics and systemic barriers that affect their ability to effectively provide services so that they can take the necessary steps to compensate for these issues. For example, they must be aware that the timeframe for providing services is often longer when working consumers who are deaf, especially when additional disabilities are present or resources for full communication access are required. Furthermore, because individuals who are deaf are part of a low-incidence population, VRCs often find themselves faced with the difficult task of providing adequate services in areas where personnel and resources are sorely inadequate. Facilitating opportunities thus requires a level of proactivity on the part of the VRC that may go above and beyond the responsibilities of VRCs working with consumers who are hearing.

Role of Communication

Effective identification and management of expectations depends, in part, on the ability of the VRC and consumer to communicate effectively and efficiently. Among all the study participants, there was clear consensus on one major issue: in order to be effective facilitators of a successful case, communication between the VRC and the consumer must occur in the consumer's preferred language modality. The participants in this study felt that when culturally competent VRCs collaborate with consumers who are deaf in the consumer's preferred method of communication, the therapeutic relationship is strengthened, as is the likelihood of implementation fidelity and, subsequently, successful outcomes. Inversely, if there is a communication breakdown, participants felt that the relationship between VRC and consumer would not be nourished appropriately, and the consumer would be unable to obtain the support required to sufficiently meet his or her career goals.

In addition to issues pertaining to language match, VRCs working with consumers who are deaf must often find ways to appropriately communicate with individuals who have underdeveloped language skills. This is especially true when working with consumers who are deaf, come from non-signing, hearing families, and have English as their first language, but are years behind age or grade level due to reduced access to language in a speaking-only environment. In cases like these, VRCs must focus on building the consumer's language ability before they can move on to the tasks that traditionally fall within the purview of VRCs working with consumers who are hearing. The VRCs' ability to anticipate and expect these communication issues is inherent to their ability to competently plan for and provide appropriate services to consumers coming from such a linguistically diverse population.

Moving Forward Through Dialog

The VRCs in this study were acutely aware of the many systemic factors that serve as barriers to successful employment for individuals who are deaf. One commonly noted limitation is the great variability of policies and resources across (and sometimes within) states, setting up different expectations and often confusion. In recognition of the fact that organizations in different states and counties have already identified and addressed some of the same problems they were experiencing, many of the participants called for more deliberate dialogue at a national level. Similarly, at the local level, professionals want easier intra-agency communication and shared, comprehensive information systems for combined caseloads. Frequent frustration was also expressed with the lack of timely communication with schools; VRCs repeatedly expressed a desire to begin working with students as early as possible and to be brought on board to collaborate from the beginning of the transition planning process.

Another commonly expressed desire was for better dissemination of information to parents. While various approaches to dissemination were recommended, the commonality between them was that there needed to be a quick and effective means by which to educate parents about their advocacy rights in regards to their children's individualized education plans. For this to be effective, the interviewees recommended that this support be in place well before the start of the transition process and discussions with VR. Recommendations for how this could be accomplished ranged from simple (such as having one-page informational pamphlets on advocacy rights disseminated to parents of students who are deaf) to more elaborate (such as creating family ambassadors who serve as educational advocates and liaisons between families and their respective school systems), but all aimed at more effective knowledge and resource dissemination. In this way, VRCs sought to help establish not only tools for success, but also

expectations on how VR, as a system, could be a part of a team approach to successful career development for individuals who are deaf.

In addition to the above recommendations, there are a number of avenues for future research that could be explored. For example, a closer examination of the kinds of strategies that VRCs find constructive when shaping expectations of employers who may have little to no experience working with employees who are deaf might be useful. For example, these "novice" employers may have only cursory information about the heterogeneity within the deaf population, or what types of technology options are available for direct communication (e.g., instant message or other text-based communication) as well as accommodated communication (e.g., remote or onsite interpreters). What does a VRC do to provide a strong foundation for future conversations about the range of options available to great a good fit between the consumer and the employer? That kind of nuanced understanding would be helpful in creating shared best practices on how to build positive expectations from the beginning, and head off potential, whether unintended or not, obstacles down the road.

A second area of research that could be explored is what happens after a successful case closure, not just in the short-term, but also later in the progression of an individual in his or her career or in the employer's later propensity to hire other deaf employees. Do initial positive outcomes lead to long-term opportunities for skill development and upward mobility for employees who are deaf? Do "novice" employers build upon their experiences to create further employment options for consumers who are deaf? A follow-up study could delve more deeply into what factors lead to positive long-term outcomes. For example, it may be important to know the extent to which the employer and the consumer are able to work through communication challenges when looking at long-term viability for a strong working relationship. Even more

specifically, it could be useful to investigate ways in which both the employee and the supervisor work to build shared expectations for current projects and future skill development? This theoretical framework with the components of expectations, confirmation, and satisfaction may be applicable not only in the VR job placement process, but also in understanding the dynamics that foster future occupational options and attainment.

Limitations

Although this study provides some helpful perspectives with regard to how VRCs conceptualize their roles in job placement for individuals who are deaf, there are a number of limitations to conclusions that can be drawn from this study. The first is that the VRCs interviewed for this study provided broad information based on their experiences, not necessarily based on individual cases with specific consumer and employer characteristics. As such, the variability in both consumers and employers likely confounds to disassembling specific strategies and goals that would be applicable to future policy and practice. A second limitation is that this study focused only on the VRC perspectives. A more robust analysis would look at specific cases, and include not only the VRCs but also the consumers and the potential employers. Only in this type of study would the VRCs report experiences as confirmed (or not) based on information from other participants in the job placement process. This study raises potential questions, but cannot verify that the VRCs' interpreted statements from consumers and employers as they were intended. A final limitation is the nature of data collection process. Although the interview transcripts were rigorously coded and analyzed following qualitative research protocols, and the development of the interview questions was done with significant levels of feedback from professionals in the field, interviews only occurred once, and did not reflect long-term relationships between the research team and the study participants. The

interviewers were thus "outsiders" to the processes being described, potentially limiting the teams ability to capture the full range of interpretation of meaning within the data.

Conclusion

The employment landscape for individuals who are deaf is one fraught with long-standing barriers and often, disjointed services, agencies, and resources (Buys & Rennie, 2001; Harlan & Robert, 1998; Kohler, 1996; Scherich & Mowry, 1997; Schroedel & Geyer, 2000). Facilitating communication between providers, and between providers and consumers, is essential if systemic barriers are to be removed and the VR relationship is to continue being supported. Satisfaction with a job placement is more than just receiving a paycheck—significant levels of underemployment for individuals who are deaf is both demoralizing and dis-incentivizes a search for a job or career (versus relying on public assistance). Expectations about the role of VR is contextualized in the broader reality that, even with a job, many individuals who are deaf will not make enough money to live independently, or to continue to progress throughout their career. In their work to maximize the potential of each deaf individual, VRCs are thus advocating not only for their clients, but also for equality for all people.

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Appendix A

Background Information (asked of all interviewees across the project)

1. What experiences or training have you had specific to serving individuals who are DHH?
2. What is the history of individuals who are DHH in this program, setting, or organization? How many individuals who are DHH are served by your program or setting?
3. What makes your program unique from other programs, settings, or organizations?
4. What is the admissions process to your program or setting? How do students or potential participants gain access to the program? What kind of funding is available to support their participation in the program?
5. How would you describe the goals and aspirations of the individuals who are DHH in your program or setting?
6. How do you identify and support individuals who are DHH with co-occurring disabilities in your program or setting?
7. What do you see as the primary needs of postsecondary students who are DHH in your program or setting?

Questions Specifically for VR Specialists

1. In your state and in your experience, at what point does VR become involved in the postsecondary planning for students who are DHH? Are VR specialists involved in the IEP meetings? If so, what is their role?
2. How do you determine who qualifies as 'under-employed' or 'unemployed'? How does the client's goals or aspirations fit into this definition?
3. Tell us about the process you use to make a match between individuals and potential jobs. What information do you share with potential employers if you have a good match, but the employers are reluctant about having a employee who is DHH?
4. What is the definition of a "successful case closure" in your state?
a. When is a case closed? Under what circumstances? What criteria are utilized?
b. Where are the limitations of providing support and to what extent? Why?
5. If an individual loses their job that VR helped set up, can they come back to VR to try again? How many times can you re-apply to VR? After how much time receiving services is the 'able to benefit from VR' criteria re-evaluated?
6. How do you define success for your consumers?
7. What kinds of supports do your consumers have when they leave?
8. How do you collect information about consumer outcomes? Short term? Long term?
9. Do you track consumer satisfaction? If so, how?
10. What do you think contributes to consumers having a positive experience of VR?
11. Do you communicate in the preferred communication modality of the consumer?
12. Do you think direct communication in the consumer's preferred communication modality influences the consumers experience of VR? If so, how?
13. Do you think direct communication influences consumer outcomes?

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[1] In this study and in the field, the population of individuals who are deaf is diverse in characteristics, etiology, identity, and preferred communication modality. This article uses the term "deaf" to include those who identify as deaf, Deaf, hard-of-hearing, late-deafened, or deaf with a disability such as ADHD or deaf-blind.

[2] Participants in this study used two terms when referring to the individuals they worked with in VR: clients and consumers. These two terms are also used in the literature. For the sake of clarity, this article uses the term "client" throughout this manuscript, with the exception of when direct quotes from some participants may include "consumer."