

***Love Letters to My Profession: An Autoethnography of a CRC.***

by  
**Kyle J. Walker**

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Doctor in Education in Career and Technical Education Degree

Fall 2024

Style Manual Used: American Psychological Association, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition.

I understand that this research report must be officially approved by the Graduate School. Additionally, by signing and submitting this form, I (the author(s) or copyright owner) grant the University of Wisconsin-Stout the non-exclusive right to reproduce, translate, and/or distribute this submission (including abstract) worldwide in print and electronic format and in any medium, including but not limited to audio or video. If my research includes proprietary information, and agreement has been made between myself, the company, and the University to submit a dissertation that meets course-specific learning outcomes and CAN be published. There will be no exceptions to this permission, which I (the author) understand and agree to.

Dr. Kyle J. Walker Ed.D., CRC, CRL, CPM | Date

Dr. Urs Haltinner Ph.D., Chair | Date

Dr. Debbie Stanislawski Ph.D., Committee Member | Date

Dr. Daniel Kelsey Ph.D., Committee Member | Date



GRADUATE SCHOOL

Inspiring Innovation Learn more at [www.uwstout.edu/grad/](http://www.uwstout.edu/grad/)

Students: Please read the statements below and mark each box as “checked” to signify you have read and agree to each item. This page can be deleted from your copy of the dissertation if you choose to publish but must be present for submission to and approval by the Graduate School.

Style Manual Used: American Psychological Association, 7<sup>th</sup> edition.



I have adhered to the Graduate School Research Guide and have proofread my work.



I understand that this research report must be officially approved by the Graduate School.

Additionally, by signing and submitting this form, I (the author(s) or copyright owner) grant the University of Wisconsin-Stout the non-exclusive right.

to reproduce, translate, and/or distribute this submission (including abstract) worldwide in print and electronic format and in any medium, including but not limited to audio or video. If my research includes proprietary information, an agreement has been made between myself, the company, and the University to submit a thesis that meets course-specific learning outcomes and CAN be published. There will be no exceptions to this permission.



I attest that the research report is my original work (that any copyrightable materials have been used with the permission of the original authors), and as such, it is automatically protected by the laws, rules, and regulations of the U.S. Copyright Office.



My dissertation chair has approved the content and quality of this paper.

**Walker, Kyle, J. *Love Letters to My Profession: An Autoethnography of a CRC***

**Abstract**

Human service organization mission success is dependent on the quality of human talent. The inability of the public vocational rehabilitation program (PVR) to recruit and retain qualified Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRC) imperils its social justice mission assisting people with disabilities to maximize vocational opportunity, independence, and full community inclusion. VRC recruitment and retention has received scholarly attention amassing a body of knowledge primarily focused on micro-level variables. Interventions derived from these studies has had negligible impact. The lack of macro-level systemic research creates a void in understanding how the total lived experience of the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu might mediate, moderate, or amplify this crisis. This qualitative autoethnography is a highly personalized account of one CRC's (CRC) lived experiences in the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu. It provides insights into why the PVR program is an unattractive professional practice setting. This study advocates increased scholarly attention investigating the macro-level psychosocial cultural environment to identify incongruent, misaligned, and maladaptive features contributing to VRC failure to thrive. This research is essential to inform psychosocial cultural milieu transformational realignment to create practice environments that support VRC recruitment, retention, and professional thriving. People with disabilities served by the PVR program are entitled to receive services from qualified VRC professionally empowered to help them achieve their full vocational potential.

## Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to the people who recognized my potential before I did. Thank you to the many people who have guided, challenged, coached, mentored, taught, corrected, and supported my journey of self-discovery.

Linda, your love, vision, and total acceptance created the transformational relationship that gave me the confidence to embrace the discomfort of personal growth. You are a testament to the transformative power of unconditional love, acceptance, trust, and safety necessary to support learning and growth. To Logan, Brock, Kylie, my grandchildren, sisters, nieces, nephews, Mom, and Dad. Thank you for everything. You are the reasons I have tried to become a better person.

To the faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Stout Career and Technical Education Leadership Doctoral program and my dissertation committee: Dr. Urs Haltinner, Dr. Debbie Stanislawski, and Dr. Daniel Kelsey, thank you for challenging me to explore, learn, and grow. To Dr. Donna M. Mertens for introducing me to the autoethnographic methodology. I want to express my gratitude for the guidance of Dr. Michael O'Brien, Dr. Cayte Anderson, Dr. Mary McManus, and Russ Thelin.

I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved profession of Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling. These are my love letters to you. I hope they influence creating the conditions supporting your professional thriving, flourishing, and the actualization of your fullest potential. I hope this study honors you.

## Table of Content

Abstract .....	3
List of Figures .....	9
Chapter I: Introduction .....	10
Problem Statement.....	11
Purpose Statement .....	12
Research Questions .....	13
Significance of the Study .....	13
Assumptions of the Study .....	14
Limitations of the Study .....	16
Definition of Terms .....	16
Chapter II: Literature Review .....	20
Historical Context .....	20
Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling .....	22
Occupation Stage.....	24
Profession Stage .....	26
De-Professionalization Stage.....	37
Recruitment & Retention .....	44
Impacts.....	44
Recruitment.....	46
Retention.....	49
Summary .....	51
Chapter III: Research Methodology.....	53
Philosophical Assumptions.....	53

Ontology .....	54
Epistemology.....	54
Axiology .....	56
Research Method: Autoethnography .....	56
Positionality Statement.....	59
Research Design.....	59
Subject Selection .....	60
Data Sources .....	62
Instrumentation.....	63
Data Collection .....	66
Data Analysis .....	68
Ethics.....	70
Cautions, Disclosures, & Limitations.....	72
Summary .....	72
Chapter IV: Results .....	73
Love Letters to My Profession: Autoethnography of a CRC.....	73
Origination: The Beginning or Creation of Something or Someone.....	74
Remembrance: The Act of Recollection and Reflection .....	79
Denigration: The Act of Unfairly Criticizing or Labeling Something or Someone .....	82
Marginalization: Treating a Person or Group as Insignificant, Peripheral, of Lesser Importance .....	85
Exclusion: The State or Process of Being Excluded, Isolated, or Segregated.....	99
Imperfection: The State of Being Faulty, Incomplete, Flawed, or Being Undesirable ...	106
Emancipation: The Process of Being Set Free, Liberated, Released, or Unconstrained.	111

Expectation: A Belief That Someone Can and Will Achieve Something .....	120
Vocation: A Calling, Mission, Life Purpose, Niche, or Way of Being.....	137
Motivation: The Purpose or Reason for an Action or Behavior .....	151
Attachment: Sense of Bonding, Connection, and Belonging in a Relationship with Others .....	156
Transactions: Executing Exchanges of Goods or Services, Doing Trade Interactions ....	162
Subjugation: The Action of Dominating, Controlling, or Governing Something or Someone .....	178
Professionalism: Competence, Skill, and Expertise Standards Expected of a Specialist	190
Disappointment: Sadness or Displeasure Resulting from Nonfulfillment of Hopes .....	206
Discouragement: Loss of Confidence, Enthusiasm, and Sense of Dispiritedness .....	219
Habituation: Accommodation, Settlement, Compromise, Or Adapted Arrangement...	228
Dehumanization: Objectification, Apathy, Denial of Inherent Humanity.....	235
Incongruence: State Of Being Incompatible, Contradictory, Antithetical, Or Misaligned .....	256
Transformation: Change in Composition, Structure, Form, Appearance, or Character.	276
Regression: Relapse, Remission, Deterioration, or Return to a Lesser State .....	288
Similitude: State Of Similarity, Likeness, Sameness, or Duplication .....	290
Heresy: Beliefs Or Opinions At Odds With Generally Accepted Cultural Dogma .....	298
Summary .....	303
Chapter V: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations .....	305
Discussion.....	306
Data Analysis.....	306
Data Interpretation .....	310

Conclusions.....	318
Recommendations.....	319
References .....	323
Appendix A: Semi-Structured Self-Interview Protocol .....	363
Appendix B: IRB Approval.....	365
Appendix C: Selected VRC quotes about PVR practice.....	367



**List of Figures**

Figure 1: Research Design Overview .....	60
Figure 2: Reflexive Thematic Transcript Analysis .....	70
Figure 3: Data Coding & Reflexive Thematic Analysis .....	310
Figure 4: Transactional Psychosocial Cultural Milieu of PVR Program.....	314
Figure 5: Transformational Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling Profession .....	316

## Chapter I: Introduction

The PVR program has long been plagued by a pervasive professional workforce shortage of qualified VRC (Dew et al., 2008; Herbert et al., 2020; Herbert et al., 2023; Landon et al., 2024; Leahy, 2012; O'Brien & Graham, 2009). High turnover coupled with insufficient talent supply chain capacities do not meet labor market demand creating barriers to recruitment and retention (Herbert et al., 2023). The ubiquitous inability to recruit and retain VRCs is irrespective of educational qualifications or professional credentials. This study concentrates on barriers impeding recruitment and retention of qualified VRCs. This study adopts the profession's established qualification standards defining a qualified VRC as an individual who:

1. has earned a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling or closely related discipline from an accredited program; and,
2. successfully passed the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC) board examination; and,
3. maintains the CRC credential engaging in continuous professional education; and,
4. is compelled to provide services faithful to the Code of Professional Ethics for CRC (Hartley & Tarvydas, 2022, Leahy & Hartley, 2018; Leahy et al. 2019).

The CRC credential is evidence of the mastery of evidence-based core competencies required to perform the roles and functions identified through 100 years of applied clinical practice validated by empirical scholarly research (Chan et al, 2021; Hartley & Tarvydas, 2022; Leahy, 2012; Leahy & Hartley, 2018; Leahy et al., 2019a).

The professional talent pipeline supply chain capacity has never been able to meet labor market demand resulting in a shortage of CRCs available in the talent pool (Herbert et al., 2023). As a result, employer hiring practices consistently depends on underfilling vacant positions creating a workforce dominated by practitioners lacking the profession's minimum qualification standards (P. Shlemon,

personal communication, January 3, 2023). This pervasive underrepresentation of CRCs in PVR practice affords consumers no assurance of access to minimally qualified, competent, effective, and ethically obligated VRCs. It also puts a great deal of stress on the PVR program forced to invest limited resources in upskilling or reskilling underqualified recruits.

### **Problem Statement**

This study examines this historical, pervasive, and intractable professional workforce crisis. It is doubtful that such an historically pervasive systemic problem can be attributed to the effects of any single or limited combination of micro-level variables. This study seeks to examine the problem by interrogating the total lived experience of one CRC practicing for nearly 30 years within the PVR program's macro-level psychosocial cultural milieu. Looking to understand why CRCs and other VRCs do not thrive professionally in this practice environment making the profession unattractive to new recruits and existing professionals.

This mystery is particularly perplexing considering features of the profession that in theory should make it a highly attractive career of choice. VRC is a profession that has consistently experienced job growth with labor market demand exceeding supply (P. Shlemon, personal communication, January 3, 2023). VRCs typically enjoy a plentiful job market with multiple vacancies facing little qualified competition (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). Annual salaries of all VRCs are not competitive with similarly situated counseling professions. Therefore, pay has received a great deal of attributional attention as the primary contributor to the recruitment and retention crisis. However, annual salary surveys conducted by CRCC indicate CRCs in PVR practice earn above market total compensation packages considering combined salary and fringe benefits (P. Shlemon, personal communication, December 12, 2023). While pay is often cited by those abandoning PVR professional practice it is frequently not cited as the primary motivator that instigated the initial job search.

Employment in the public sector has historically been relatively stable in secure state government settings typically less impacted by market forces or economic downturns. Position descriptions portray VRCs engaging in deeply meaningful work that many find intrinsically rewarding. The profession has also benefited from unique progressive public investments and graduate scholarship programs incentivizing recruitment and making career entry nearly cost free (Smith et al., 2020). Despite these advantages the profession's higher education programs and the PVR program continuously struggles to attract, recruit, and retain qualified talent to meet labor force demand (Herbert et al., 2023).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to shift the conversation of VRC recruitment and retention away from simplistic reductionist micro-level cause-and-effect studies to call attention to the possibility that the root cause of CRC and VRC failure to thrive creating barriers to recruitment and retention is centered in the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu. The purpose is to advocate for a research agenda that prioritizes macro-level cultural environment investigations to identify key features that are misaligned, maladaptive, incongruent, inhibiting professional thriving. This study borrows a macro-level diagnostic concept from medicine, conceptually framing the problem as analogous to Failure To Thrive (Goldbloom, 1982). The satisfaction of basic human needs can either be supported or thwarted by the psychosocial cultural environments (Ryan & Deci, 2022). Individuals experiencing cultural environments that are basic need supporting tend to thrive, succeed, and grow (Brown et al, 2017). Conversely, individuals experiencing psychosocial cultural environments that stress and thwart basic need satisfaction experience failure to thrive. Why do CRCs and VRCs fail to thrive in PVR practice and how does that failure to thrive make the profession and practice setting unattractive impeding both recruitment and retention of qualified professionals?

## **Research Questions**

Autoethnography is a form of narrative inquiry not typically required to state research questions (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020; Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, for the unique purposes of this study the following research questions guided the investigation.

1. What can be learned about CRC failure to thrive through an autobiographical exploration of the lived experience of a CRC with nearly 30 years in PVR practice?
2. What can be learned about CRC failure to thrive through a critical ethnographic analysis of the total lived experience of the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge conceptualizing the recruitment and retention crisis as symptomatic of a broader VRC failure to thrive. The study calls attention to the possibility that the roots of this crisis may reside in the subjective lived experience of the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu that may thwart thriving. VRC failure to thrive provides a conceptual framework to shift attention away from micro-level individual attributional investigations focused on individual characteristics of VRCs or the effects of extrinsic motivators such as compensation, benefits, recognition, or promotional opportunities. VRC failure to thrive centers the investigative lens on the psychosocial cultural milieu to examine environmental stressors that implicitly or explicitly thwart professionalism and thriving. VRC failure to thrive serves as a unifying macro-level diagnostic paradigm transforming existing micro-level research findings into a holistically complex, contextualized, and synthesized attributional hypothesis enabling the iterative emergence of opportunities to significantly improve VRC recruitment and retention by creating the conditions supportive of professional thriving.

Extant empirical evidence supports the efficacy of CRC qualification standards as being essential for ensuring quality ethically informed consumer outcomes (Frain et al., 2006; Mackay et al., 2020).

Consumers are entitled to be served by qualified competent professionals within practice settings that

fully support, prioritize, and empower applied use of empirically validated core competencies and evidence-based practices (CRCC, 2023a).

The study seeks to stimulate other macro-level research interrogating the psychosocial cultural practice environment to identify transformational system and culture change to make the PVR practice setting more attractive ensuring consumers have access to qualified and competent professionals. Continuing to fail to recruit and retain qualified VRCs is a dereliction of ethical, moral, social justice, and consumer protection obligations (Aliff & Sprong, 2020; Kelsey & Smart, 2012, Miller & Millington, 2002).

This problem negatively affects a vital social justice program intended to assist people with disabilities to maximize vocational opportunity, independence, and full community inclusion (Herbert et al., 2023; Kelsey & Smart, 2012; Kim et al., 2023; Millington, 2021). The inability to attract, recruit, hire, retain, and support qualified VRCs imperils the civil rights and social advancement of people with disabilities. It squanders significant historical taxpayer investments and devalues, discounts, and ignores a substantial body of empirical evidence forged over one hundred years of applied practice and empirical research. Failure to address this crisis relegates an already marginalized minority community to second class citizenship status unworthy of qualified professional services (Aliff & Sprong, 2020).

### **Assumptions of the Study**

My professional lived experiences are unique to me. While I assert commonalities, patterns, and themes shared with similarly situated peers will enhance our understanding of this crisis, I acknowledge that my own experiences, perceptions, and sense making are uniquely my own. My experience and construction of reality are influenced by unique and individualized mixes of background, identity, and privilege. I recognize many CRCs have had similar lived experiences while recognizing that my narrative story is limited to me.

This study is limited by the following assumptions:

1. I assume the existing body of empirical knowledge and over 100 years of professional applied practice experience informed development of a specialized set of knowledge, skills, and abilities unique to the VRC profession. While gaps in the body of knowledge continue to be examined and clinical practices continuously evolve, at present the evidence supports specific knowledge, skills, and abilities are required for competent ethical VRC professional practice.
2. I assume the established VRC core competencies are required to competently assist people with disabilities to maximize vocational opportunities, independence, and full community inclusion consistent with unique individualized strengths, abilities, capabilities, talents, skills, passions, interests, and potential.
3. I assume the existing professional qualification standard represented by the CRC credential informed by applied clinical practice and empirical research provides the only objective verification of the mastery of core professional competencies.
4. I assume the distinctive philosophies, conceptual models, paradigms, clinical interventions, evidence-based practices, core values, code of ethical standards, and social justice advocacy of CRCs is not replicated, duplicated, or interchangeable with any other professional discipline and is specifically effective for PVR practice.
5. I assume VRCs working with a marginalized and potentially vulnerable population must be informed by professional competency standards and accountable to professional ethical obligations formalized in a written code of ethics that is enforced.
6. I assume the professional core competencies and ethical conduct standards established by CRCC as defined by the Code of Professional Ethics for CRCs is the standard for assuring consumer protection (Chan et al., 2021).

7. I assume the CRC credential is the only existing objective empirically validated means to assure professional competencies providing risk mitigation functions. I assume the underrepresentation of CRCs in PVR practice presents inherent risk to people with disabilities and employers of underqualified VRCs.
8. I assume people with disabilities are entitled to receive services from professionally qualified, effective, competent, and ethically obligated professionals.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology with inherent empirical limitations. An autobiographical self-case-study is limited to the researcher's lived experiences, perceptions, meaning making, and sense of professional identity framed by specific psychosocial cultural milieus. As a self-case-study the researcher is simultaneously the sole research subject. While I am confident that commonalities, themes, trends, and variations on themes that emerged over the course of this study are broadly germane to VRC failure to thrive, readers are urged to be cautious in overly generalizing or extrapolating the study findings. This study is not intended to provide generalizable findings. It urges additional scholarly research using qualitative and quantitative methodologies to investigate VRC failure to thrive by interrogating the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu. Generalizing findings obtained through an autoethnography is potentially spurious and inaccurate (Adams et al., 2022). The goal is to explore alternative theories, ask different questions, raise awareness, and stimulate macro-level systemic research.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms appear throughout this study. Definitions are those of the researcher unless otherwise indicated.



***Autoethnography***

A qualitative research methodology describing and critically analyzing personal lived experiences of a member of a psychosocial cultural milieu elucidating the subjective total experience of life within that culture. A human centered research method approaching knowledge generation as a political, ethical, and moral act to advocate social justice and improve the human condition. Autoethnography is both a research process and research product (Bochner & Ellis; 2001).

***Certified Rehabilitation Counselor***

A CRC is a graduate-level educated professional counselor who has passed a board certification test and holds the nationally recognized credential issued by the CRCC (Hartley & Tarvydas, 2022).

***Client/Consumer/Customer/Participant/Job Seeker***

In this study the terms client, consumer, customer, participant, or job seeker denotes an individual with a disability receiving services from the PVR program.

***Code of Professional Ethics for CRCs***

Formalized enforceable professional code of ethical standards informing obligations to an ethical code of conduct for CRCs (Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification, 2023).

***Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification***

Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC) is the credentialing body of rehabilitation counseling profession (Leahy et al. 2019).

***Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation***

Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) which is the national professional membership organization representing the seventy-eight state VR agency Chief Executive Officers (Connelly & Wooderson, 2020)

***Milieu***

All-encompassing physical and social environment, settings, contexts, atmospheres, and climates where individual cognition and behavior is influenced, moderated, mediated, or amplified in relation to others.

***Organizational Culture***

Collective conscious and unconscious shared values, assumptions, beliefs, philosophies, norms, priorities, symbols, language, artifacts, rituals, myths, legends, taboos, behaviors, attitudes, habits, and attributions that are deeply entrenched, change resistant, and enculturated through new member institutionalization and socialization (Cameron, 2009).

***People with Disabilities***

Individuals with one or more physical or mental impairments that for the individual present barriers or impediments to employment requiring vocational rehabilitation services to prepare for, obtain, maintain, or advance in employment consistent with unique individualized strengths, interests, abilities, capabilities, and informed choices (Rehabilitation Act, 1973).

***Public Vocational Rehabilitation***

Public Vocational Rehabilitation (PVR) is the state-federal vocational rehabilitation program jointly funded, operated by states (State Vocational Rehabilitation Program, 2016). There are seventy-eight state and territorial vocational rehabilitation agencies. States may establish a single combined VR agency or separate general and blind VR agencies (Rehabilitation Act, 1973).

***Psychosocial***

The interrelation and intersectionality of internalized psychological functioning, behavior, and sense of self-identity as mediated, moderated, and amplified by the external social environment or culture (Greene, 2008).

***Rehabilitation Services Administration***

Rehabilitation Services Administration is the federal agency responsible for administering the PVR program within the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (Rehabilitation Act, 1973).

***Vocational Rehabilitation***

Public, private, or community-based programs designed to assist people with disabilities to prepare for, obtain, maintain, and advance in meaningful employment, economic self-sufficiency, independence, and community inclusion (Sales, 2012).

***Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor***

A Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) is a professional providing counseling and guidance to help people with disabilities to overcome disability related barriers to maximize career opportunity, economic self-sufficiency, independence, and community inclusion consistent with their unique interests, abilities, capabilities, strengths, resources, concerns, and informed choice (Sales, 2012).

## Chapter II: Literature Review

This autoethnography seeks to interrogate the subjective total lived experience of a CRC as an embedded member of the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu to understand why VRCs fail to thrive rendering the profession unattractive. Sales (2012) argued that understanding VRC and the PVR program requires a basic familiarity with the historical evolution of the modern profession. This literature review focuses on the PVR program and VRC profession's historical evolution. It tracks the major milestones and contextual factors from occupational emergence to emerging profession status. It highlights the key milestones, formative events, and resulting features that contribute to the current recruitment and retention crisis. The review examines contemporary events regressively de-professionalizing, deskilling, and returning VRC to occupational job title status. This chapter provides an overview of the extant body of knowledge studying micro-level variables correlated with the crisis of VRC recruitment and retention.

### Historical Context

The United States Congress declared people with disabilities have historically occupied an inferior second-class status due to social isolation, segregation, exclusion, oppression, discrimination, stigmatization, institutionalization, and have been denied their constitutional rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990). Congress has a long track record enacting federal legislation attempting to remediate this social injustice, inequality, and inequity (e.g., Air Carrier Access Act, 1986; Americans With Disabilities Act, 1990; ADA Amendments Act of 2008; Barden-LaFollette Act, 1943; Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975; Fair Housing Act Amendments, 1968; Fair Housing Act Amendments, 1988; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004; Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act, 1938; Randolph-Sheppard Act, 1936; Rehabilitation Act, 1973; Rehabilitation Act Amendments, 1992; Smith-Fess Act, 1920; Smith-Hughes Act, 1917; Smith-Sears Act, 1918; Social Security Act, 1935; Telecommunications Act, 1996; Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act, 1999; Vocational Rehabilitation Amendments, 1954; Vocational Rehabilitation Act

Amendments, 1968; Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act, 1984; Workforce Investment Act, 1998; Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014).

Despite significant public policy efforts and taxpayer investments, people with disabilities continue to be one of the largest marginalized and disadvantaged minority groups in the United States (Dirth & Adams, 2019; Horner-Johnson, 2021; West et al., 2023). Today people with disabilities represent twenty-six percent of adults in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.), and that percentage is growing due to advancements in medicine and other socioenvironmental factors (Smart, 2016).

People with disabilities face significant disparities and inequalities in quality of life measures including healthcare (Dean et al., 2018; Mitra & Palmer, 2023; Mitra & Yap, 2022; Pacheco Barzallo et al., 2021; Reichard et al., 2019), educational attainment (Hurwitz et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2023; Reinarts & Melo, 2023), employment (Bonaccio et al., 2020; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023; Maroto & Pettinicchio, 2015; Reichard et al., 2019), socioeconomic status (Jajtner, 2020; Jajtner et al., 2020; Shandra, 2020; Zaninotto et al., 2020), resource availability (Goodman et al., 2020), housing and other primary quality of life factors (Bixby et al., 2022; Repke & Ipsen, 2020; Oexle & Corrigan, 2018; Shandra, 2021, Shandra, 2020).

This disadvantaged and marginalized minority group is unique in that membership is not dependent on birth. Every American has a reasonable probability of acquiring a disability during their lifetime (Smart & Smart, 2006). Therefore, this population is not a “special interest group” and every American has a personal interest to ensure equity, equality, and quality of life for people with disabilities.

In American society work plays a significant individually self-defining role (Bernstein, 1997). Successful personally meaningful employment is a primary predictor of economic self-sufficiency, community inclusion, independence, well-being, housing, and overall quality of life in the United States

(McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Pratap et al., 2021). Because meaningful work is so important it has been perceived as one of the great social equalizers (McGowan & Porter, 1967). Congress declared that every citizen has an inherent right to earn a living and contribute to society, and therefore society has a moral obligation to ensure equal access to employment opportunity (McGowan & Porter, 1967).

In 1920 Congress passed the Smith-Fess Act also known as the Civilian Rehabilitation Act (1920). This act created the state-federal PVR program for the purpose of providing vocational guidance, disability adjustment counseling, advocacy, and vocational training to people with disabilities (Cull & Hardy, 1972; Leahy et al.; 2009b; Sales, 2012; Scotch, 2009). Since 1920 applied clinical practice experience and empirical research identified and validated necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities required to assist people with disabilities to maximize career opportunities, economic self-sufficiency, and community inclusion (Glenn & Lee, 2022; Hartley & Tarvydas, 2022; Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1954, Workforce Investment Act, 1998).

Since 1920 the demand for VRCs has pervasively outpaced the capacity of the profession's higher education talent supply pipeline (Herbert et al., 2023). Pervasive professional labor force shortages rendered the PVR program challenged by the stresses of forced underfilling of vacancies requiring intensive training, upskilling, reskilling, and managerial oversight. The PVR program has historically been overdependent on a labor force of RCs who do not meet established minimum professional qualification standards (Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation, 2022; McDonnall et al., 2022; Tansey et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

### **Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling**

Sociologist Eliot Freidson (2013) studied the evolutionary developmental process common as an occupation transition into a profession. Freidson argued that an occupation gradually achieves profession status as it comes to possess five key characteristics (Freidson, 2013). An occupation becomes a profession when it:

1. possesses an organized body of knowledge shaped by distinct philosophical frameworks;  
and,
2. controls the occupational domain through a delimited scope of practice, defined roles, functions, activities, and the legitimate authority to safeguard, protect, and defend the scope of practice from encroachment; and,
3. establishes, maintains, and enforces specific minimum professional credentials required for practice, with defined standards for attainment of those minimum credentials, and formalized regulatory bodies authorized to enforce those standards; and,
4. possesses the ability to control the profession's practice domain, marketplace, or territory through the control mechanisms of industry recognized minimum qualification standards;  
and,
5. formalizes professional obligations, expectations, and standards of ethical conduct to maintain public trust earning the credibility to exert influence based on authority, expertise, and efficacy.

Freidson's model provides a conceptual framework useful for exploring the historical evolution of the VRC profession. Framed by this conceptual model we will first explore the occupational stage to provide an overview of the key milestones from the birth of the job title to formative developments of profession emergence. The profession stage provides summary of VRCs transition into a nascent emerging profession nominally possessing Freidson's five (5) key characteristics. The historical exploration culminates with a discussion of contemporary forces and events conceptualized as the de-professionalization stage to explore VRCs regression to occupational status. This historical overview is essential to understanding VRC recruitment and retention.

## Occupation Stage

VRC sometimes referred to as Rehabilitation Counseling (RC) is primarily a public service profession achieving occupational birth through Congressional action (Leahy, 2012; Sales, 2012). The Soldier's Rehabilitation Act of 1918 and Smith-Fess Act of 1920 established the PVR program (Elliott & Leung, 2005; Leahy, 2012). These acts created the state-federal vocational rehabilitation program for the purpose of assisting people with disabilities to overcome barriers to vocational opportunities, independence, and full community inclusion (Obermann, 1965; Sales, 2012; Smart, 2016).

Efforts to assist people with disabilities existed prior to these acts. However, these efforts were typically provided by charitable or faith-based organizations provided by individuals with little or no expertise (Elliott & Leung, 2005; Jenkins et al., 1998; Obermann, 1965; Sales, 2012; Smart, 2016). Early strategies and solutions resulted in menial jobs with low wages and no opportunity for advancement (Berger & Wilbers, 2021; Obermann, 1965; Sales, 2012; Sales, 2007; Smart, 2016). Good intentions and patriarchal protectionism further entrenched social segregation as people with disabilities were isolated in sheltered workshops, enclaves, or self-contained work crews (Berger & Wilbers, 2021; Obermann, 1965; Sales, 2012). Low expectations rooted in cultural bias resulted in underemployment, unemployment, exploitation, poverty, and dependency (Berger & Wilbers, 2021; Smart, 2016). People with disabilities were treated as an inferior class relegated to begging (Smart, 2016). Social stigma, prejudice, and cultural norms resulted in many people with disabilities being hidden from public view, sequestered in attics, or confined to institutions (Berger & Wilbers, 2021; Smart, 2016; Smart & Smart, 2006). People with disabilities had little control over the decisions affecting their lives, experienced dependence on others, faced abuse, exploitation, manipulation, bigotry, and prejudice (Berger & Wilbers, 2021; Conrad, 2020; Elliott & Leung, 2005; Guevara, 2021; Smart, 2016). In short, the presence of a disability created subjugation, objectification, and oppression.



The first world war was a catalyst for social change as the number of service members returning from battlefields with significant physical and mental impairments surpassed previous conflicts making disability more visible and salient (Jenkins et al., 1998; Obermann, 1965). Advancements in battlefield medical care significantly decreased mortality rates increasing the number of surviving Veterans with significant lifelong disabilities (Leahy, 2012; Smart, 2016; Smart & Smart, 2006). Veterans returning to civilian life with visible and invisible disabilities experienced significant barriers to vocational employment, independent living, and full social inclusion (Sales, 2012; Smart & Smart, 2006). The Soldier's Rehabilitation Act of 1918 acknowledged the moral, social, and economic obligation the nation owed returning veterans. It provided services to regain vocational employment, increase independence, and enhance social inclusion (Elliott & Leung, 2005; Jenkins et al., 1998; Sales, 2012).

The Smith-Fess Act of 1920 extended vocational rehabilitation to other citizens with specific disabilities (Jenkins et al., 1998; Sales, 2012). Since 1920, Congress has consistently expanded access to vocational rehabilitation services for citizens with all types of disabilities (Hartley & Tarvydas, 2022; Jenkins et al., 1998; Sales, 2012). It is important to note that the Smith-Fess Act and the succeeding Rehabilitation Acts were originally designed to create a social justice program providing people with disabilities equal and equitable access to American citizenship. Congress intentionally used the term vocational rather implying PVR was a jobs program. This will be a key point later in this study.

The signing of this act on June 2, 1920, gave birth to the occupational job title of VRC (Leahy & Szymanski, 1995; Sales, 2012; Sales, 2007). Congress created the occupational title ex nihilo, but it did not specify any qualifications, knowledge, skills, or abilities (Jenkins et al., 1998; Obermann, 1965). In the absence of qualification standards PVR agencies recruited and hired an eclectic diverse mix from existing disciplines like education, psychology, sociology, social work, and others (Jenkins et al., 1998; Leahy et al., 2019a). This early developmental feature established competing disciplinary claims over the occupational practice domain and entrenched the occupation as a nonexclusive open entry

multidisciplinary job engaged in by a diverse set of professional identities. This feature has impeded the emergence of a clear and unified VRC identity inhibiting brand identity development and reputation. This multidisciplinary heritage has been both a blessing and a curse with lasting impacts on VRC recruitment, retention, and thriving.

Early PVR program challenges revealed that the job required a specialized set of competencies, knowledge, skills, and abilities that did not exist at the time (Hershenson, 1998; Jenkins et al., 1998; Leahy et al., 2009b; Maloney, 2017). Working as a RC was not a simple transaction connecting an unemployed job seeker to a vacant job opening. The new occupation and program began to recognize people with disabilities experience overly complex and individualized barriers to education, employment, independence, and full community inclusion. These individual complexities required specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities to achieve a deep understanding of uniquely individualized strengths, skills, abilities, capabilities, untapped potential, and interests necessary to achieve successful vocational outcomes (Hershenson, 1998; Leahy et al., 2009b; Maloney, 2017). This need spurred empirical research to inform the specialized training that was an urgent priority (Jenkins et al., 1998; Obermann, 1965; Sales, 2012). Early program performance further exposed this skills gap, and the lacking empirical body of knowledge needed to inform curriculum standards (Sales, 2012; Sales, 2007). The recognition of the need for empirical research was a catalyst in the occupation transitioning into an emerging profession.

### **Profession Stage**

Limited surface level commonalities belied the fact that no existing professional academic discipline already possessed the specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to competently serve people with disabilities in VR practice (Jenkins et al., 1998; Muthard, 1969; Peterson et al., 2006). In the 1940s, three public universities established graduate level educational programs for RCs in response to this emerging need (Muthard, 1969; Peterson et al., 2006). In 1941 New York University

established a VRC graduate program aligning it within vocational education. The Ohio State University established a program in 1944 aligned with social work. In 1948 Wayne State University established a program tied to special education (Muthard, 1969). These programs were a welcome addition in the transition from an occupation to a profession, however, the diverse differences in disciplinary alignment, professional identity, philosophical frameworks, and orientations left a legacy of unintended consequences (Jenkins et al., 1998). These developments combined with the already entrenched multidisciplinary practice domain prevented the emerging profession from coalescing around a unified, clear, and shared common professional brand identity (Sales, 2012). Entrenched diverse professional identities such as social workers, psychologists, vocational educators, therapists, or guidance counselors prevented the development of a unifying VRC professional identity. Rather than developing as a dominant professional identity, VRC was viewed by many as only a job title. A lasting impact of this professional identity diffusion is that the profession's brand identity, visibility, reputation, recognition, and awareness rendered recruitment and retention difficult. Recruitment was impacted because the VRC profession was never able to clearly define, differentiate, and communicate the brand internally or externally. Retention was impacted because deeply entrenched primary professional identities prevented attachment, commitment, and dedication to VRC practice. Identity diffusion, identity confusion, and multidisciplinary attachments sowed factional division inhibiting the formation of healthy professional membership organizations essential for professions to establish a sense of community belonging and to exercise political advocacy (Jellinek & Lynch, 1983; Jenkins et al., 1998; Peterson et al., 2006). These factors have been substantial impediments to articulating the VRC brand value proposition to the public necessary to establish authoritative credibility to influence public policy and protect the professional domain from encroachment (Brubaker, 1981; Brubaker 1977; Dew et al., 2008; Jellinek & Lynch, 1983; Patterson, 1957; Patterson, 2009; Peterson et al., 2006; Stebnicki, 2009).

The 1954 reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act represented Congress' first efforts to add structure to the VRC occupation by providing a defined scope of practice, essential job functions, and defining a set of minimum qualifications (Elliott & Leung, 2005; Peterson et al., 2006). Congress also invested federal funds to establish higher educational graduate training programs for the express purpose of meeting the labor force needs of the PVR program (Elliott & Leung, 2005; Jenkins et al., 1998; Peterson et al., 2006).

As an embryonic organized body of knowledge began to emerge, VRC began to formalize a distinctively original set of philosophical frameworks (Chan et al., 2004; Elliott & Leung, 2005; Hartley & Tarvydas, 2022; Parker et al., 2005; Riggan & Maki, 2003; Smart, 2016; Wright, 1980). These developments further differentiated the emerging profession from extant professional disciplines characterized by all three elements of the title VRC (Parker et al., 2005). The profession's philosophical frameworks were rooted in the social justice purpose of assisting people with disabilities to maximize vocational opportunities, independence, and full community inclusion. Vocational outcomes in personally meaningful employment consistent with the individual's unique strengths emerged as the primary VRC clinical intervention. Engaging in one's life purpose through a vocation enhanced social justice, health, wellbeing, independence, and social inclusion (Allan et al., 2018; Hartley & Tarvydas, 2022; Parker et al., 2005; Strong, 1998; Wong, 2020). The roles and functions were not simple transactional exchanges connecting a job seeker to a vacant job. VRC competency required interpersonal transformational relationship skills to identify, develop, and unleash untapped individual potential used in a vocational calling. While a job can pay the rent, meaningful vocations serve as great social equalizers advancing social justice for people with disabilities (Parker et al., 2005; Sales, 2007; Wong, 2020).

Wright (1980) in the seminal text *Total Rehabilitation* frames *rehabilitation* as an interpersonal relationship founded on a shared aspirational goal to maximize functioning to improve the quality of life

in all major life capacities. This distinctly different conceptualization of the word *rehabilitation* focuses on advising and informing the individual as they emancipate, liberate, and empower themselves overcoming social and environmentally imposed barriers, restrictions, or constraints. This is not the form of rehabilitation defined as restoring function caused by a defect centered on the individual in need of correction, treatment, restoration, or healing. The emerging profession's distinctly different brand of *rehabilitation* recognized disability as a natural part of life attributing the *problem* that needs to be fixed to the socially and environmentally imposed constraints, restraints, and barriers (Smart, 2018).

It is important to note these early philosophical philosophies were influenced by the emerging disability civil rights movement (Parker et al., 2005). Smart (2018) argued the existing professional disciplines of the time were philosophically influenced by the culturally dominant and patriarchal medical model or deficits model of disability adopting a lexicon of dehumanizing terms like patient, handicapped, defective, deficient, enfeebled, debilitated, incapacitated, imbecilic, or crippled. The medical model attributes the cause of disability related problems as the deficits caused by the presence of the disability. Fixing the problem focuses on reducing the deficits, weaknesses, limitations, inabilities, and incapacities. From a medical model perspective success requires the removal or significant improvement of the disability.

The medical model does a disservice to people with disabilities in many ways. First, the medical model makes the disability the defining aspect of the individual turning a human being into a dehumanized diagnostic label. Second, in many cases functional limitations result from arbitrary socially or environmentally defined constructs rather than the disability and the medical model precludes looking beyond the disability or the individual. Third, the medical model's focus on deficits is negatively reductionistic preventing the identification of untapped strengths, skills, abilities, capabilities, talents, passions, and hidden potential. Finally, the medical model is easily applied in a detached, objective,

paternalistic, and expert-authority patient-obedience approach interfering with autonomy, empathy, listening, trust, psychological safety, and holistic understanding.

The cultural dominance of the medical model influenced the early development of the PVR program; however, program consumers and many VRC professionals recognized the model was maladaptive, incongruent, and ineffective in PVR practice (Smart, 2018). The medical model became deeply offensive to the growing disability civil rights movement that argued the model entrenched stigmatization, marginalization, discrimination, and did little to normalize disability to overcome social and environmental barriers (Elliott & Leung, 2005; Smart, 2018). In response Congress shaped public policy rejecting the medical model replacing it with the psychosocial model that recognized barriers and constraints were functions of the social and built environment (Smart, 2018). Smart (2016) pointed out the rejection of the medical model in favor of the psychosocial model liberated the emerging profession to improve outcomes by focusing on individualized strengths, skills, abilities, capabilities, and talents rather than deficits. These core professional philosophies, interventions, perspectives, and values constituted a significant divergence from existing medical model disciplines such as psychology, mental health counseling, and social work.

The professionalization process advanced as consumers and disability rights advocates criticized the lack of uniform hiring standards in the PVR program demanding access to qualified and competent VRCs (Hartley & Tarvydas, 2022, Rumrill & Koch, 2015; Sales, 2012). Congress responded with progressive legislative actions and additional public investments to advance the quality and quantity of VRCs (Elliott & Leung, 2005; Hartley & Tarvydas, 2022; Jenkins et al., 1998; Sales, 2012).

In 1954 Congress declared that no other existing academic or professional discipline possessed the necessary body of knowledge or qualification standards to effectively meet the needs of consumers served in the PVR program (Jenkins et al., 1998; Sales, 2007). Congress invested federal funds to stimulate empirical research, expand the specialized body of knowledge, evaluate applied practices

scientifically, validate evidence-based practices, inform graduate training curriculum, and inform professional clinical practice (Jenkins et al., 1998; Patterson & Pointer, 2007; Sales, 2007).

In 1954, Mary Switzer, Director of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation attempted to settle the contentious ongoing debate about the proper disciplinary alignment of the RC profession that was claimed by psychology, education, counseling, and social work (O'Brien, 2001; Peterson et al., 2006). Switzer's public policy statement federally recognized VRC as a distinct profession, with a unique scope of practice, unique roles and functions, and distinct skills that could not be considered a subspecialty of psychology or social work (O'Brien, 2001). Switzer defined VRC as a new interdisciplinary or hybrid profession. While acknowledging shared overlapping knowledge, skills, and abilities, Switzer nevertheless stated the federal government's position that VRC is a standalone specialty professional discipline (O'Brien, 2001). Switzer's public policy statement did much to position the VRC as a profession but did little to impact the alignment variation of graduate degree programs diluting the brand with diffused professional identities attached to education, special education, health, human services, psychology, and social work (O'Brien, 2001). The deeply entrenched differences in professional identities have continued to be a contentious debate resulting in internal factions and divisions (Brubaker, 1981; Leahy & Tarvydas, 2001; O'Brien & Graham, 2009; Patterson, 2009; Patterson, 1957; Stebnicki, 2009; Tarvydas et al., 2009). These factional conflicts have negatively impacted recruitment by keeping the profession marginalized and invisible while also negatively impacting retention by failing to instill commitment around a shared unified professional identity (O'Brien & Graham, 2009; Patterson, 2009).

In professions, professional membership organizations serve several essential functions that support recruitment, retention, and professional thriving. In 1925 the National Rehabilitation Association (NRA) was established to be the voice in public policy advocacy improving the lives of people with disabilities (Sales, 2012). In 1952 the American Counseling Association (ACA) was formed with a

rehabilitation psychology division being formed in the American Psychological Association (Peterson et al., 2006). In 1955 faculty and academic researchers in higher education formed the National Council on Rehabilitation Education establishing a peer reviewed journal to disseminate evidence-based research into applied practice (Patterson, 2009). In 1958 the National Rehabilitation Counseling Association was formed. Over time other peer reviewed research journals were established (Sales & Organist, 1986). The profession's multidisciplinary identity diffusion a proliferation resulted in a proliferation of niche membership organizations that have come and gone (Patterson, 2009). This professional identity diffusion within a small public service profession diluted the professional community, entrenched internal divisions, impeding unification of professional brand identity, and prevented the development of a sense of belonging to the VRC professional community (Barnes et al., 2012; Huber et al., 2019; Patterson, 2009).

Phillips et al. (2022a) pointed out some organizations focused only on those employed in the PVR program, ignoring, or neglecting the needs of professionals practicing in an expanding private sector. Other organizations concentrated on counseling aligning the professional brand with mental health counseling, marriage and family counseling, and general counseling. These groups tended to use the term Rehabilitation Counseling deemphasizing vocational roots and reembracing the medical model befitting private practice clinical counseling settings. Some retained focus on VRCs vocational rehabilitation roots neglecting, ignoring, or disassociating from the counseling aspects of the profession. Several organizations represent other subset constituencies such as scholarly researchers, counselor educators, paraprofessionals, or various subspecialties creating a plethora of professional identity silos (Phillips et al., 2022a).

As scholarly research and applied clinical practice identified evidence-based practices, the persistently growing need for qualified VRCs spurred research to inform preservice professional curriculum (Leahy, 2012; Leahy & Szymanski, 1995). Researchers investigated and identified essential



roles, functions, competencies, and specific knowledge, skills, and abilities required for competent practice (Aliff & Sprong, 2020; Alston et al., 2006; Chan et al., 2003; Chan et al., 2016; Frain et al., 2013; Leahy, 2012; Leahy et al.; 2019; Leahy et al., 2003; Leahy et al., 2009; Leahy & Szymanski, 1995). However, the disjointed disciplinary affiliations of graduate programs produced inconsistent curricula informed by the diverse variety of primary professional identities (Barnes et al., 2012; Hartley & Tarvydas, 2022; Patterson, 2009).

Standardization of VRC graduate education curriculum required action and resulted in the establishment of the Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE) in 1972. CORE provided the emerging profession with a mechanism to formalize graduate school curriculum standards by creating an accreditation system aligned with the PVR labor force needs and the developing body of knowledge (Linkowski & Szymanski, 1993; Patterson, 2009; Shaw & Kuehn, 2009; Szymanski, 1991). CORE accreditation advanced the professionalization process standardizing the preservice curriculum standards and enforcing instructional fidelity. However, it left the issues around the disciplinary alignment of these programs unaddressed (Patterson, 2009; Shaw & Kuehn, 2009). CORE successfully standardized the basic curriculum, but individual professional identities and the larger professional brand remained confused, split, diffused, and divided (Patterson, 2009).

In 1973 the CRCC was established (Leahy et al., 2019a). CRCC established and managed the VRC profession's board certification examination process creating an industry recognized credential providing employers and consumers with an assurance of core competency. CRCC is the oldest and most empirically validated national counseling board certification examination process in the United States (Leahy et al., 2013; Leahy & Holt, 1993). CRCC partners with researchers to periodically conduct job analysis, role and function studies, and evidence-based practice studies informing the content of the examination. Successful examinees are issued the CRC (CRC) credential validating mastery of the profession's core competencies (Leahy et al., 2019a). These efforts made VRC a model in the helping

fields creating the expectation that research-based and research-validated competencies are required to prepare for and remain current in professional clinical practice (Leahy et al., 2019b).

While the professional talent supply pipeline slowly added capacity and the number of VRCs entering the workforce grew, it is important to note increasing demand continually exceeded supply. Pragmatic PVR program staffing practices maintained the overrepresentation of multidisciplinary underqualified VRCs. In response CRCC created an extensive list of inclusive, unusually permissive, and professionally atypical alternative eligibility categories to facilitate increasing the number of CRCs available in the labor market. An unintended consequence of these actions was the failure to emphasize CORE accredited programs. Broad educational eligibility criteria inadvertently had negative impacts on CORE program recruitment, enrollments, and the demand for more programs specific to VRC. With multiple pathways to enter the professional domain encroachment by aligned professions was facilitated and encouraged rather than controlled or prevented (Leahy, 2012; P. Shlemon, personal communication, January 12, 2023). While the CRC evolved into the VRC profession's "gold standard" credential it was completely voluntary rather than required for practice. This optional voluntary nature of the credential did not require employers of VRCs to honor or value this standard in hiring practices, nor did it require VRCs to obtain it to enter or maintain it to practice as a VRC (Shlemon, personal communication, January 12, 2023).

Recognizing the need for the emerging VRC profession to formally establish a professional code of ethical conduct, CRCC partnered with professionals, educators, stakeholders, and employers to establish the first Code of Professional Ethics for CRCs (Leahy & Holt, 1993). This development including the establishment of a formal ethical violation review board, procedures to report ethical violations of CRCs, and enforcement mechanisms including professional sanctions (Leahy & Holt, 1993). CRCC established and has maintained a systematic approach to ethical code revision processes to ensure the code is a living document that keeps pace with social evolution.

On the surface by the late 1990s the profession had achieved several key indicators of Freidson's (2013) model. The occupation transitioned into the profession stage as it amassed an organized body of specialized knowledge supported by empirical research informed by distinct philosophical frameworks (Chan, 2004; Chan et al., 2016; Chan et al., 2004; Leahy & Szymanski, 1995; Sales, 2012). The profession had established a delimited scope of practice, defined activities, specialized roles, and functions informing industry recognized minimum credentials required for competent professional practice (Glenn & Lee, 2022; Leahy & Szymanski, 1995). It possessed formally defined curriculum standards for the attainment of qualifications with accreditation enforcement by CORE (Glenn & Lee, 2022; Shaw & Kuehn, 2009; Zanskas, 2017). VRC possessed a rigorous board certification examination process and possessed an enforceable code of professional ethics with obligatory continuing professional education requirements (Emener, 1987; Glen & Lee, 2022; Leahy & Holt, 1993). The profession was represented by several professional membership organizations disseminating evidence-based research in peer-reviewed journals and conferences (Fleming et al., 2011; Matkin, 1983; McCarthy, 2020; Patterson, 2009; Phillips et al., 2022a; Philips & Leahy, 2012; Sales, 2012; Sussman, 1965). At the time many of the profession's pioneers assumed the progress achieved would continue (Patterson et al., 2005).

Critical examination of the VRC profession within the context of Freidson's (2013) model provides a more sobering assessment. The profession never achieved control over the occupational domain and never possessed the ability to safeguard practice from encroachment. VRC never achieved a majority position within the practice domain. Labor market demand outpacing the profession's talent supply pipeline left the single largest professional practice sector overwhelmingly encroached upon by a variety of other disciplines. VRC was unable to strictly enforce minimum qualification standards for entry into professional practice. The necessity of underfilling staffing practices, overly inclusive alternative pathways to the voluntary CRC, failure to grow the number of CORE accredited graduate programs with

the capacity to meet the workforce needs, and internal divisions prevented the VRC profession from effectively defending and controlling the professional domain. The profession's inability to control entry into the practice domain removed a key professional recruitment tool preventing increasing the talent pipeline capacities entrenching the scarcity of CRCs and increasing the need of the PVR program to hire unqualified or underqualified individuals as VRCs. These VRCs create programmatic challenges requiring intensive training, upskilling, and reskilling. These underqualified VRCs require the creation of risk reducing bureaucratic managerial control structures that are incongruent with professionalism. In a vicious cycle growing labor force demand for VRCs magnifies the scarcity of VRCs necessitating hiring practices that erode building the talent pipeline capacity further reducing the number of VRCs available in the labor market rendering the profession unattractive and difficult to recruit new professionals and retain current professionals.

The profession's failure to control the practice domain through exercising legitimate gatekeeping authority enforcing minimum qualification standards affects both the supply side and demand side. Control of the professional domain represents more than a profession's territorial self-interest. Freidson (2013) argues the only way professions build and maintain public confidence, trust, legitimacy, and authority is effectively functioning to assure consumer protections. Consumer protection functions of a profession include gatekeeping entry into practice by enforcing required minimum qualification standards, protecting the use of the professional brand assuring it is used only by qualified professionals, and enforcing professional standards of conduct and ethical practice (Freidson, 2013). Historical VRC hiring and employment practices result in the profession's brand identity being used and defined by underqualified or unqualified individuals (Chan, 2003; Dew et al., 2008; Landon et al., 2024; O'Brien & Graham, 2009; P. Shlemon, personal communication, February 6, 2024). VRCs brand identity has been diffused, diluted, devalued, its credibility and validity have been questioned (Barnes et al., 2012; Huber & Oswald, 2017; Irons, 1989; Maki & Tarvydas, 2012; Patterson, 2009). The system

management control structures made necessary by employing underqualified VRCs create a de-professionalized practice environment that prevents CRC thriving.

### **De-Professionalization Stage**

The evolution of the VRC occupation to full-fledged profession was incomplete. Several recent developments have regressively reversed the gains of the profession, with many voices arguing the return to occupational status. Power, authority, and influence is the life blood of a profession's ability to maintain public confidence and maintain authority over the professional domain (Freidson, 2013). As VRC developed in parallel with other counseling professions it became painfully evident that the profession had not established a comparable level of political power, authority, recognition, and influence.

The growing power and expanded political influence of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) slowly emerged as a challenge to the VRC profession (Patterson et al., 2006). CACREP was founded in 1981 and is the largest and most identifiable accreditation body engaged in the accreditation of higher education graduate programs in a variety of counseling disciplines (Bobby, 2013; Shaw & Kuehn, 2009; Tarvydas et al., 2009). Since its establishment CACREP has actively and effectively worked to unify a wide variety of diverse counseling specialties coalesced within a dominant primary counseling professional identity. CACREP was not perceived as a threat to the VRC profession due to the presence of CORE and the belief that there was no conflict with the primary VRC practice domain in the PVR program.

In 1982 the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) was established to create a national counselor certification system for professional counselors (Arslan, 2018). While a few CRCs were actively engaged in this newly emerging unified counseling identity many were not because they were primarily focused on CORE, CRCC, and the PVR practice domain (Glenn & Lee, 2022).

CACREP, NBCC, and the American Counseling Association (ACA) forged a collaborative strategic alignment that emerged as a powerfully unified, vocal, proactively engaged, and politically influential voice for the counseling profession in the public square. Counseling's unification juxtaposed against the VRC profession's disunification, division, and factionalism prevented a unified, coordinated, or intentional VRC engagement in this process (Patterson, 2009). Unable or unwilling to demand a seat at the emerging counseling table may have unintentionally resulted in VRC ending up on the menu. As various counseling specialties coalesced under a unified counseling brand identity facilitated by CACREP, NBCC, and ACA attention turned to controlling the professional domain establishing gatekeeping control authority over professional practice using the title counselor. This gatekeeping function was attained by counseling as they lobbied state legislatures to establish professional counselor licensing standards (Arslan, 2018). Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) laws defined and regulated all forms of professional counseling restricting entry and practice based on qualification standards that restricted the lawful use of the title counselor (Arslan, 2018). The LPC provided the counseling profession with the mechanism to limit employment to only qualified counselors as defined by CACREP, NBCC, and ACA (Arslan, 2018; Glenn & Lee, 2022; Tarvydas et al., 2009). VRC was not meaningfully engaged and had little influence on these licensure laws assuming an LPC would not be required in CRC practice settings (Leahy, 2012). A majority of LPC laws influenced by the unified counseling profession mandate graduation from CACREP accredited graduate programs and passing the NBCC examination to the exclusion of CORE accredited programs and the CRCC examination (P. Shlemon, personal conversation, February 8, 2024).

Over the years professional opportunities for CRCs had expanded beyond the PVR program as the private sector began to value the skill set (P. Shlemon, personal conversation, February 8, 2024). In these practice settings, LPC laws became a pressing concern as CRCs found themselves legally blocked from counseling practice (Tarvydas et al., 2009). The lack of a unified VRC brand identity, brand

recognition, and lack of political influence rendered VRC unable to impact or influence these public policy decisions (Tarvydas et al., 2009). Key stakeholders and decision makers did not recognize, respect, or value VRC as a legitimate counseling profession (Tarvydas et al., 2009). CACREP, NBCC, and ACA have successfully asserted dominant control over the counseling brand, practice domains, and qualification standards (Tarvydas et al., 2009). While some VRCs voiced the need for the profession to embrace the emerging counseling identity, many VRCs resisted efforts to unify with CACREP, NBCC, or the ACA (Tarvydas et al., 2009). CACREP accredited program graduates and NBCC certification became the “gold standard” in LPC laws limiting CRCs private practice opportunities and barring third party billing privileges in many states (Tarvydas et al., 2009). Some voices within the unified counseling profession do not favor unification with VRC based on doubts about its legitimacy and perceptions of a lack of professional parity (Shaw & Kuehn, 2009; Tarvydas et al., 2009).

These developments exacerbated the already contentious and divisive internal VRC debate around professional identity (Patterson et al., 2005). It also put the profession in a competitive disadvantage making recruitment of graduate students difficult. An VRC graduate degree provides opportunities in the PVR program but creates barriers to private practice on a state-by-state basis. While other counseling graduate degrees provide access to PVR practice without limiting private practice opportunities in any state. These developments also incentivize VRC graduates to forego the CRCC examination in favor of the NBCC examination resulting in fewer first-time examinations and declining numbers of CRCs (P. Shlemon, personal communication, December 12, 2023).

The early 2000s brought initial conversations about the future of CORE and CACREP (Hartley & Tarvydas, 2022; Shaw & Kuehn, 2009; Zanskas, 2017). In 2007 these discussions nearly resulted in the merger of CORE and CACREP (Bobby, 2013; Glenn, 2006). CACREP’s board approved the merger but the CORE board rejected it (Bobby, 2013; Patterson et al., 2006). At the time CACREP supporters argued the merger would unite the counseling professions fully including and embracing CRCs assuring parity in

professional licensing. CORE supporters asserted the merger would irreparably change the focus of the VRC profession, water-down the curriculum, deemphasize the profession's historical connection to the PVR program, and erode the essential core competencies (Bobby, 2013; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs,, 2015; Huber et al., 2019).

In 2010, the U.S. Veteran's Administration (VA) announced that it would recognize LPCs from CACREP-accredited programs as qualified to work within the VA system (Bobby, 2013). Many CRCs who had been employed in the VA holding CORE-accredited graduate degrees were excluded from employment within the VA mental health system (Bobby, 2013).

While PVR agencies have never been mandated to ensure all VRCs meet CRC qualifications, prior to 2014 federal law required state agencies to submit an annual Comprehensive System of Personnel Development plan that specified the minimum qualification standards employed by the agency and the strategies the agency employed to ensure the development of a qualified professional labor force (Sherman et al., 2019). Prior to 2014 many Comprehensive System of Personnel Development plans specified VRC minimum qualifications as being eligible to sit for the CRCC examination within 5 years of hire and strategies for reaching this standard often included tuition reimbursement or other financial incentives. This requirement was removed with the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2015). For the first time in the history of the PVR program Congress reversed its historic emphasis on increasing VRC qualifications (Sherman et al., 2019). Congress not only removed the minimum standards requirement it also encouraged PVR agencies to address VRC recruitment by hiring individuals with undergraduate degrees in fields such as business, human resource management, and economics (Sherman et al., 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2018, U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Previously allocated federal training funds earmarked to help states fund graduate level upskilling were converted to general funds for any allowable program purpose (Sherman et al., 2019).



These actions effectively downgraded VRCs from professional to occupational status (Aliff & Sprong, 2020; Chan et al., 2017; McClanahan & Sligar, 2015). While some PVR agencies maintain CRC hiring preferences and qualification standards they do so voluntarily under no obligation to enforce the standards. Since 2015 many PVR agencies have removed hiring preferences and have lowered qualification standards to undergraduate degrees. This public policy change compounded the factors impeding VRC graduate student recruitment and CRC retention as professionalism is perceived to be devalued. This has had a chilling effect on the profession's graduate programs recruitment, enrollment, viability, and sustainability (Chan et al., 2017; McClanahan & Sligar, 2015).

In 2015 the boards of CACREP and CORE successfully concluded the previously unsuccessful merger (Aliff & Sprong, 2020; CACREP, 2015; Fleming et al., 2022; Strauser, 2017). The merger was finalized in 2017, with CACREP assuming all accreditation responsibilities for formerly CORE-accredited programs (CACREP, 2015). CORE accreditation reports archived under the custodial care of CRCC indicate in 2014 there were 128 CORE accredited VRC master's degree programs enrolling 5,500 students graduating approximately 1,500 RCs each year (P. Shlemon, personal communication, February 6, 2024). CACREP's *2022 Vital Statistics Report (2023)* indicates in the 2022 academic year this number had declined to 93 CACREP accredited VRC master's degree programs enrolling 3,509 students graduating 1,108 VRCs each year (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs, 2022). The decline in the number of programs, number of enrolled students, and number of graduates is counterintuitive considering the insatiable demand and job opportunities for VRCs in the PVR program.

The current accreditation, state licensure, and professional climate negate any potential advantages of job availability in the labor market. Recruitment into the profession's graduate programs is extremely challenging. A degree in the field is no longer necessary to get a job in PVR while at the same time a degree in the profession significantly restricts career opportunities in other practice

settings on a state-by-state basis. Enticing new recruits to invest time, money, and effort to complete a graduate degree and pass a rigorous professional examination is unattractive if it has no value, means nothing in the labor market, and only serves to limit career alternatives.

In 2024 it is estimated that a little over 15% of all PVR practicing VRCs hold the CRC credential (P. Shlemon, personal communication, January 24, 2024). Since its founding in 1974 CRCC records reflect continuous steady year over year increases in the total number of CRCs in the professional labor force peaking at 16,913 in 2014 (P. Shlemon, personal communication, February 6, 2024). Since 2015 the total number of CRCs has dropped each year with just 13,551 total CRCs in 2023 (P. Shlemon, personal communication, February 6, 2024). These declines are primarily due to fewer eligible first-time examinees and the hemorrhaging of CRCs who choose not to renew at their first 5-year renewal cycle (P. Shlemon, personal communication, February 8, 2023). Fewer first-time examinees are attributed to the significant declines in the number of accredited programs, declining enrollments, declining graduates, and the incentives to take the NBCC examination over the CRCC examination for professional licensing. The percentage of PVR program employed first time examinees has also declined sharply reflecting the deemphasizing of the credential post WIOA. The number of first renewal cycle CRCs who choose not to renew after the first 5 years is also troubling. CRCC surveys indicate the most common reason cited is PVR agencies no longer emphasizing, valuing, or supporting the CRC credential. Other reasons cited include lack of pay differentials based on qualifications, the perception that the job no longer reflects professional counseling as the bureaucratic case management duties and managerial controls have usurped professionalism, with many reporting their intent to completely abandon the profession in favor of an alternative career path (P. Shlemon, personal communication, February 8, 2023).

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2022 an estimated 82,420 VRCs were employed in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). With 13,551 CRCs in the United States this indicates less than 17% of all practicing VRCs have attained the CRC credential. In 2023 an

estimated 3,910 CRCs are employed in the PVR program (P. Shlemon, personal communication, February 6, 2024). In 2022 an estimated 27,550 VRCs were employed in the PVR program meaning less than 15% of PVR VRCs meet the profession's minimum qualification standards (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). As a result, 85% of the PVR VRC workforce lacks the professional credential assuring core competencies and are not obligated to honor the profession's code of ethics (P. Shlemon, personal communication, January 24, 2024). The potential for harm and concerns over consumer protection, professional efficacy, consumer success, and program performance are staggering.

Another indication of professionals disengaging from the profession is found in several recent studies indicating paid membership in the profession's organizations has plummeted (McCarthy, 2020; Phillips et al., 2022b). The membership declines have impacted the organizational functioning, sustainability, and viability. Declines in memberships also negatively impact scholarly research, knowledge dissemination, and implementation of evidence-based practices as peer reviewed journals and conferences disappear. Professional membership organization engagement functions of identity development, professional community belonging, professional support, professional career development, commitment, perseverance, and resiliency are unmet.

The dominating theme of the CSAVR 2022 spring conference was the PVR program's VRC recruitment and retention crisis (Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation, 2022a). State PVR agencies describe a systemic hemorrhaging of VRCs attributed to many factors making the job more difficult, demanding, unmanageable, less attractive, and unsustainable (CSAVR, 2022; Herbert et al., 2020; Pitt et al., 2013; Zanskas & Stohmer, 2011). Many cite low salaries, cuts in fringe benefit packages, and labor market trends as a primary contributor. Initiatives like increasing pay, paying sign on bonuses, and work-life balance initiatives are frequently reported to show initial short-term promise that fail to significantly impact the problem long term.

Viewed from the perspective of Freidson (2013) it can be argued that VRC no longer possesses the features required to be considered a profession. VRC continues to maintain an organized body of knowledge shaped by distinct philosophical frameworks but the capacity to advance that body of knowledge is being stressed as academic positions decline due to decreasing enrollments and the disappearance of professional organizations and peer reviewed journals. The profession has never controlled its occupational domain which is continually encroached upon as the CRC credential is both optional, voluntary, and growing scarcer. CACREP accreditation abdicated VRCs power to define and control the profession's curriculum standards to the unified counseling profession that does not respect the unique nature of PVR practice or the essential competencies of a CRC. The established professional code of ethical conduct only applies to 13,551 of the 82,420 practicing VRCs. At present, VRC is arguably an occupational job title in search of a profession.

### **Recruitment & Retention**

The PVR program labor force crisis creating barriers to the recruitment and retention of VRCs, and CRCs has received considerable scholarly research attention investigating potential causes and viable solutions (Herbert et al., 2023). The following is a brief review of the extant literature. It begins by reviewing evidence for negative impacts on the PVR program correlated with the recruitment and retention crisis. Next, it provides a brief review of the extant literature specifically focused on barriers affecting VRC recruitment. Finally, it reviews the extant literature specifically concentrating on the barriers to VRC retention in PVR practice.

### **Impacts**

Surprisingly, few studies have examined the negative effects of the VRC recruitment and retention crisis on PVR consumers. Therefore, this section begins by reviewing the literature from similarly situated practice settings. While some turnover in organizations is Janicel, expected, and can have positive organizational effects, significant pervasive turnover is extraordinarily pernicious in social

services, human services, mental health, and counseling organizations (Knight et al., 2013). These types of organizations do not achieve the mission through simple transactional exchanges of goods and services. These organizations are dependent on the quality of the transformational interpersonal human relationship between a client and an employee. The unique knowledge, skills, abilities, and expertise needed to cultivate effective working relationships are difficult to develop requiring intensive education, training, and practice. In addition, these types of organizations are typically under resourced with demand exceeding organizational human resource capacity. These types of organizations tend to be understaffed, overworked, and overwhelmed in the best of conditions (Knight et al., 2013; Knight et al., 2012a; Knight et al., 2012b). These dynamics make these organizations unusually dependent on maintaining a stable, reliable, consistent, and dependable professional labor force.

Excessive turnover in counseling dependent organizations has been consistently correlated with negative impacts on client wellbeing. Studies have found correlates to poor service quality, ineffectiveness, inefficiencies, increased costs, client disengagement, client lack of follow through, recidivism, client dissatisfaction, ethical care issues, increased client stress, increased client anxiety, increased need for emotional de-escalation and crisis management, and significant decreases in the quality of consumer outcomes (Adams et al., 2019; Alexander et al., 1994; Babbar et al., 2018; Beale, 2023; Brabson et al., 2020; Eby et al., 2010; Garner et al., 2012; Glisson, 2009; Glisson et al., 2008; Hatch-Maillette et al., 2019; Johnson-Kwochka et al., 2020; Murphy, 2022; Plomondon et al., 2007; Woltmann et al., 2008). In addition, turnover of VRCs is a significant drain on organizational fiscal resources as the costs to recruit, hire, onboard, and intensively train new employees is substantial (Boushey & Glynn 2012; Fortin, 2022). High turnover in counseling dependent human services organizations also causes subtle negative organizational impacts such as creating a climate of stress, strain, frustration, and burnout as retained staff cover multiple workloads (Knight et al., 2013; Eby & Rothrauff-Laschober, 2012).

Turing to the extant VRC literature, Landon et al. (2024) postulate CRC turnover contributes to consumer disengagement, lack of follow through, and feelings of abandonment and lack of support. Frain et al. (2006) argue the empirical evidence suggests approximately 20,000 more people with disabilities served by the PVR program could achieve successful outcomes each year if all state VRCs had a master's degree in VRC. Clearly the harm caused by the failure of CRCs to thrive in the PVR program and barriers to the recruitment and retention of CRCs is significant. This harm is further exacerbated as vacancies go unfilled or are underfilled by unqualified staff requiring extensive and intensive training or upskilling (Chan et al., 2003). Aliff & Sprong (2020) argue that recruitment, retention, turnover, and the related scarcity of CRCs in the PVR program is a programmatic, professional, and social justice crisis requiring immediate action.

### **Recruitment**

For purposes of this study, I define recruitment as actions designed to locate, appeal to, draw, entice, invite, attract, enlist, enroll, or otherwise increase the number of new people entering the profession. Recruitment from this perspective implies that there is a recruitment role and obligation at the individual, profession, organizational, system, and higher education levels.

A Google Scholar keyword search using rehabilitation, counselor, and recruitment conducted on February 6, 2024, returned over 59,500 results. Sorting out unrelated content resulted in just forty-nine studies. As recruitment and retention have been consistent historical themes in the profession, the extant literature was surprising limited. A cursory review of these articles indicates that the body of knowledge is replete with articles that contain both the word recruitment and retention, clearly this phenomenon has been conceptualized as an interrelated phenomenon.

However, a deeper review finds many these articles study either recruitment or retention with few studies attempting to investigate both. A limited number of articles provide insights into recruitment issues while a larger number of articles provide insights into retention issues. For this

reason, there is a surprising dearth of findings specific to recruitment. In fact, there are no known extant studies that employed market research strategies to determine how the profession is perceived, recognized, understood, or valued by the public, high school students, people with disabilities, or undergraduate students. No extant studies could be located focused internally to understand variables inherent to the profession itself and the PVR program practice setting that could shed light on the perceived attractiveness, allure, or appeal of the profession to both new and existing professionals.

For example, Sussman & Haug (1968) studied individual characteristics, experiences, attitudes, and dispositions common in those who have already been attracted to the profession to provide a profile, typology, and categories of people who are more likely to be successfully attracted to the field. Additionally, the authors fleshed out what specific factors were most influential to attracting these types of people to the discipline. While this is helpful in targeting recruitment strategies and efforts to locate and engage with this small pool of candidates it does not provide insights in expanding the potential pool of candidates by enhancing the professional brand appeal.

Goodwin Jr (1986) identified marketing strategies that VRC master's degree programs could use to recruit new graduate students. The bulk of the article is framed around specific marketing products, behaviors, and tactics. However, a very brief discussion of inaccurate perceptions, stereotypes, and biases about the profession were shared by the author based on anecdotal personal experience. No reference citations were provided to indicate that these factors had been studied by other scholars, and I could find no follow-up studies that attempted to empirically study these inaccurate perceptions.

Many articles on the topic indicate that authors believe that the profession is not recognized nor understood by the public and suffers from a form of professional brand anonymity (Huber et al., 2019). However, again no reference citations were provided to indicate these beliefs were anything but anecdotal. A Google Scholar search on keyword combinations including rehabilitation, counselor, brand recognition, brand reputation, public awareness, public recognition, visibility, anonymity, or prestige

returned no empirical research attempting to understand how well the profession is recognized, understood, or respected by the public or PVR program stakeholders.

Patterson (2009) referred to VRC as the “best kept secret” in the helping professions and cited the professions public invisibility as a primary factor. The author provides a vision for the profession to enhance the profession’s brand recognition and reputation specifically citing the need of the profession to market itself and its value proposition aggressively to the public as opposed to only relying on graduate training programs to market to prospective students. Once again there were no citations nor references to research studies supporting these perceived brand issues that may profoundly impact the ability of the profession to attract new recruits. While it was difficult to find any formal market research to support these assumptions, reading the profession’s scholarly literature demonstrates that these assumptions and perceptions are assumed to be true and are frequently cited as factors impacting recruitment.

Over the years several authors have studied or proposed specific strategic recruitment enticements such as increased federal grants and scholarship programs (Chan, 2003; Dew et al., 2008; Paul & Brodwin, 2017). Others studied graduate student preferences for professional practice settings (Chapin & Goodwin, 2006; Lustig & Strauser, 2009). Still others studied professional identity and association membership as recruitment strategies (Fleming et al., 2011). One focused on targeted recruitment efforts to enhance multicultural diversity of VRC graduate student recruits (Minor et al., 2017).

Herbert et al. (2023) conducted a mixed methods analysis of recruitment and retention of VRCs in PVR practice. The methodological approach and focus indicated the authors primarily obtained information about retention based on the perceptions of currently practicing VRCs in PVR practice. The study identified several recruitment barriers perceived by VRCs. These included insufficient supply of qualified candidates, potential candidates who have limited understanding of the job self-selecting out



by not applying for vacancies, the extensive and cumbersome hiring processes in state PVR agencies resulting in losing qualified applicants to other employers, and salary levels that are not competitive with similarly situated jobs. While these are important insights on VRCs perceived barriers to recruiting applicants for existing vacancies it does not provide insights into making the profession more attractive to a larger pool of new recruits.

It appears from the review of the literature that the extant body of knowledge on VRC recruitment has significant gaps. Clearly the profession needs to increase understanding of why an intrinsically rewarding profession in high demand is unable to sell and position itself within the professional marketplace as a viable, attractive, and coveted destination career of choice.

### **Retention**

Many factors have been identified in the literature that are correlated with the retention of quality employees (Herbert et al., 2023). These factors include professional identity incongruence, values conflict, person-job fit, high job stress, job dissatisfaction, compassion fatigue, burnout, excessive workloads, low pay, poor peer social relationships, unmanageable large caseloads, physical office location issues, limited recognition, limited appreciation, supervisory effectiveness issues, limited professional development, lack of advancement, and bureaucratic paperwork tasks that usurp VRC applied practice of core competencies (Andrew et al., 2002; Chan, 2003; Dew et al., 2008; Fleming, 2018; Herbert et al., 2023; Herbert et al., 2020; Landon et al., 2024; Layne et al., 2004; Lin & Ni, 2021; Matkin & Bauer, 1993; O'Brien & Graham, 2009; Pitt et al., 2013; Sabella, 2017; Schultz & Millington, 2007; Schultz et al., 2002; Zheng et al., 2017). A review of the literature indicates that the PVR program psychosocial cultural milieu may not be supportive or congruent with VRC thriving. However, it is also evident that the high turnover rate of all VRCs in the PVR program indicates that this failure to thrive in this setting is systemic.

Judge & Church (2000) argued the concept of job satisfaction is the most extensively researched topic in the history of organizational psychology, business management, and human resource management. Job satisfaction is operationalized as an employee's affective (emotional) response and connection to their work, coworkers, and employer (Locke, 1970). Job satisfaction has consistently been correlated with employee recruitment (attraction), identity development, loyalty, commitment, retention, resiliency, efficacy, efficiency, productivity, and performance measures across multiple employment domains and in diverse cultures (Hoff et al., 2020; Judge et al., 2020; Keith et al., 2021; Sahito & Vaisanen, 2020; Saputra & Mahaputra, 2022). In addition, employee job satisfaction has been correlated with customer satisfaction and organizational success in diverse industries and diverse cultures (Akdere & Egan, 2020; Ahmad & Raja, 2021; Charni et al., 2020; Chiesa et al., 2020; Kurdi et al., 2020; Phan et al., 2021).

Consistent with research trends in other professional disciplines, VRC job satisfaction has been a consistently empirically tested construct since the early 1940's (Bluett, 1945; DiMichael, 1949; Miller & Muthard, 1965; Wilkinson & Wagner, 1993). This early research established correlational relationships between RC job satisfaction and recruitment, retention, and performance. Much of this early research identified the quality and nature of supervisory, management, leadership, and cultural environments in PVR agencies as key moderators or mediators of job satisfaction (Aiken et al., 1972).

The relationship between job satisfaction and quality supervision, management, and leadership in public VR programs has been firmly established and advanced by significant contemporary research contributing to the empirical body of knowledge (Andrew et al., 2002; Armstrong et al., 2008a; Armstrong et al., 2008b; Capella & Andrew, 2004; Chan, 2004; Herbert et al., 2023; Herbert et al., 2020; Hylton, 2013; Landon et al., 2024; Landon & Schultz, 2018; Lane et al., 2012; Layne et al., 2004; Lu et al., 2023; McCarthy, 2013; McFarlane et al., 2011; O'Sullivan & Bates, 2014; Sabella, 2017; Schultz et al., 2002; Tansey et al., 2004; Zanskas & Stohmer, 2011).

The extant literature indicates that VRC failure to thrive in PVR practice is influenced by a complex tapestry of organizational systemic features that contribute to fatigue, burnout, exhaustion, apathy, eroding a sense of confidence and sense of professional competence. This complex systemic tapestry of organizational features prevents long term retention of VRCs. VRCs are voting with their feet by abandoning the PVR practice setting.

### **Summary**

The extant literature investigating the recruitment and retention crisis has overwhelmingly leveraged reductionistic micro-level approaches to identify variables and correlational effects. However, historically pervasive systemic problems are rarely caused or solved by a single individual micro-level factor. The VRC profession's historical context highlights key vulnerabilities inherent in VRC as a public service profession. These include multidisciplinary diversity preventing a common unified professional identity, voluntary rather than required qualification standards, brand identity diffusion, brand anonymity, and brand confusion. Internal divisions in the profession amplify identity diffusion, inhibits a unified professional community connection, and VRC struggles to sell the brand to internal and external audiences.

Recruitment requires selling the profession within a competitive marketplace of attractive, prestigious, and recognized alternative professions. Retaining and fully optimizing the existing limited supply of qualified VRCs requires fostering attractive clinical practice environments conducive of professional thriving, perseverance, and resilience. Collectively VRC, the PVR program, and higher education programs struggle to sell the profession externally and internally. An external value proposition is needed for effective recruitment and shaping key stakeholder preferences. An internal value proposition is required to continuously recruit and optimize the thriving of the limited existing supply of qualified VRCs.

Supply chain and labor market demand do not appear to be a linear relationship where market demand for VRCs drives higher education supply chain capacities to meet demand. The relationship in this case appears more intricately complex, reciprocal, and mutually codependent. This is due to the small size of the profession and the predominate practice sector.

Supply chain capacity appears dependent on the PVR market demanding and valuing the supply of the end-product, in this case a CRC. Recruitment into these graduate programs is also dependent on the PVR market creating working conditions that are congruent with professionalism and support professional thriving thereby making the career choice attractive, sustainable, and rewarding. While the PVR program has voiced an insatiable demand for VRCs, employment practices have devalued the CRC making the profession less attractive inadvertently failing to support generating growth in the capacity of talent supply chain. Rendering the profession unattractive in a competitive professional marketplace inhibits recruitment and enrollment in graduate programs resulting in the contraction rather than growth of the talent supply pipeline further decreasing the supply of CRCs. The growing labor market need, and supply chain contraction necessitates actions that further decrease supply while increasing demand. For these reasons, a macro-level systemic research agenda investigating CRC failure to thrive in PVR practice and the impacts on recruitment and retention is necessary to surface the complex tapestry of codependent issues that must be addressed to correct the problem of VRC recruitment and retention.

### **Chapter III: Research Methodology**

This critical autoethnography advances a macro-level contextualized comprehensive approach to investigate VRC failure to thrive in PVR practice and impediments to VRC recruitment and retention. This study is an intimate and personalized narrative inquiry of the lived experience of a CRC practicing in the PVR program for nearly 30 years. Autoethnography methodology is used to investigate the following research questions:

1. What can be learned about CRC failure to thrive through an autobiographical exploration of the lived experience of a CRC with nearly 30 years in PVR practice?
2. What can be learned about CRC failure to thrive through a critical ethnographic analysis of the total lived experience of the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu?

#### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Creswell (2014) urged disclosure of the philosophical worldview, paradigms, ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions that frame researcher thinking. Doing so allows the reader to approach this work with a transparent understanding of the beliefs and biases that informed the study and associated limitations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology constructed upon an eclectic foundation of philosophical ontological and epistemological orientations (Poulos, 2021). These eclectic philosophical lenses appeal to me as a human science researcher because they are congruent with what Creswell (2014) would describe as my own worldview. My philosophical assumptions shape and frame how I experience, perceive, and make sense of the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

When it comes to the study of human beings, I am the philosophical product of my own educational and professional past. My undergraduate education in sociology gave me an awareness and sensitivity to the complex reciprocal dynamics present when an individual is shaped within a psychosocial cultural milieu. My master's degree in VRC further heightened awareness of the

psychosocial phenomenological construction of an individual and shared realities. My approach to studying human beings in isolation or in groups is indelibly framed in psychosocial constructivism within a humanist axiology.

### ***Ontology***

In the human lived experience objective reality is subservient to the processes of selective perception and subjective construction of reality. Human beings do not experience a single objective external reality with any accuracy. Rather, an approximation of reality is constructed based on limitations in physiological sensory systems, neurocognitive perceptual systems, and a mix of evolutionarily inherited psychosocial response systems. External reality is filtered, altered, crafted, and distorted by our uniquely psychosocial and physiological evolutionary heritage. While an objective external reality exists, we are unable to observe it objectively or describe it with degree of accuracy. This psychosocial and physiological evolutionary heritage blurs myth into reality turning fact or fiction into continuums rather than dualistic dichotomies.

### ***Epistemology***

Studying this psychosocial construction of human reality requires grappling with the complexity of internal, external, conscious, and unconscious phenomena. Fisher (1985) posited narrative theory arguing that human beings can accurately be referred to as “homo narrans” because we are innately natural storytelling animals experiencing and constructing reality through dialogical stories. Fisher points out human beings are hard wired to perceive and craft stories containing a sequence of chronological events with cause-and-effect attributions that are infused with meaning and intentionality. This is congruent with the existentialist position that a human being is born into temporal existence and must find, create, or adopt some sense of meaning or purpose to achieve wellbeing (De Beauvoir, 2020). Frankl (2014) asserted that people are innately driven by a need to find meaning, purpose, and make sense out of their existence. Rogers (1995) adds that each human being is a “human becoming” through

interaction with a phenomenal lived experience in a subjectively perceived social reality. For Rogers, understanding human beings requires understanding internal frames of reference and the narrative stories we tell ourselves to make sense out of our world. In many ways Adler's (1998) concept of the *inferiority complex* is a form of narrative storytelling creating a sense of meaning framed by social interaction. Adler (1931) stated that human reality is the realm of meaning because it reflects this subjective narrative sense making. Contemporary neuroscience provides evidence that the primary function of the human brain is to construct stories out of sensory information favoring meaning making at the expense of accuracy (Armstrong, 2020; Armstrong, 2018; Hoffman, 2019; Mehl-Madrona, 2015; Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2022; Walker, 2012). This storytelling brain facilitates cognition, perception, consciousness, awareness, pattern recognition, memory, emotional regulation, and empathy (Armstrong, 2020). Stories, narratives, myths, fables, folk tales, and legends have long been viewed as the quintessentially human toolkit in evolutionary survival facilitating knowledge formation, knowledge sharing, and knowledge mobilization (Bayer & Hettinger, 2019; Garcia-Pelegrin et al., 2021; McAdams & Cowan, 2020; Mills, 2020; Smith et al., 2017; Storr, 2020; Zaidel, 2020). My epistemological approach views the individual simultaneously as the author of an individualized subjective reality and the central character who is shaped through interactions with a psychosocial cultural milieu thereby actively constructing perceptions of a subjective reality. Consistent with symbolic interactionism (Meltzer et al., 2020) I assume psychosocial culture and cultural identity influences the reality we sense, perceive, and interpret (Berger & Luckman, 2023). Our sense of self is therefore a psychosocial-cultural product (Miyamoto, 2023). Therefore, any attempt to understand an individual human being requires an inductive, holistic, and comprehensive approach to flesh out the dynamic, complex, and diverse conscious and unconscious layers of individual and group beliefs, norms, fears, aspirations, values, purposes, goals, taboos, myths, language, symbols, rituals, roles, expectations, and attributional biases. From the transformative worldview I recognize that socially marginalized communities experience

realities that are vastly different based on systems of control, marginalization, oppression, exclusion, inequality, prejudice, discrimination, and inequity (Camacho, 2020; Mertens, 2023a; Mertens, 2023b; Shan, 2022). As such, human subject researchers must be sensitive to asymmetric power relationships, systematic oppression, and structural systems of domination (Mertens, 2023a). From this worldview scholarly research requires ethical and moral clarity to avoid practices that further marginalize in order to promote transformational systems change restoring human dignity, equity, equality, autonomy, and social justice.

### ***Axiology***

My values are congruent with existential humanism (Copson, 2015; Davies, 2008; Maslow, 1987; May, 2009; Sartre et al., 2007; Rogers, 1995). My ethical principles are rooted in the principles of autonomy, beneficence, fidelity, justice, nonmaleficence, and veracity. Every human being has inherent worth and should be afforded respect, dignity, equality, and justice. I believe human beings should never be objectified, dehumanized, or reduced to inanimate objects, assets, resources, inputs, outputs, raw materials, or byproducts. Every person has unique individualized potential, abilities, capabilities, talents, strengths, skills, and individualized genius. Social problems can typically be attributed to social systems that ignore, deny, constrain, or restrain the full realization of individual human potential.

### **Research Method: Autoethnography**

Qualitative research methodologies seek to discover the ways in which individuals and groups experience, make sense of, and ascribe meaning to existence by gathering storytelling narratives and other data for analysis and interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology leveraging the researcher's own personal lived experiences (auto) as an embedded participant member of a psychosocial cultural community (ethno) to systematically observe, describe, analyze, and critique the cultural milieu using qualitative data gathered through written storytelling and narrative inquiry (graphy; Adams et al., 2022; Ellis et al., 2010).



In autoethnography the researcher serves as the primary research subject analogous to an autobiographical self-case-study (Adams et al., 2022). The methodology has roots in both narrative inquiry and phenomenology. The researcher-as-subject storytelling narrative evocatively draws the reader into the emotional and intellectual total lived experience of the psychosocial cultural phenomenon and represents the data set used for coding and thematic analysis (Adams & Herrmann, 2023). The goal is to synthesize objective knowledge with subjective ways of knowing (Adams et al., 2022; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 2004; Leavy, 2020; Poulos, 2021). Borrowing from phenomenology, autoethnography focuses on the subjective individualized lived experience of a phenomenon to understand the complex ways individuals and psychosocial cultures interact to construct core meanings defining an experience (Schwandt, 2014). Consistent with hermeneutics, autoethnography seeks to understand how people perceive, interpret, ascribe, and construct systems of meaning and how these meanings are embedded in shared language, symbols, and cultural artifacts (Fuster Guillen, 2019).

Ethnography has a long history in Anthropology serving as the methodology of choice for the objective and scientific study and scholarly description of cultures (Eriksen & Nielsen, 2013; Simpson & Coleman, 2017). Ethnography suffered from several key flaws (Hammersley, 2006). First, human beings modify behavior when they are aware of being observed, a phenomenon known as the *Hawthorne Effect* (Landsberger, 1958). This phenomenon made naturalistic observation by a non-member outsider problematic as a primary means of documenting cultures (Hammersley, 2006). Second, objective outside observers were rarely truly objective due to implicit and explicit biases, expectations, beliefs, norms, roles, and values impeding objective cultural interpretations (Shanklin, 1998; Warren & Kleisath, 2019). Third, as many of the cultures studied were Indigenous cultures considered “exotic” or “primitive” this type of ethnography reinforced dominant cultural privilege, subjugation, racism, stereotyping, justified oppression, marginalization, and sometimes rationalized genocide (Warren & Kleisath, 2019). Researchers in anthropology, sociology, organizational studies, education, and other

disciplines began to experiment with methodologies that amplified voices of researchers who were native members of the culture (Adams et al., 2022).

Originating with Heider (1975), autoethnography embraces the intersections where the individual meets the psychosocial cultural ecosystem (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Autoethnography recognizes, values, and embraces the researcher's subjective lived experience as embedded members of the culture of interest. Adams et al. (2017) described autoethnography as a qualitative research method that:

- 1) Uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences;
- 2) acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others;
- 3) uses deep and careful self-reflection- typically referred to as "reflexivity"- to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political;
- 4) shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles;
- 5) balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity; and
- 6) strives for social justice and to make life better (p. 2).

Adams et al. (2017) contend the use of autoethnography in scholarly research extends the extant body of knowledge by creating compelling contextualization recognizing knowledge is situational, subjective, and contextual. The authors assert autoethnography synergizes objective knowledge with subjective ways of knowing within the context of a total lived experience. It reveals unique systems of sensemaking, wayfinding, and meaning making as an individual is shaped by the psychosocial cultural milieu.

As of February 1, 2024, Google Scholar lists 95,600 sources using the term autoethnography, and 22,200 sources using autoethnography in doctoral dissertations. Autoethnography has advanced and is supported by professional organizations, professional journals, national and international conferences, and is taught as a specific course in several graduate programs (Adams et al., 2015). Autoethnography has been widely used in the social sciences including in the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, education, leadership studies, business, social work, political science, and counseling (Adams et al., 2015; Chang & Bilgen, 2020; Hernandez et al., 2022; Poulos, 2021).

### **Positionality Statement**

Autoethnography can be thought of as an in-depth single case-study positioning the researcher as research-subject (Adams et al., 2022; Hernandez et al., 2022, Reed-Danahay, 1997). While traditional postpositivist empirical methods emphasize objective rational conventions to eliminate bias and researcher influence, autoethnography embraces researcher bias and influence as a compromise to open the human black box to interrogate the subjective, emotional, and human lived experience (Adams & Herrmann, 2023; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Consistent with Spry (2017) the autobiographical narrative used for this study introduces the reader to my own autoethnographic “I” to gain a richer understanding of the total lived experience of a CRC embedded in the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu. My autoethnographic I positions the researcher-me as the sole research-subject-me.

### **Research Design**

The research project plan was designed to align with the autoethnographic method (Adams et al., 2022). Autoethnographic procedures used by this study include systemic self-reflexivity, introspection, memory mining, document mining, artifact mining, experience reconstruction, sensory and emotional data mining, and cultural re-immersion to inform production of member-embedded participant observation field notes (Adams & Herrmann, 2023). These procedures were used to collect data to inform the writing of autobiographical storytelling narratives and ethnographic storytelling

narratives. The various storytelling narratives were blended, braided, and synthesized into a single coherent and comprehensive autoethnographic storytelling narrative transcription. The autoethnographic transcription represents the primary data instrumentation device containing the total data set available for qualitative thematic data analysis.

Figure 1 provides a conceptual map of this study's research design. The research design is presented as a simplified sequential linear process to enhance clarity of understanding. However, it is important to note the process is not rigidly sequential with recursive and iterative aspects in applied practice.

**Figure 1**

### *Research Design Overview*

#### 1. Data Instrumentation:

1. **Memory Mining:** Self-Reflection, Semi-Structured Self-Interviews, Formative Events, Experiences, Sensory Perceptions, Emotions, Meaning
2. **Document Mining:** Journals, Jottings, Poems, Transcripts, Notes, Reports, Minutes, Publications, Writings, Communications, Memos, Logs
3. **Artifact Mining:** Souvenirs, Photographs, Mementos, Tokens, Reminders, Keepsakes, Memorabilia, Relics, Trophies, Awards, Collectables
4. **Participant Observation:** Cultural Observation Field Notes, Taboos, Rituals, Lexicon, Practices, Myths, Legends, Values, Priorities, Behaviors
5. **Member Checking:** Key Informant Third Party Memory Checks, Clarification, Verification, Accuracy Checking

#### 2. Data Collection:



#### 3. Data Synthesis:



#### 4. Data Analysis:



#### 5. Data Reporting:

Findings,  
Interpretation, &  
Recommendations

*Note.* Adapted by the author based on the work of Adams et al. (2022), Braun and Clarke (2022), Braun and Clarke (2020), Cooper and Lilyea (2022), and Ellis (2004).

### **Subject Selection**

Autoethnography is a single case-study where the researcher represents the sole research-subject. I leverage my own subjective lived experience as a CRC in PVR practice for nearly 30 years to

gain insights into the problem statement and research questions. Distinctive features of my career make me a uniquely qualified research subject. I entered my first professional position directly after graduating with a Master of VRC degree. This is atypical as many of my professional peers had long been employed in PVR practice and were required to obtain a graduate degree to remain employed. Compared to some of my peers, I had made a volitional decision to enter a profession obtaining a graduate degree to enter clinical practice, while many were being forced to obtain a graduate degree to keep their job. My peers were already immersed in the applied reality of occupational practice before they studied the academic professional ideal. My having been first introduced to the academic professional ideal created dissonance and disillusionment as it conflicted with the applied occupational reality of PVR practice.

My unique career path resulted in opportunities to serve in a variety of functional positions at every level of organizational hierarchy informing perspective taking reflective of practitioners, supervisors, managers, administrators, and leadership. I have experiences designing, managing, implementing, and administering every major operational function of a typical PVR agency. I have experiences practicing in multiple types of state VR agencies.

My current work at the University of Wisconsin-Stout Vocational Rehabilitation Institute afforded experiences with a majority of the seventy-eight state agencies. I have also gained experiences working with the Veteran's Administration VR program, Native American VR program, and with private rehabilitation counseling professionals. Providing consultation, professional continuing education, staff training, and technical assistance provided lived experiences with multiple organizational cultures, a variety of professionals, interacting with policy makers, and various consumer groups at the local, county, state, regional, and federal level. I have consistently been actively engaged in professional membership organizations, attending annual conferences, and serving in leadership roles at the state, regional, and national levels.

During my career I have been impacted, influenced, and shaped by the psychosocial cultural milieu through conscious and unconscious processes of acculturation, assimilation, and accommodation. As a supervisor, manager, administrator, and leader I consciously and unconsciously maintained, perpetuated, and amplified existing psychosocial cultures requiring others to acculturate, assimilate, or accommodate. I have also been a part of a collective transformational effort to re-define, re-design, re-align, and re-balance a deeply entrenched misaligned psychosocial cultural milieu. As the co-founder of the National Training Center for Transformational Rehabilitation Leadership I have worked with over one hundred leaders in PVR agencies to effect transformational systems and cultural change. Finally, as the current President of the Board for the CRCC, I have been working on the issues of recruitment and retention of qualified RCs for several years. It is the total cumulative effect of these professional lived experiences that make me a uniquely qualified researcher and research subject. Autoethnography embraces this positionality to contribute to the body of knowledge enhancing our understanding of factors negatively impacting VRC recruitment, retention, and thriving.

### **Data Sources**

This study targeted identified data sources relevant to the study's purpose statement, problem statement, research questions, and methodology (Adams et al., 2022). Autobiographical data was sourced from my memories, personal archives, documents, and artifacts. Systematic self-reflexivity and introspection are memory mining procedures that are stimulated and refined by document mining of journals, notes, calendar, logs, jottings, musings, drawings, poems, and written correspondence. Personal career artifacts such as mementos, keepsakes, awards, souvenirs, and photographs stimulated and advanced memory mining. Memory mining was further supplemented by key informant member checking. Member checking allowed me to check my own memories with those of others who shared a lived experience to gain clarity and enhance memory recall and accuracy.

Ethnographic memory mining applied the same procedures to produce member embedded participant observation field notes describing the lived experience of the culture. Field notes were informed by cultural document mining of memorandums, reports, publications, policies, meeting agendas, meeting minutes, and other official written communications. Cultural artifact mining generated observational field notes that examined the shared language, symbols, dogma, rituals, mythologies, legends, taboos, and behaviors. Key informant member checking further stimulated memory recall, cultural re-immersion, and accuracy checking.

The qualitative autobiographical data and ethnographic data collected were synthesized into a single coherent autoethnographic storytelling narrative transcription containing the primary data set used during data analysis (Adams et al., 2022).

### **Instrumentation**

Autobiographical data instrumentation centered on documenting systematic self-reflexive introspection procedures (Adams et al., 2022). Memory mining procedures enable the researcher self to fully engage the research-subject self in “memory work” stimulating memory recall to re-experience and reconstruct past lived experiences (Poulos, 2021). Recollective participant memories are intended to temporally center the researcher in the research-subject’s experience to see, hear, feel, think, and make sense of a specific formative moment. The procedure attunes the researcher to the phenomenon being studied stimulating mindful awareness aiding in the collection of experiential data (Berry, 2015). Mindful re-presence allows the researcher to gather emotional, sensory, psychological, and physical data received during formative lived experiences (Poulos, 2021). Attending to sensory and emotional experiences allows the collection of sensory, perceptual, and emotional data. This memory data is used to inform writing evocative and emotionally salient autobiographical storytelling narratives (Poulos, 2021). Memory mining was occasionally stimulated by employing a semi-structured self-interview protocol designed to stimulate memory recall, trigger remembrance, and surface recollection of

formative events (See Appendix A for semi-structured interview protocols). Systematic self-reflexive introspection and memory mining was enhanced by archived document mining and career artifact mining (Adams & Herrmann, 2023). Key informant member checking was used to stimulate further introspective memory recall and to gain clarifying insights from contemporaries. Member checking procedures serve as checks and balances protecting the autobiographical narrative from engaging in narcissistic, self-aggrandizing, self-serving, or self-delusion (Adams et al., 2022; Hernandez et al., 2022; Poulos, 2021). Systematic self-reflexive introspection, memory mining, and member checking were carefully documented in case study notation format, categorized, and catalogued.

Ethnographic data instrumentation centered on creating member embedded participant observation field notes (Adams et al., 2022). Ethnographic field notes provide a comprehensive description and critical analysis of the lived experience of the psychosocial cultural milieu. The objective is to provide a salient, engaging, accurate, and vivid account that places the reader inside the total lived experience of the culture to experience the forces of assimilation, accommodation, conformity, obedience, compliance, adaptation, conflict, and compromise (Adams et al., 2022). Ethnographic procedures used by this study include researcher-member embeddedness and thick descriptive participant observational field note narratives. I originally engaged in participant observation as an embedded member of the culture thereby reducing the risk of the “Hawthorne Effect” where behavior is adjusted in the presence of an outsider-observer. My embedded member positionality allowed naturalistic participant observation of the psychosocial cultural milieu stored in my memory. Embedded member participant observations are a storehouse of cultural data providing insights into implicit and explicit cultural elements, language, norms, beliefs, biases, values, priorities, symbols, rituals, and mythology. Selected ethnographic data collection instrumentation centered on researcher-member embedded participant observation field notes produced by engaging in systematic self-reflexive cultural re-immersion (Adams & Herrmann, 2023). Cultural re-immersion was stimulated by reviewing my



collection of cultural artifacts and cultural documents. Ethnographic participant observation field notes were generated through systematic self-reflexive introspection of my lived cultural experiences.

Reliving, reexperiencing, remembering, and reobserving formative events, experiences, emotions, cognitions, and interpretations informed the crafting of a thick description ethnographic narrative transcript (Geertz, 2008). The purpose of the ethnographic narrative is to both *show* what the culture looks like, and to *tell* what the culture feels like (Adams et al., 2022). Ethnographic instrumentation in the form of field notes collects cultural data to craft engaging and emotionally salient stories that push and pull the reader into a vicarious lived experience stimulating empathy, compassion, and understanding (Ellis, 2022).

Autoethnography is a methodology centered on narrative writing as empirical inquiry. Poulos (2021) emphasizes that narrative writing is the primary end product driving this form of research rather than focused on wrap up summations of advanced statistical data findings. Autoethnography as a research methodology emphasizes the artful crafting of emotionally and cognitively engaging evocative, visceral, and subjectively human centered storytelling narratives to engage the reader's heart and mind (Adams et al., 2022; Bochner & Ellis, 2016). For this reason, narrative inquiry procedures were used to convert the autobiographical and ethnographic narratives into a single coherent autoethnographic storytelling narrative transcript serving as the primary data collection instrumentation containing the primary data set (Barkhuizen, 2019, Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021, Clandinin, 2022). The autoethnographic transcript was then analyzed to identify patterns in the subjective lived experience (Clandinin, 2022). The autoethnographic transcript is the data collection instrument used to deconstruct the lived experience interrogating assumptions, beliefs, schemas, paradigms, values, and purposes. Narrative inquiry is a used method in diverse academic disciplines such as sociology, psychology, education, and organizational studies (Clandinin, 2006; Haydon & der Riet, 2017; Kim, 2016; O'Toole, 2018).

## Data Collection

Autoethnography produces qualitative data for the purpose of informing a literary storytelling narrative inquiry transcript of the totality of the lived experience (Adams et al., 2022). The resulting autoethnographic storytelling narrative transcript represents the study's instrumentation, collected data set, and primary product of the research methodology (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography is designed to collect qualitative data presented in story form. These stories present data elements that describe the formative events, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, epiphanies, biases, beliefs, ideas, priorities, values, motives, and meaning making. Autoethnography praxis exhibits a wide variation and diversity in approaches to data collection, instrumentation, tools, methods, and procedures (Adams et al., 2022). The primary goal for data collection is to enhance crafting an emotionally salient narrative of verisimilitude or face validity between the evocative storytelling and the reader's perception that the experience is genuine, real, true, coherent, believable, and compelling (Adams et al., 2022; Hernandez et al., 2022). Feldman (2003) argues the existential nature of a self-case-study requires researchers to pay special attention to how they demonstrate the validity of qualitative data based on intellectual, ethical, moral, and political obligations. Enhancing validity in self-study requires researchers to:

1. Provide clear and detailed description of how we collect data and make explicit what counts as data in our work. That is, either within the text itself or as an appendix, provide the details of the research methods used.
2. Provide clear and detailed descriptions of how we constructed the representation from our data. It is not always obvious how an artistic representation of research has arisen from the data. It would add to the validity of the representation if readers had some knowledge or insight into the way the researcher transformed data into an artistic representation.
3. Extend triangulation beyond multiple sources of data to include explorations of multiple ways to represent the same self-study. Because one data set can lead to a variety of

representations it is important to show why one has been chosen over the others. A danger is the construction of straw men. However, multiple representations that support and challenge one another can add to our reasons to believe and trust self-study.

4. Provide evidence of the value of the changes in our ways of being teacher educators. As I have discussed, self-study is a moral and political activity. If a self-study were to result in a change in the researcher's way of being... then there should be some evidence of its value.

(pp. 27-28)

A substantial quantity of data sources was available for this study having been collected and archived over the course of my career. My collected and archived data sources proved extremely valuable to this research project informing and enhancing the autoethnographic inquiry. Data was collected through the procedures of systematic self-reflexivity, introspection, memory mining, member checking, and participant observation.

Qualitative research methodologies employ an iterative holistic data collection and data analysis approach simultaneously collecting, analyzing, reviewing, and collecting additional data in a recursive process designed to identify emergent patterns, themes, commonalities, or trends (Adams et al., 2022). Data collected in the form of a memories, thoughts, and emotions enter data collection and analysis upon conscious awareness. The analysis is used to stimulate further self-reflexivity facilitating an iterative emergence of concepts, patterns, trends, or themes. For example, if self-reflective introspection is stimulated by the review of artifacts from a specific time, event, or place all memories, thoughts, and emotions generated are data elements collected, documented, and catalogued. At the same time the data is analyzed for patterns, meanings, trends, themes, or other commonalities to inform the generation of further data collection, analysis, used to inform thematic data analysis and interpretation.

All relevant collected data was utilized to stimulate and inform evocative writing of interrelated heuristic narratives of inquiry. These narratives of inquiry take the form of heuristic narrative transcriptions documenting the synthesized refinement of the raw data into a contextualized data set. Graphological storytelling transcriptions provide contextualized access to the collected raw data for thematic data analysis. This recursive iterative process generates data informed, descriptive, and emotionally salient storytelling narrative transcripts. Narrative transcripts were reviewed, edited for accuracy, relevance, and significance based on the study's purpose statement, problem statement, and research questions. The various narrative transcripts merge into a single coherent emotionally salient autoethnographic storytelling transcript containing the primary data set used during data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The raw data set contained within the autoethnographic storytelling narrative transcription was analyzed for patterns of meaning, sense making commonalities, and interpretive themes using *reflexive thematic analysis* conceptualized by Braun and Clarke (2022; 2006). Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) is an approach intentionally formulated to be compatible with qualitative research methodologies assumptions and paradigms and is well suited to the needs of this study. Braun and Clarke (2020) point out thematic analysis (TA) is not a single standardized approach, rather it is a variety of approaches designed to enable researchers to recognize, identify, and categorize patterns of meaning contained within a collection of qualitative data. The authors point out that the various TA approaches conflict procedurally and philosophically and may be incongruent for use based on a philosophical assumptions and methodology. Divergence in terms, theoretical framing, epistemological assumptions, data orientations, and appropriate application means TA is not a singular approach but rather a collection of approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The authors identify three versions of TA including:

1. Coding Reliability (CRTA): grounded in the neopositivist paradigm with a focus on striving for unbiased, objective, or impartial theme coding. Central to this approach is bias reduction

- through the formalization of a standardized codebook and protocols ensuring consistent multi-rater coding, inter-rater reliability, and inter-rater consensus. These approaches are typically deductive with themes firmly established upfront grounded in the existing body of knowledge or existing theoretical constructs.
2. Codebook (CTA): Typically uses a structured coding protocol to control for bias, but does not emphasize multi-rater consensus or inter-rater reliability. Themes are typically established early deductively grounded in existing knowledge or theory, but this approach does allow for limited inductive theme emergence during data engagement.
  3. Reflective (RTA): Fully embraces the qualitative philosophical paradigms and the inevitable subjective impact of the researcher. RTA recognizes researcher bias can be controlled but not eliminated, and may add value to the investigative process. No research team, multi-raters, or inter-rater reliability protocols are required. Analysis is conceptualized on a continuum from deductive to inductive reasoning deductively surfacing themes grounded in theory and the inductive emergence of data grounded themes. Coding is flexible, organic, creative, and open with no requirement for standardized protocols. (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

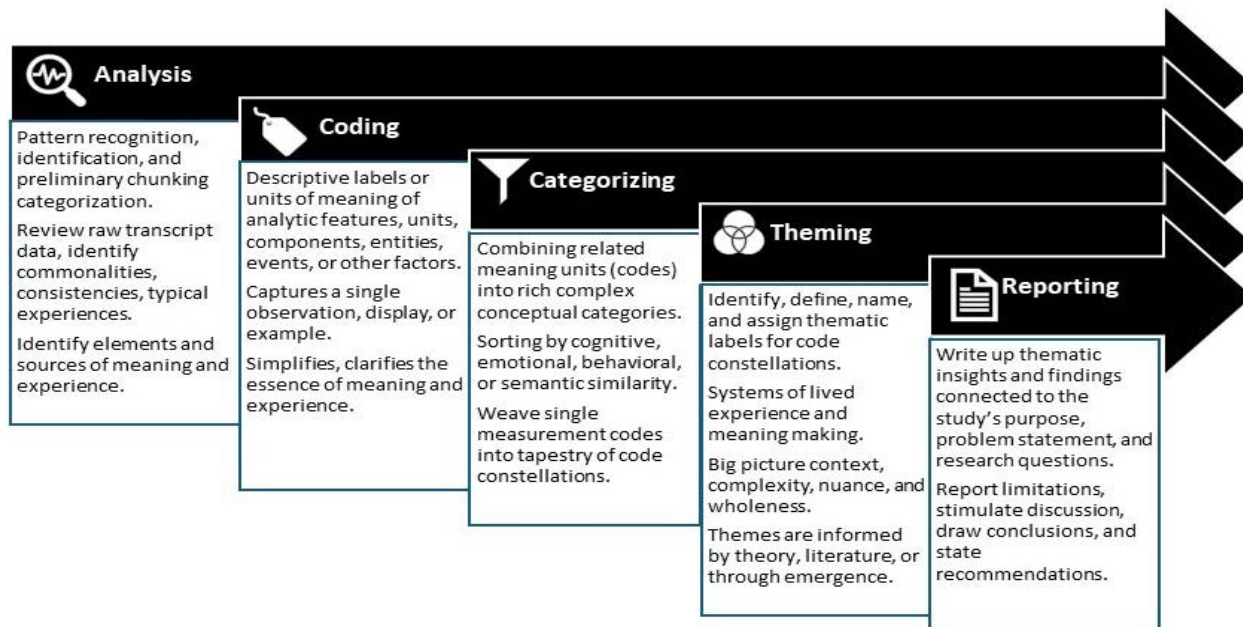
This study utilized RTA for data analysis because it is compatible with experiential, contextualist, constructivist, and humanistic approaches to understanding meaning and sense making (Braun & Clarke, 2022). RTA commenced with an iterative data analysis of pattern recognition identifying commonalities, consistencies, and elemental building blocks of meaning. Elements of meaning were sorted, organized, and catalogued. Coding procedures assigned descriptive labels to specific units of meaning. Codes were reviewed, refined, documented, and catalogued. Categorization procedures were used to reduce, combine, and organize codes into conceptual constellations based on relational interconnection or repetition. Theming procedures refined code constellations into a reduced set of overarching themes.

Reporting procedures were used to present the thematic insights and interpretations to answer the research questions.

Figure 2 provides a visual overview of the reflexive thematic transcript analysis (RTA) process.

**Figure 2**

*Reflexive Thematic Transcript Analysis*



*Note.* Adapted by the author based on the work Braun & Clarke (2022), Braun & Clarke (2020).

**Ethics**

The use of autoethnography as a research methodology presents unique ethical challenges and moral dilemmas (Adams et al., 2022; Cooper et al., 2022; Edwards, 2021; Phillips et al., 2022c).

Throughout the design and implementation of this research project I consulted with my Dissertation Committee and the University of Wisconsin-Stout Office of Research and Special Projects (ORSP) to ensure compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) human subjects standards (Appendix B). In addition, as a CRC I regularly consulted with the CRCC Code of Professional Ethics for Rehabilitation Counselors sections specific to my professional ethical obligations conducting scholarly research.

I am both the researcher and sole research subject. However, to tell my autoethnographic story key individuals who serve as characters in my career journey must be protected from potential harm. In order minimize risk, potential harm, and to respect the right to confidentiality and anonymity I used a combination of pseudonyms, composite figures, or other means to prevent the identification of specific individuals.

Research subjects have the right to consent to or decline requests to become research participants. Consistent with CRCC (2022) and the University of Wisconsin-Stout IRB human subjects' protocols as both the researcher and the research subject I reviewed following procedures and consent to participation in this study.

1. I accurately explained the purpose and procedures to be followed.
2. I identified and explained my research questions.
3. I described any explained potential risks.
4. I described the potential benefits of this research.
5. I disclosed appropriate alternative procedures or alternative means for participation in the study while maintaining confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity.
6. I answered questions, inquiries, and discussed any concerns.
7. I described potential limitations on confidentiality.
8. I described the potential target audiences and publication format.
9. I explained plans for the dissemination of research findings.
10. I explained to participants that they were free to withdraw their consent and to discontinue participation at any time; and
11. I used language, communication formats, and methods to ensure participant understanding.

**Cautions, Disclosures, & Limitations**

As an autoethnography this study is limited to my own lived experiences, perceptions, meaning making, and sense of professional self-identity within the specific organizational practice setting cultures in which I was embedded. While I believe commonalities, themes, trends, and variations on themes will become evident, the ability to generalize these insights would be spurious and inaccurate. Readers should take caution to understand the potential implications of this study as the methodology is subjective by intentional design. I would refer readers seeking objective and more generalizable findings to the extant literature which is replete with objective generalizable methodologies. My subjective approach attempts to fill an existing gap between what is known objectively and how it is experienced subjectively.

Disclosure is hereby made that the researcher has a long-standing relationship with the CRCC as a credentialed CRC and Certified Rehabilitation Leader (CRL), and currently serves as the president of the CRCC Board of Directors. While the researcher asserts there are no conflicts of interest nor potential for financial gain through this research study, the researcher discloses there is the potential for bias.

**Summary**

This autoethnography immerses the reader in my lived experiences working as a CRC for over 30 years in the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu to study CRC failure to thrive and resulting impediments to recruitment and retention.



## Chapter IV: Results

This chapter presents an autoethnographic storytelling narrative. The narrative represents the primary data set analyzed in Chapter 5. This chapter begins with an autobiographical sketch of my early life experiences. The purpose of the autobiography is to help you understand who I was and why I fell in love with VRC. The narrative merges into an ethnographical sketch describing my lived experience as an embedded member of the PVR program psychosocial cultural milieu. The purpose of the ethnography is to allow you to vicariously experience the paradoxical and incongruent nature of the PVR psychosocial cultural environment. The autoethnographic storytelling narrative provides insights into macrolevel psychosocial cultural incongruence that is antithetical to the concept of professionalism. Further, the paradoxical and contradictory psychosocial cultural environment is incompatible with the existential purpose of the PVR program. It is a psychosocial cultural environment where priorities, goals, philosophies, values, and competing irreconcilable purposes collide setting people up for failure.

To understand and address the crisis of recruitment and retention of qualified VRC in PVR practice we must understand why they are abandoning the program. Understanding why VRC experience professional failure to thrive provides insight into retention strategies focused on psychosocial cultural realignment to facilitate professional thriving. Recruitment of new professionals depends on creating an attractive vocational calling in environments supporting professional thriving. We must start by learning why VRC experience professional failure to thrive in the PVR program psychosocial cultural context.

### **Love Letters to My Profession: Autoethnography of a CRC**

You are about to read a love story. These are my love letters addressed to my profession. VRC has been my passion for nearly 30 years. I acknowledge this is an atypical empirical approach to doctoral dissertation research. However, the approach honors my distinctly human centered profession. The approach is congruent with the distinct values and philosophies that recognize the transformational impact of acquiring a full understanding of the unique lived experience of each individual human being.

This approach allows me to utilize my unique professional skills to generate insights into psychosocial cultural and environmental factors that create significant impediments to VRC professional thriving.

Emotions like love and passion make some people uncomfortable because they are subjective, irrational, and illogical. Empiricism favors the objective, rational, and logical. But my profession and the PVR program is a uniquely human centered discipline where emotions like love and passion must flourish if we are to achieve our transformational existential purpose. I feel compelled to tell you why I fell in love with my profession at first sight and why I care so deeply about how it has been dehumanized and de-professionalized dominated by a transactional cultural paradigm. For me, it has never been just a job. It was never just a way to earn a paycheck. In it I found a way to live my life's purpose.

I fell in love with my profession at first sight. But why was it love at first sight? What attracted me to it? Why did it feel right? I fell in love at first sight because of what VRC was. I was all wrong. I fell in love with it because of who I was before I found it. I fell in love at first sight because it let me become who I already was deep inside myself. Every love story must have a beginning. My love story must begin at the beginning too.

I must begin by telling you about the beginning of me.

***Origination: The Beginning or Creation of Something or Someone***

Dear VRC,

I was born to fall in love with you. My life began in Fremont California on the Eastside of California's San Francisco Bay Area in December 1971. I am grateful I have no memories of this event. I only know about my birth because dad and mom frequently shared their memories of this experience. I was my parent's second child. I have been told my older sister Janet and dad were tremendously excited about adding a little boy to the family. The most frequently told story of my birth achieved a sort of mythical status throughout my life. Mom told this story constantly. She said I was a big baby weighing in at 12 pounds 11 ounces requiring her to undergo a Caesarean section.

*“Al Davis called from Oakland,” my mom claimed the doctor told her after my delivery, “he said the Raiders were ready for him to start on the o-line next season.”*

This story was told so often that the Oakland Raiders and I seemed connected for life. The Raider brand and mystic of the 1970's foreshadowed my own life story. Today as I reflect on my career journey, I am only now realizing how much the Oakland Raiders of the 1970's framed my worldview. Oddly enough, this worldview aligned with your core values, your distinct philosophical frameworks, and your unique clinical interventions. I realize now that part of the reason I fell in love with VRC at first sight is because I was born into a family of Oakland Raider fans.

In my childhood the Oakland Raiders were known as a band of rejects, misfits, outsiders, outcasts, castoffs, nonconformists, deviants, eccentric misanthropes, and social outlaws who had failed to thrive on other teams. These talented human beings had been labeled failures and were summarily disposed of as useless. The Raiders owner Al Davis was known for embracing these social outcasts. He created an environment that gave them a chance for redemption.

Unlike other teams, the Raiders did not demand these outcasts change who they were. They did not ask them to become something they were not. Davis ignored their flaws, deficits, and weaknesses. He did not care if they were socially acceptable. Davis and the Raider organizational culture embraced, accepted, and valued who they already were. He only cared about the hidden potential he saw. Davis recognized their inherent and untapped value. The only thing he cared about was making the most out of each player's unique strengths, talents, and skills. These players thrived because the environmental context supported unleashing their full hidden potential. For the first time these human beings were defined by what they were capable of doing. What they could not do didn't matter.

I grew up idolizing Davis and the Oakland Raiders. They taught me that when we see people as the cause of our problems rather than the solutions to our problems, we waste human talent labeling people worthless, useless, expendable, disposable, and interchangeable. Davis recognized every human

being could achieve success within the right context. His genius was shaping the context to fit his players, not forcing his players to fit the context. The organization's existential purpose was clear and omnipresent. *"Just win baby!"*

I grew up idolizing players like John Matuszak, Kenny Stabler, Fred Biletnikoff, Cliff Branch, Art Shell, Gene Upshaw, Ted Hendricks, and Jack Tatum. My favorite was Lyle Alzado. All these players were judged failures and were summarily rejected. The focus on making them overcome their deficits did not work. Defining and labeling them based on what they could not do well did not work. Davis's strengths-based culture of acceptance did work. His band of useless misfit castaways won championships, super bowls, and converted busts into hall of fame legends.

In all honesty, I had never thought about any of this until today. I learned early to root for the outcast underdog. I never connected my love for my profession with the Raiders until today. I realize how intuitively I understood that human performance and thriving is dependent on the context. All the talents and strengths in the world mean nothing if people are forced to live in an environment where they are prevented from using those talents and skills. Flaws, deficits, and weaknesses only become disabling in an environment where those are the only things that matter. One or two unique talents or strengths in the right cultural environment can make an underachiever develop into an immortal legend.

Every human being has unique flaws and unique talents. Some are hidden and some are obvious. Environments centered on our flaws disable, disempower, and disenfranchise human beings. Human beings fail to thrive when the environment guarantees failure. When flaws are all that matter talents go unused. The muscles of our strengths atrophy. When talents are all that matter, flaws become nothing more than endearing quirks. The roots of a human being's failure to thrive can be found deep in the soils of the organizational psychosocial cultural context. Fertile cultural soils bear fruit because every human being is valued for who they are and what they can contribute based on their unique talents.

The Oakland Raiders turned me into an amateur psychosocial cultural ecologist.

Ecology is the study of the macrolevel environment. Ecologists study how living organisms thrive or fail to thrive depending on how their survival needs are supported or thwarted by the ecosystem. When an ecologist observes an individual microlevel organism failing to thrive in an environment, they don't waste time trying to figure out what is wrong with the individual. Ecologists don't blame the individual for its own failure to thrive. Rather ecologists focus their curiosity on investigating the holistic macrolevel ecological system. They interrogate the dynamic environmental factors that are thwarting the organism's survival needs. When an entire group of organisms fail to thrive and face an extinction event, ecologists look at the complex mix of cause-and-effect relationships present in the ecosystem.

Every human organization is a complex ecosystem. Like the Oakland Raiders, some organizational ecosystems are intentionally and consciously designed to bring out the best version of every human being in the environment. These organizational environments are transformational in nature. These ecosystems nourish, grow, develop, and provide a supportive cocoon where people undergo a kind of metamorphosis intrinsically motivated by their basic need to learn, grow, and maximize their potential. Occasionally an individual may still fail to thrive in these environments. But as a group, human beings in transformational need supporting environments experience individual thriving, health, and wellness.

There are other organizational ecosystems unintentionally designed that have unconsciously evolved in ways that bring out the worst version of each human being. Sometimes these organizations have elements that turn the environment into a dehumanized mechanized marketplace of logical and rational transactional exchanges. These transactional organizational environments unknowingly create barriers and impediments to human thriving. Mired in transactional exchange thinking these psychosocial cultures double down using the only problem-solving tools they know how to use resulting in a vicious cycle creating contexts that control, deprive, neglect, abuse, and devalue human beings. A few exceptionally resilient microlevel individuals may achieve a level of survival in these kinds of

environments. But as a group, most human beings in these types of organizations merely survive. Most fail to thrive and face extinction if they do not migrate to more suitable cultural ecosystems.

An organization's macrolevel psychosocial cultural milieu is analogous to ecology's concept of a biosphere. A biosphere is the sum-total of the energy, nutrients, climate, and symbiotic relationships in the environment. An organizational psychosocial cultural milieu is the sum-total of the organization's energy, nutrients, climate, and symbiotic relationships. In an organizational context the psychosocial culture is the macrosystem approach to understanding why microlevel individual human beings fail to thrive in an organizational environment.

Human beings are complex psychosocial living organisms. The Oakland Raiders, my childhood, my education, and my professional experiences primed me to be sensitive to the ecological context of a psychosocial cultural milieu. My romantic relationship with VRC further framed my understanding of the importance of context. People with disabilities are disabled, inhibited, restricted, limited, and thwarted when they are forced to perform in unaccommodating, poorly designed, and unsupportive psychosocial and physical environments. The failure to thrive with a disability is not a function inherent to the impairment or the related functional limitations. Failure to thrive is a function of unaccommodating one-size-fits all environments. Talented but imperfect people are set up to fail when the environmental context demands and only values perfection.

When it comes to the thriving of a human being, context is everything. The Oakland Raiders made me aware of the importance of finding the right environment. My childhood experiences instilled a hypersensitivity to psychosocial cultural contexts and their impacts on my own failure to thrive. I need to tell you about my childhood. It will help you understand why these concepts were burned into my soul. Knowing about my childhood will help you understand who I was before I fell in love with you. I fell in love with you at first sight because in you I found my vocational calling. In you I found my life's purpose.

***Remembrance: The Act of Recollection and Reflection***

My dear profession,

I have few memories of the first years of my life. I have always attributed this to normative age-appropriate brain development. All I can recall are faint fuzzy flashbulb type memories I regard with suspicion. I fear some are manufactured, borrowed, or have been implanted in my brain by repeatedly hearing the memories of others.

Some memories I most likely crafted by repeatedly looking through family photo albums. Mom curated the family photo albums. Her photo albums document only the earliest years of my childhood. Multiple volumes of family photo albums thoroughly document my early life from 1971 to approximately 1979. No photo album exists containing pictures taken after 1979. A handful of photographs from these years exist but there are far fewer. They were never compiled into photo albums like those prior to 1979. It is obvious that for some reason my parents took fewer pictures after 1979. There are also noticeable voids in the photographic record. My historical record is interspersed by periods of complete photographic silence. I have long been troubled by the fact that these voids correspond with gaps in my own memories.

As I worked to produce this autoethnographic narrative I have been confronted by significant memory gaps. I have been troubled by large gaps in memory from middle and later parts of my childhood. My first retrievable memory occurred in 1980. That year I was 8 years old. I experience significant memory gaps from several periods following this memory. As I dig through mom's carefully curated photographic record, I realize my memory gaps coincide with gaps in mom's photo albums.

As an adult I have learned I have a good memory of past events. I can frequently recall memories full of intricate details that others have forgotten. This ability has surprised friends and colleagues alike. This makes me reasonably confident that the sporadic voids in my childhood memories are not due to organic or neurological impairment. My memory recall vastly improves in 1989. My limited ability to

recall the events and memories of my childhood had become normalized in my mind. It did not matter. It was all behind me. Autoethnography has a funny way of forcing you to reflect on parts of yourself that have been left unexamined. I became intrigued by my memory gaps. I envisioned them as hidden safes I wanted to crack open to see what was inside.

Autoethnography forced me to dig deeper to learn more about my past. I thought I knew who I was and where I came from. This research methodology forced me to confront and learn things about my past that I had blocked out or emotionally distanced myself from. As I tried to piece together a narrative of my childhood, I realized I knew extraordinarily little about the details of my formative years. I found myself disoriented and confused by my childhood memories. The chronological timelines of my memories made no logical sense. My memories also did not make sense emotionally. I have never intentionally investigated my own childhood. Nostalgic conversations with my parents and siblings have always been shallow surface exchanges about the periods we all seem to remember well. The gaps in my memories have been maintained by my lack of inquisitiveness into my own early life experiences.

I don't know many people who start where I was forced to start. I had to begin by trying to create a timeline of my life from birth to high school. I mapped out the years from 1971 to 1989. I then mapped out my age at each successive birth date. Doing this made me feel even more disoriented because memories I can recall did not appear to fit. My memories of where we lived, where I attended school, and where my parents worked failed to match up. I had no idea how our family got from one place to the next. Several years separated events I had remembered happening simultaneously. I knew major things were missing. Large chunks of time were left in a dark fog. I have memories of an event, but when did it happen? Where did it happen? Am I even sure it happened? I considered abandoning sharing the story of my childhood in this dissertation because I was no longer sure of what I knew about my childhood. I was also worried it would be completely irrelevant to why I fell in love with my profession.



But now I was too curious. Frustrated and confused I called mom. Mom was never my go to source for information about the past. Mom had several strokes during my childhood. The effects of those strokes and her persistent mental health issues made her an inaccurate historian. In the present mom has been dealing with age related dementia. Her already limited memories have further faded significantly. She got anxious when I asked her to help me remember my childhood. Mom urged me to call my older sister Janet. She said Janet's memory was more accurate than hers. I assumed mom's anxiety was due to her dementia rather than the nature of the questions I was asking.

I called Janet. I peppered Janet with questions as I walked through my chronological timeline. I found her memories more confusing and frustrating than my own. Her memories, formed by her own perspective were not consistent with mine. For example, I remember vividly attending Kindergarten in a school I know to have been located a block away from the home we were renting at the time. Janet insisted this was impossible because I was too young to attend school when we lived in that town. She stated there were no elementary schools in walking distance from our house. Janet remembered having to ride a bus every day for over an hour. I doubt the accuracy of Janet's memories of this time. Partly because they conflict with my own. Partly because her memory of my age at the time is a chronological impossibility. Google Earth with street view provided additional evidence. I showed Janet the house we lived in, and she agreed it was our house. I then showed her the elementary school I have vivid memories of walking to in kindergarten. It is a 1960's era school that still stands a block away from our house. She was confused and insisted this school did not exist when we lived there. I discovered that Janet has large gaps in her childhood memories. Her gaps correspond to my memory gaps. They also line up with the voids in the photographic record.

Frustrated again, I turned back to our family photo albums. Like a detective I began investigating my life starting with little fragments of evidence discernable in photographic images. I used these photographs and my timeline to fill in the gaps. I mined the few memories I can recall from those years.

This process stimulated long forgotten memories narrowing the gaps allowing me to bridge some of the voids.

My childhood was atypical. I experienced trauma, chaos, insecurity, and instability. Today, I realize the unexplainable gaps in my childhood memories correspond to the void in my parent's photographic record for a reason. These gaps in memory protected me from reliving significant emotional trauma. As I have worked to recollect and come to terms with these repressed memories, I have been surprised to discover just how much I was shaped to fall in love with VRC.

***Denigration: The Act of Unfairly Criticizing or Labeling Something or Someone***

Today, I write to you on a bright morning. It is June 2024. I brought a thumb drive to my office this morning. My sister Janet mailed it to me. It contains electronically scanned copies of the photographs of my childhood. I plug in the thumb drive and start scrolling through the familiar photographs. None of these images are new to me. I have seen them all countless times before. I have seen them so often I begin to wonder if any of these images will help me mine my memories to meaningfully inform this autoethnography.

I stop scrolling and open one picture. I look at this familiar photograph. In this picture I appear to be less than a year old. I am dressed in a little white tee shirt wearing a sagging disposable diaper. I am standing on a small white wooden chair leaning over to kiss my daddy. Dad sits on a 1970's blue and white floral print couch. Behind him mustard yellow curtains are drawn over a window. This photograph has been omnipresent in my life. I was desensitized to it for years. I have never had an emotional response to it. Until today.

Suddenly this morning I find myself emotionally triggered, tears form in my eyes and worry that if I start crying, I may not be able to stop. I do not understand this. I take a deep breath. I drink some water and whip the tears from my eyes. I return my gaze to this picture.

I intently study this picture. I find myself weeping again. My emotionalism does not make any sense. I am trying to excuse these emotions on simply missing my dad. He died too young. Maybe I am getting emotional because I am now a grandpa who has a little grandson who gives his "Papa" similar butterfly kisses. My life today provides a new vantage point. I am seeing this photograph for the first time with new eyes. It is as if I have never seen this picture before.

These unexpected emotions are unwelcome. This is an ominous sign considering the memories I know I need to share with you from my professional career. This was supposed to be the part of my life that should be easy to share. Its only purpose was to serve as background. Today I realize looking at this single picture that my childhood needs to serve as foreground. My childhood is foundational to understanding why I was attracted to you. Why I fell in love with you at first sight. Why I could never imagine my life without you, my beloved profession.

All of this is contained in this single photograph.

I see something I have never noticed before. What I notice for the first-time floods me with emotions and memories. These memories have everything to do with the purpose of this research project. Until today, I never noticed this picture was clearly taken late at night. No sunlight can be seen behind the drawn curtains. This makes me wonder how late at night this image was captured. What was my bedtime? In my experience toddlers of this age are usually put to bed earlier in the evening. This photograph appears to be much later at night. I wonder why I was still awake.

My dad is wearing dark slacks and a white dress shirt. But the thing that catches my eye for the first time today is what he wears around his neck. Dad is wearing the western bow tie or string tie made famous by the legendary Colonel Harland Sanders of Kentucky Fried Chicken fame. I am seeing my dad in his work uniform. His clothes are his stigmata, the symbols of his job. His work uniform communicates his social status and his socioeconomic class. His work uniform is the symbolic representation of his place in the world. These clothes signify how my dad was categorized and valued by society.

I realize the behavior captured in this image are also symbolic representations of his job. I have spent my entire career wrestling with the limitations of our shared lexicon. The words we choose to use are important because these labels define and confine us. Words matter. Today this image makes me think of words that lose their power and meaning when we use them imprecisely, synonymously, or interchangeably. As I look at this picture with new eyes I think of words like job, vocation, career, employment, work, and profession. This picture is of a man who has a job.

A job is a transactional exchange where one person pays another person to complete a task. The task is something that must be extrinsically motivated through transactional exchanges of rewards or the avoidance negative consequences. A job is simply a job. Like a uniform, a job does not transform us into a different person. A job requires extrinsic rewards because a job does not intrinsically motivate or inspire us. A job title is just like a uniform, it is just something we wear on the job. What we wear can easily be taken off, stripped away, disposed of, and can easily be exchanged. Every job has the potential of being someone's vocational calling, but a job is not necessarily a vocational calling for everyone. Today, I see an image of a father returning home from a long day on a job. He is wearing his job. For him it was not his vocational life calling.

My daddy has just gotten home from an exceedingly long day at work. His long hours managing a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant is part of my family lore. I know he worked 12-hour days 6-days a week. Daddy left home early in the morning to go to work to prepare the store for opening at lunchtime. He would return home extremely late at night long after store closing. I don't remember any of this myself.

Looking at this picture in this context, dad suddenly looks exhausted. He looks tired. To me it looks as if this may have been the first time he had sat down all day. This picture tells the story of one little boy who missed his daddy all day. A little boy who may have fought his mom refusing to go to bed until he gave his daddy a welcome home butterfly kiss. All at once this picture makes me think of love,

family, children, sacrifice, and the significant difference between a job and a vocation. It also makes me think about how short our lives really are and how jobs turn the limited hours of our existence into transactional exchange commodities.

This morning in my office, I suddenly smell the aroma of KFC Original Recipe fried chicken. This is the smell of my daddy. His job uniform absorbed this smell, and it was imprinted on my brain. This morning, I smell my daddy again. No, that isn't quite right. This morning, I smell my daddy's job again.

This simple picture communicates one reason I was attracted and fell in love with you, my beloved profession. This picture helps you understand why it was love at first sight. I already knew that having a job was not enough. I already knew that every human being needs more than a job. I already knew that just being able to obtain and maintain a job had limited impact on human lives. When I entered my office this morning to begin writing this autoethnography none of this was in my conscious awareness. I only started looking at this specific picture because it caught my attention. This picture is why I fell in love with you. In you I found a way to be the person my dad desperately needed all those years ago. Maybe if dad had access to a VRC, my childhood would have been quite different.

***Marginalization: Treating a Person or Group as Insignificant, Peripheral, of Lesser Importance***

My dear profession,

My parents were loving, caring, patient, and kind. In many ways they were ideal parents. My parents tried to shield me from how desperate and impoverished our lives became. My parents were both hard working people. Contrary to social stereotypes about poverty, my dad and mom were not lazy or unmotivated. My parents both had gifts, talents, and unique skills that could have been used to succeed in the right psychosocial environment. The problem was the only job market my parents had access to did not value or employ their unique skills, strengths, and abilities. Instead, the only job markets accessible to my parents made their imperfections, flaws, and inabilities their only defining attributes.

Dad and mom were both high school dropouts. I have never known why. I was always told it was more common at the time. I was told dad had taken some college courses sporadically during his life. Before I was born, my parents lived in St. George, Utah. My older sister Janet was born there. Dad attended Dixie Junior College. He was the campus student newspaper editor and worked at the college radio station. He aspired to become a journalist. I was never told why he never finished. I only know that he later took several journalism courses at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. In Salt Lake City dad worked for a brief time as an on-air news presenter at a radio station. Dad did not earn a degree. Dad dropped out because he could not afford tuition, and his grades had suffered from working two jobs to pay the bills. Mom told me that when he asked my grandparents for help, they encouraged dad to stop wasting his time and money on college. Apparently, his mother felt it was more important for him to get a job rather than an education.

Dad, mom, and Janet moved to the Navajo Nation in Northern Arizona. My parents managed the Tes Nez lah Trading Post. In the late 1960's the Tes Nez lah Trading Post consisted of a small motel, small grocery store, gas station, and a restaurant. Dad, mom, and Janet lived in a small singlewide trailer behind the trading post. This was all before I was born. I have never had a clear understanding how this job ended. When the job ended the housing that went with it also ended. This spurred a move to California where I was born, and daddy worked at KFC.

My parents had lots of jobs but never had stable long-term employment. I do not remember ever being told what happened to dad's job at KFC. My parents career trajectories primarily consisted of a long series of intermittent, temporary, or transitory minimum wage or unskilled jobs interspersed with extended periods of underemployment or unemployment.

Home is a word that had little meaning to me during my childhood. I experienced frequent chaotic moves staged in the middle of the night, preemptive strategies to avoid an imminent eviction or escape from an unpaid landlord. We lived at various times in Fremont California, Antioch California,

Porterville California, Shiprock New Mexico, and Beaver Utah. I have no memory of many of these moves. And I have never been able to ascertain the details of these moves from mom.

Again, I scroll through the pictures of my childhood contained on Janet's thumb drive. I search for images that may contain clues to the chronological sequencing of my early childhood. One photograph catches my attention. This is also an image I have seen thousands of times.

This is a picture of my older sister Janet, younger sister Carol, and myself hanging over the tailgate of a cream-colored wood paneled Ford station wagon. The car sports blue and yellow California license plates, a signal to me that this is an image from our transition from the relative stability of dad's KFC job to what would become our new Janicel. Standing outside the tailgate on either side is my Aunt Nonie and Uncle Mel. Uncle Mel sports a beige fedora. He is wearing a grey dress shirt, slacks, and has what appears to be a pocket protector on his chest pocket. Aunt Nonie is wearing a white floral print blouse and blue slacks. They look like proud grandparents to me.

I always assumed this picture was of my grandparents. It is only today that I realize I have never looked at this picture close enough to realize this is Aunt Nonie and Uncle Mel. Today I feel like I have never really seen this photograph at all. I never noticed who the adults in this picture were because my mind always focuses on the station wagon. Thinking about that car brings more tears to my eyes.

This is the only picture I have that emotionally represents the notion of my childhood home. The station wagon in this photograph was my childhood home. Early in my childhood as dad went through extended periods of sporadic and periodic joblessness my family lived in that car. My parents said we were going camping. Every night we parked in different public parks and camped out in that station wagon. I was too young to understand what homelessness meant. Not too long after this picture was taken, Dad was unemployed again and we were a homeless family of 6 living in that car.

I have no concrete memory of how we moved from California to New Mexico. I only have one faint memory of sitting in the rear facing back seat of that station wagon riding from California to New

Mexico. I have a vivid memory of slowly falling asleep looking out the back window as the neon lights of Las Vegas, Nevada twinkled in the distance. On the radio Elton John and Kiki Dee were singing *Don't Go Breaking My Heart*. Every time I hear that song this visual memory returns. The memory fills me with feelings of fear and uncertainty.

Grandpa and Grandma Walker lived in a small self-built house made from scavenged building supplies in La Plata, New Mexico. Their little house sat on an acre of sage brush covered dessert sand piled high with a collection of broken-down tractors, junked vehicles, and two rotting collapsing chicken coops. Grandpa Walker also dropped out of high school to begin working as a construction laborer. His limited means and lived experience of the Great Depression made him a scavenger. He hoarded anything that may someday have value. He regularly visited every garbage dump and land fill in the area returning home with another load of junk. I remember growing up in a place that looked and felt like the junkyard from *Sanford and Son*.

We made this move to New Mexico sometime in late 1979. This move coincides with the significant void in my parent's photographic historical record. Whatever happened with my parents at this time it is clear they were either unable or unmotivated to document our lives at the level they had previously. This period also coincides with significant sporadic gaps in my own childhood memories.

Prior to this move I always had to share a bedroom with my sisters, and sometimes with my parents. When we moved to New Mexico I was given the first bedroom that I did not have to share with anyone else. My first bedroom was the Ford station wagon in this picture. My station wagon bedroom sat tireless, precariously propped up on cinder blocks in a patch of fragrant sage brush near a huge cottonwood tree. The car had broken down and dad and mom did not have the money for repairs.

I remember all those nights sleeping in my station wagon bedroom. I could stare up at the Milky Way in the dark New Mexico skies. Sometimes it was hard to sleep during full moons that turned night into day. I remember cold Northern New Mexico winters when I nearly froze to death curled into a ball



under a large pile of scratchy dark green wool U.S. Army surplus blankets. I remember getting scared in the middle of the night and wanting to get comforted by my mom and dad. I remember not being able to go to them because I was surrounded by hungry coyotes yapping and looking for a meal. I was used to sleeping in that car with my entire family. Having it become my bedroom was not awkward. I had more room. I loved my bedroom. No kid I knew had a bedroom that had a steering wheel, gauges, and a pretend radio. My bedroom doubled as my only toy. I had so many adventures driving that station wagon to imaginary destinations.

My three sisters' bedroom was a chalky white 1930's white panel milk delivery van sitting tireless directly on the ground next to the water well pump house shack. I remember pretending the van was Al Capone's because it was riddled with bullet holes and smelled like stale motor oil and whiskey. Between my station wagon, my sister's van, and several other abandoned cars I had no problem letting my imagination run free. My parent's bedroom suite was a rotting 1940's camper shell. Mom and dad slept in this smelly mouse infested camper. For several years this was our life. I had no concept of being homeless at the time. The fact is we were homeless.

In late 1981, daddy and Grandpa salvaged truckloads of old wooden war surplus ammunition boxes from Kirtland Airforce Base in Albuquerque. I got to help take these ammunition boxes apart and stack the six equally sized panels in piles. These panels were attached to a 2x4 frame built from mismatched used wood Grandpa reclaimed from a local garbage dump. This is the first real house that I personally remember. It was a small tar paper and chicken wire covered shack built over a wooden pallet foundation. It was heated by an old, rusted cast iron wood burning stove Grandpa had salvaged from a house he had torn down. We had no electricity and no plumbing. There was no bathroom, no television, and no kitchen. The only furniture we had was a heavily soiled couch scavenged from a landfill. I remember mom kept it covered with a blanket because she said the stains on it made her want to vomit. Dad and I drove Grandpa's truck to Hacienda Home Center in Farmington. He bought a roll of two-inch

thick foam pads that became our beds. Our toilet was a 5-gallon plastic bucket. It was my daily chore to carry that bucket out into the sage brush to dig a hole and empty it every morning.

La Plata, New Mexico is a rural sparsely populated area just south of the Colorado state line. We lived only 8 miles from Farmington New Mexico, but I remember feeling like we lived in the middle of nowhere. Once a month mom loaded us kids into the back of Grandpa Walker's pickup truck to drive 8 miles into Farmington for our bath night at Grandma James' house. While we took baths, mom washed the few clothes we always wore and listened to her mother complain about my dad and the way we were living.

My Grandma James' house seemed like a palace. Years later my adult self was surprised to find out it was just an average sized house. To my child eyes it was the kind of mansion I saw the *Brady Bunch* live in on TV. Her house had carpet throughout. The carpet was attached to the floor and had some kind of padding that made my feet sink into it. The carpet even went from wall to wall, all the way to the edges. She had electricity. She had both a heater and an air conditioner. Her house had indoor plumbing and two bathrooms with toilets, sinks, and bathtubs. Her kitchen sink was attached to drinkable city water. She had a washer and a dryer. I remember being most fascinated by her kitchen. She had a refrigerator full of food and a slot in the door that you could get ice from. It had a stove, an oven, a microwave, and something called a dishwasher. I remember it had three or four bedrooms with real doors, sheetrock walls, and closets. Grandma also had a big color television set and something she called cable. I remember thinking this meant she would watch every station available on the planet. Some of my happiest after school memories are of watching reruns of *Dragnet*, *Adam-12*, *Emergency!* and *Bonanza* on KTLA all the way from Los Angeles, California.

Grandma James' house sat in a seemingly lush oasis the locals called the glade. In the glade a clear stream meandered in the shade of huge cottonwood trees where rabbits and squirrels frolicked. I remember snapping off fresh wild asparagus that grew on the stream's banks sometimes eating them

uncooked like fresh green beans from the vine. I loved to roll up my pant legs and wade into the cool waters to catch crawdads. I remember the glade being peaceful, quiet, and serene. I remember frequently losing track of time in the glade and getting punished for returning to Grandma's house late. I also remember getting punished for getting my shoes muddy or my pants wet.

Grandma James' house sat on St. James Place named by the city after my mom's family. Mom's family all had houses spread out on the dirt road. I remember that all this was a wonder to me. It seemed to me that my mom's family were famous, rich, and highly respected by the city. Why else would they name the street after them? I do remember feeling like the James side of our family were embarrassed by my family. I specifically remember feeling shunned and made fun of by my cousins. I also remember clearly that I knew my Grandma James did not like my dad. She made it clear that she thought my mom deserved a better life. Grandma James was one of those people with no poker face and no filter. If she thought it, she said it. If you were hurt by her words, it was your fault not hers. You needed to toughen up and not have such a thin skin.

I have always questioned the accuracy of my memories about my Grandma James. My mom and sisters' share memories of my grandmother that are quite different from mine. I remember knowing that Grandma James treated my three sisters different than she treated me. She seemed cold, detached, judgmental, critical, angry, and sometimes outright cruel towards me. I have vivid memories of treatment that I would now define as emotional abuse. I could not understand why she seemed to hate me while she seemed to love my three sisters. I remember her deliberately humiliating me in front of other children. Once I remember wetting my pants. She made me strip completely naked so she could wash my clothes. I remember it was lunch time because my three sisters and three cousins were sitting around her dining table eating lunch as she made me get undressed in front of them and then made me sit and eat lunch at the table naked. I was embarrassed about having an accident in my pants, but I was

very self-conscious sitting naked in front of all these other kids who made comments about how fat I was. I remember crying the whole time.

*"Maybe this will teach you to pay attention and go to the bathroom instead of pee your pants."* Grandma James said. When I asked if I could wrap myself in a towel, she barked at me again. "No, you may not get a towel, *there are consequences for your behavior. You are just as useless and lazy as your father.*" I remember her telling me. *"Shiftless and lazy, can't even keep a job."* She said under her breath.

Perhaps being a boy who looked a lot like my dad transferred her hostilities for him onto me. I knew she openly despised and constantly belittled my dad. She did me too. Perhaps my sisters reminded her of my mom. While the luxuries of her home were appealing to me, I grew to dread and avoid these visits. Eventually I started to pretend being sick so I would not have to go to her house. I remember fighting with mom about this often. I remember dad sometimes kindly offered to stay home to watch over me. I remember this would enrage my mom who felt it was a slight to her mother. Mom got so upset about this that many times dad would give up and we would both go and be miserable. When I talk to my sisters and mom, and they share happy memories of experiences at Grandma James' house. I have never shared my own experiences with them because it is clear they have no awareness of what it was like for me. I still get a pit in my stomach thinking about all this.

Grandpa Walker had a water well that produced water that was undrinkable. He only used it to water a small vegetable garden. The water was yellow in color and smelled like rotten eggs. We lived too far out in the country to have access to city water. So, my family collected and cleaned more than 30 used plastic milk jugs we used to secure our drinking water each week. Every Saturday morning, we rode in the back of Grandpa Walker's red and white 1971 Chevrolet pickup truck to a free public access natural spring located in the San Juan Mountains of Southwestern Colorado. I remember lugging the empty jugs 100 yards down a steep hill. My dad stood next to the spring's faucet filling each jug and twisting the cap back on. I then had to carry two filled jugs in each hand back up hill and put them in the

back of the truck. Every single kid I knew had city water connected to their house. When they were thirsty, they just got a clean glass out of the kitchen cabinet and drank water from their sink. I was the only kid I knew who had to collect water in old milk jugs out of the ground. I was the only kid I knew who drank directly out of a milk jug. I remember feeling different than the other people I knew.

I learned about hunger and as a result I developed eating habits I have worked to overcome my entire life. Today I understand the term food insecurity and the resulting consequences of living with food insecurity. In fact, it took being connected to a therapist before I was able to process and explore these formative experiences and my complex relationship with food. I did not know the term food insecurity when I was a child, but I do remember never knowing where our food would come from if it came at all.

When we first moved to New Mexico our nutritional needs were met by Grandpa and Grandma Walker. Today I think my grandparents' cuisine would be categorized as deconstructed Great Depression era fusion. I have no memory of any breakfast with them that was anything but a bowl containing a glob of gelatinous oatmeal sprinkled conservatively with a few granules of brown sugar. I have no memory of Grandma Walker ever cooking eggs or bacon. I do remember her cooking toast. I remember she cooked a lot of toast. Not for breakfast but for dinner. Lunch was always a slice of Oscar Meyer boloney, a slice of processed cheese, a dab of Mirical Whip all folded inside a single slice of white Wonder bread.

Grandma's toast skills were on display at dinner. Dinner was always the same. I should say it was always a variation of the same concept. I remember Grandpa called it "*shit on a shingle*" while giving me and my sisters a little wink. He was not a great salesperson. I remember feeling relieved when it turned out SOS was an unlimited artistic pallet of creative potential in the hands of Grandma Walker. SOS consisted of anything "creamed" poured over a single slice of toasted white bread. Monday evening could be creamed corn on toast. I remember sometimes creamed corn on toast would be sprinkled with some type of canned meat. Tuesday's menu could be creamed green peas on toast. Wednesday may find

cream of mushroom on toast. Creamed tuna on toast provided a little protein for a Thursday night. Friday was always an excellent time to go all in with creamed corn beef on toast. I vaguely remember a creamed trout on toast. Saturday was typically creamed ground beef on toast. I also have memories of creamed canned salmon on toast. I remember chewing through the bones Grandma artfully left un-creamed. I even remember a creamed cubed pork chop on toast. I remember occasionally going off theme on Sundays when a pot roast, carrots, and potatoes slowly cooked while Grandma and Grandpa were at church.

I have mixed memories of Grandpa Walker and Grandma Walker from those days. I remember that Grandpa Walker sometimes snapped at me in violent anger I did not understand. Sometimes he was gentle, kind, nice, and caring. But sometimes he could be mean and hit me hard for doing something wrong. Sometimes I did not even know what I had done wrong. When he got mean sometimes Grandma Walker would make him eat a Fig Newton cookie, or she would take him to her pantry and give him one of his insulin shots from the refrigerator. I remember watching him stick the needle of the syringe into his stomach. It made me squirm. He was always nicer again a few hours later.

When I was 6, Grandpa Walker was in a big scary hospital for an extraordinarily long time. I remember my parents would visit him at the hospital. Kids were not allowed in his room, so my sisters and I became amazingly comfortable in what became a home away from home in the hospital waiting room. I remember this time clearly because one hospital "*candy stripper*" lady used to give me these little plastic Smurfs cartoon figurines. I have no memory of just how long Grandpa Walker was in that hospital, but my memory of my Smurfs collection makes me think it had to have been an exceptionally extended stay. At one point my sisters and I had several shoe boxes full of little blue plastic Smurfs.

I remember when Grandpa Walker finally did come back home, he was hugely different. For some reason he forgot how to talk. He forgot how to walk and could not stand on his own. I remember Grandma Walker had to feed him because he forgot how to use his arms or hands. I remember his

oatmeal or creamed tuna would run down his chin because he had a tough time keeping it in his mouth. My parents told me he had something called a stroke. I did not understand what that was, but my parents explained his brain got hurt and he had to remember how to talk, walk, and use his hands all over again.

I knew something had changed between him and me because he never got mad at me again. Before his stroke I had always been nervous and scared of him because of his volatile angry mood swings. After his stroke he and I became remarkably close. In my family mythology, this period of my life has been told and retold by my parents more than any other. My only real memories are of the sudden arrival of a huge trunk full of brand-new toys that showed up in my grandparents living room. It was like Christmas morning for a little boy who had very few toys. They were new toys. I did not care if they were all baby toys. Every single day mom woke me up and told me I could go over to play with Grandpa Walker and his new toys.

At first, he and I would just play with the little wooden blocks of different shapes that we put into a container that had holes with the same shape. Grandma said we had to take turns. So, I would grab a block and put it in the right hole and then wait for Grandpa to do the same. It took a long time for Grandpa to grab a block and take his turn. At first, he would just nudge it with his fingers and even if he grabbed it, he usually dropped it. Over time he got almost as good as me at it. I also remember playing with these brightly colored foam balls of varied sizes. I remember this game where I had to squeeze it as small as I could in one hand, then Grandpa would take a turn. Grandma would judge who won.

We also played this fun game of making up sounds. When Grandpa came home from the hospital, he could not make any sounds except these kinds of grunts. So, in our sound game I would make up a sound and Grandpa would try to repeat it. He was awarded a point if Grandma thought he matched it. I would get a point if he could not. I look back at this game and think about my own

grandbabies who love the different voices and sounds their Papa makes. Now I know where this talent came from.

Overtime Grandpa regained his ability to talk again. He slurred his words like someone who just came home from the dentist, but I could understand him. As our daily playtimes progressed Grandpa Walker began calling me Doctor Walker. For some reason this made me feel proud and important. I remember how much I loved it when he called me Dr. Walker. This moniker stuck within my family, and I remember my mom, dad, Grandpa, and Grandma calling me Dr. Walker for years. When I finish this dissertation and begin hearing people refer to me as Dr. Walker, I wonder if I will ever be able to hear it without a memory of my grandpa and a need to compose myself.

At that time, I did not understand anything more than getting to have fun playing with my grandpa. Years later I would realize that playtime for me was serious physical and occupational rehabilitative therapy for my him. Grandpa Walker may have been my first rehabilitation client. Years later I learned that Grandpa refused to participate in any therapy or rehabilitation activities ordered by his doctors. Grandma Walker could not convince him to do anything, he was depressed, angry, and she became convinced he simply wanted to die. She said she noticed him respond differently when his little grandson visited. She noticed he only responded this way to me. She wondered if our relationship could motivate him to engage in therapy and reengage his desire to live. To him I became Dr. Walker, a 6-year-old rehabilitation therapist. Grandpa died in 1981 when I was 9 years old. In his eulogy the speaker talked about how much grandpa enjoyed and eagerly anticipated his morning visits from Dr. Walker. Grandpa credited our morning playtime for giving him a few more years of joy and life. Looking at the face of my own grandson today, I finally understand.

After Grandpa Walker died, Grandma Walker struggled living on her own. In 1983 she moved into a nursing home in Green River, Wyoming. Our family got to move into her small house. I was 11 years old. This is the first memory I have of living in a house with electricity, plumbing, a bathroom, and a



kitchen. The well water remained undrinkable, so we still had to haul our drinking water in used plastic milk jugs. But having access to baths was amazing even if the well water left your skin itchy and smelling like rotten eggs.

With Grandma's move our food came from a welfare program food pantry. For reasons I have no knowledge of this source was infrequent and eventually ended completely. I vividly remember the humiliation and disappointment of going to a grocery store with mom only to leave empty handed and hungry. Her name was always on a list kept taped to a wall at the check stands. Not all checkers would consult the list, so occasionally we got lucky and left with groceries. But most checkers did check that list. That list indicated the people whose checks were not to be accepted because they had a history of checks bouncing. We never had cash. I remember standing sheepishly my heart beating in anticipation hoping and praying the checker would forget to look at the list. I also vividly remember the feelings of dread and shame when they eventually told us our business was not welcome. I remember occasionally being escorted out of the store by big mean looking men.

At some point random copious quantities of groceries would just show up, left on our porch by some anonymous neighbor. The food was left in cardboard boxes, and I remember excitedly digging through the bounty. Grandma took her refrigerator with her to Wyoming, so while we had a kitchen, we still had no refrigerator. I learned to eat food when I got it. I learned to eat all of it when I got it. There was no saving of leftovers. If it could not sit on a shelf it had to be eaten right away or it would spoil, melt, or go bad. Our anonymous food source appeared to have a thing for ice cream. Every time they dropped off groceries there would be 8 to 10 full gallons of ice cream. Reflecting on this now I still cannot believe I learned to eat an entire gallon of ice cream in one night all by myself. We ate it all because we could not keep it frozen. We also knew we might not ever get the treat again. Years later my wife would struggle to adjust to how easily I consumed large quantities of ice cream. She had grown up

in a home where a gallon of ice cream may sit for months in the freezer allowing her to just take the occasional nibble.

In this environment I did not learn about portion sizes, self-control, or how to delay gratification. I did not learn how to discern true hunger from seeking comfort by eating. Eating became my emotional coping mechanism. Food was the only place I found comfort, security, and happiness. Ironically, my experience of childhood food insecurity and hunger did not make me look malnourished or skinny. I was a fat, obese, and overweight little boy. I have struggled with my weight and self-image my entire life.

Growing up I remember always being on one diet after another and always failing gaining back twice as much weight as I lost. My life of constant diet struggles started early in elementary school. My weight only became an issue for me when I was surrounded by peers who belittled and teased me because of my appearance. My weight became the primary target of bullies of all ages.

My weight was the source of a great deal of internalized shame, guilt, and self-hatred. I never thought of my weight as a contextual environmental issue. The cause of this problem was me. I was the problem. I was flawed. I remember being told by adults like teachers or friends' parents that I lacked will power. That I needed to take more pride in my appearance. That I needed to stop being lazy and stop stuffing my face all day. They told me that I would never amount to anything if I did not learn to control myself and lose weight. I hated myself for being *"a good-for-nothing tub of lard."*

Strangely my obesity made me feel both invisible and conspicuously visible at the same time. Most faces and pairs of eyes I experienced looked right at my stomach with judgmental disgust. Other faces and pairs of eyes seemed unable to see me at all. I felt like a monstrous freak show oddity that made everyone look. I was always seen by the eyes I from which I wished to hide from. The eyes I desperately wanted to see me were the ones that never noticed my existence.

I was defined by my flaws and deficits as I entered school.

***Exclusion: The State or Process of Being Excluded, Isolated, or Segregated***

Elementary school was unbearable. School was a torturous hellscape of lonely isolation punctuated by frequent violent bullying. It was not just harassment like teasing or name calling, although there was a lot of that. The violent bullying I experienced included being punched, kicked, and sometimes hit with the weapons available on the playground.

I also grew up in the hyper consumerism and appearance obsessed 1980's. It seemed like everyone had a new pair of Nike Air Jordans, trendy parachute pants, and glacier glasses. They all had boom boxes, BMX bikes, Atari Video Game Systems, and cable television. Everyone was thin, handsome, and good looking. Everyone was smart. Their hair always seemed to be neatly parted down the middle and perfectly feathered back on both sides. Everyone else seemed to have all these things. I had none of those things.

Today, I know there had to be other kids who struggled with their weight and had body image issues. But at the time I thought I was the only fat, ugly, poor, and stupid kid in my school. Now, I know now that poverty is relative and contextual. I know there were kids who were much more deprived than I ever was. But back then, I felt like the only one excluded from the real world everyone else seemed to enjoy. Everything about me made me stand out when all I wanted was to fit in.

I had a tough time making friends. I was embarrassed by who I was and how I lived. Other kids made friends by having weekend sleepovers or going to each other's birthday parties. I was never invited to sleepovers or birthday parties. I also never would have invited someone to a sleepover or birthday party where I lived. I was not one of them. I did not fit in with them. In school I felt alone, isolated, excluded, and segregated. It made me an easy target for bullies.

I remember one year a couple of amorous mating skunks got under the house and dad could not get them to leave. Whilst fornicating each morning their noxious love perfume fumigated our little house with a smell that clung to my clothes and soaked into my flesh. I think I can still taste it. My 8-mile

morning bus rides were humiliating experiences of shame. One of the first girls I remember liking was named Kristy. I had tried to get her to like me for months. After one of these morning bus rides, she started calling me "*stinky skunk boy*" on the playground and in the school halls. I remember feeling like no one would ever like me.

I hated school. I was convinced I was dumb. I knew I was stupid. My frustrated and exasperated teachers seemed to know it too. I remember most of my teachers sat me at a desk at the back corner of the room that always faced the back wall. I was told to be quiet and occupy myself. They told me I must not distract the other children from learning. I clearly understood I was not in school to learn like the other kids. I knew the learning and wellbeing of the other kids was the priority of all the adults. If I threatened the learning of the other kids, I was sent to principal Cunningham's office to get "swats." Swats were spankings using a long two-inch-wide quarter inch thick leather strap fastened to a wooden handle. This leather strap was displayed prominently on the office wall. Principal Cunningham was over six feet tall and had a bald head and a stern no nonsense face. He seemed monstrously huge to me. In my memory getting swats from Mr. Cunningham was a daily occurrence. Today I know it was probably not so frequent. But this form of corporal punishment took my breath away and always made me cry. I returned to a classroom full of peers eager to make fun of the fat kid bawling like a baby. I wonder what these swats were trying to achieve. They certainly did not make me enjoy being at school.

Recesses felt like a dangerous battlefield. I learned to keep my head on a swivel not knowing what direction the bullying, teasing, ridicule, harassment, or physical violence would come from. I remember trying to hide in isolation along the margins of the playground. The playground was a place of battle. I was just trying to be invisible until the bell rang so I could go back to the safety of my desk. Frequently my attempts to disappear from the other kids caused a well-meaning teacher to order me to go play with the other kids. They did not seem to understand that I did not play with other kids because the other kids played with me like lions play with injured gazelles.

*“This is why you don’t have any friends.”* I remember being told by Ms. Harston. *“No one will be your friend if you stay all by yourself.”*

I have no memory of how or when I discovered Tommy, Gene, and Amy. I only remember what it felt like when I did. They appeared to be excluded misfit outcasts just like me. I remember being surprised when I found them. I had never met them before. I did not know they even went to my school. They were kept in their own classroom with their own teacher. They had their own times for recess and usually got the playground all to themselves. I had never met them before because their recess times rarely overlapped with mine. I was shocked they existed. They were never at school assemblies. I never saw them in the halls. They never came to any of the evening school activities. They were never at school carnivals, concerts, or book fairs.

I remember thinking they were being kept a secret from the rest of the school. They must have been especially important. I remember thinking how lucky they were to be kept away from all the mean kids. They even had their own little bus. They did not have to ride the big bus with all the mean kids who called me names like *“fatso”* or *“stinky skunk boy.”* I wanted to be like them. I wanted to be protected too. I wanted to be kept a secret from the mean kids.

I remember sensing I was different from them too. I knew I did not fit in with all the other kids. But I also sensed I did not fit in with Tommy, Gene, and Amy either. Tommy, Gene, and Amy were all different from the other kids too. But I was not just like them. I remember asking mom if she could get me moved into their class. I argued that if I could be in their class and ride their little bus, I would stop fighting mom every day about going to school. I remember mom telling me that the school would not let me be in the same class as my new friends because they were special. I asked what being special meant and why I was not special like they were. I remember mom telling me my new friends had to be kept safe from the mean kids. I wondered why nobody wanted to keep me safe from the mean kids who gave me

black eyes or sent me home with split lips and bruises. It seemed like mom was uncomfortable talking about it. I stopped asking questions. That was the end of that.

I remember Tommy the most because we became friends outside of school. He had large eyes and big teeth that did not stay in his mouth. His eyes seemed to always be looking in different directions which I thought was cool. I thought he could see more than one bully coming at him. I remember looking in a mirror trying to get my eyes to do that. I never could. Tommy did not want to play tag or kickball. He only seemed to want to find dead birds on the playground and poke them with sticks. Tommy did not talk much, so I liked him immediately. Tommy never called me fatso. Tommy and I became close friends until Junior High School. The first and only sleepovers I ever had were at his house. His parents had a dairy farm, and I enjoyed getting to help with his farm chores. His house always had plenty of food. I loved sleeping over on Saturday nights because his family always ate buttered popcorn and cheddar cheese for dinner. I was happy when mom signed me up for Cub Scouts because I learned that Tommy was in my pack. As he and I eventually advanced into Boy Scouts, Tommy and I always shared a tent on camp outs. This arrangement helped me avoid the uncomfortable process of lining up to have other kids reject me as their tent mate. Under this selection process Tommy and I were always the last two left unchosen. Our troop leader eventually recognized this inevitable outcome and assigned us to be permanent tent mates. I enjoyed not being rejected repeatedly. I also liked it because Tommy always brought three or four huge zip lock bags full of candy. I remember getting so sick on campouts from eating so much sugar.

Tommy made me feel better about myself. He did not pick on me or call me names like the other kids. I felt free to relax and be myself because Tommy never judged me. I also felt smarter around Tommy. That is not because Tommy was dumb. He was very smart. But he was smart in certain things, usually things I was bad at like taking things apart and putting them back together again. He was good at building forts and hideouts out of junk. He once built a tree house for us to play in. He was stronger than

me too. He could lift a hay bale by himself and throw it onto a trailer pulled by a tractor. I struggled to move a hay bale. Tommy could stick his hand in anything without vomiting. I learned this hidden talent one weekend on his family's dairy farm. I will not burden you with the details of this discovery. Let's just say I would never have stuck my hand in that end of a cow.

Tommy made me feel smart when it came to reading our Cub Scout handbook because he did not like reading at all. He let me do the thinking when we had to solve puzzles or riddles. These were all things I never knew I was good at before. He also made me feel smart when we had to talk to adults. Talking to adults was always my job because Tommy stuttered and got nervous around adults. We did not seem to fit in anywhere else, but somehow, we fit in a little better when we were together.

Gene and I were at school friends only. He talked much more than Tommy. In fact, I seem to only remember Gene talking. He seemed to have had a lot to say. Gene was much smarter than me. Math and science seemed to come naturally to him. Gene did not like playing tag or sports either because he told me he never learned how to run. I thought this was kind of funny because I could not remember having to learn how to run. Gene liked to hang out under a tree in one corner of the playground and did not roam around much so I always knew where I could find him if he was out. The problem for me was my friends were rarely out during my recesses.

Amy was not my friend exactly. I liked her, but she was always just there in the background with Tommy, Gene, and me. I have no memory of her ever saying a word. I only remember her green eyes and the freckles on her nose. She had these little tan boxes wedged behind her ears. The only thing she liked to do at recess was hang upside down swinging on the monkey bars. Amy was more terrified of the other kids than I was. If any other kid got close, she ran away.

Tommy, Gene, and Amy are the only friends I remember having at Swinburne Elementary School in Farmington, New Mexico. We did not always get the same recesses, so playing with them was an infrequent relief. I noticed a significant difference between the days we were together and the days I was

alone. When I was alone, I was the target of the other kids teasing, abuse, and bullying. I hated those days. When I was with Tommy, Gene, and Amy one of two things happened and both were good from my perspective. Either the other kids left us all alone, or the other kids targeted Tommy, Gene, or Amy for taunting and treated me like I was invisible.

I feel pain and am deeply ashamed by this memory. I knew my friend's presence made me less of a target. I do not remember a single time that I tried to stick up for them when they were the target of the other kids' abuse. I did not defend them like a loyal friend would. I was glad it was not me getting picked on. I don't think I intentionally set out to use them as human shields for my own self-protection. But I fear that I did just that from the 3rd grade to the 6th grade. When I entered Tibbetts Junior High School for 7th grade, I don't remember seeking any of them out in the halls or in the lunchroom. I remember seeing Tommy at various times that year. He was always alone like I continued to be. But I have no memory of talking to him again after 6th grade. Recently I looked him up on Facebook. He has had a successful career as an auto mechanic at a car dealership. He is married and has grown children who look to have had happy lives. He and his wife run his family's dairy farm. Tommy's face looks happy.

I hated school so much that early on I learned to fake every known and several unknown diseases, illnesses, or plagues. My poor mom had to fight a battle every single morning to get me to go to school. I have vivid memories of the constant daily fighting. Looking back now I realize she just did not have the ability to force me to go to school. I remember my parents had this collection of National Geographic Magazines I liked to look through as a kid for reasons that have no bearing on this research. In those magazines, I learned the symptoms of the bubonic plague, hantavirus, and the Spanish Flu. I remember sitting next to mom at "truancy meetings" and her telling me that they would put her in jail if I didn't go to school. I remember being terrified at the thought of mom being in jail. But even this haunting thought did not encourage me to endure going to school. I was absent from school so much



that all my flashbulb childhood memories of historic events such as the shooting of Ronald Regan or the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion were formed while I was at home pretending to be sick.

I continued to fight mom about going to school. And then one day mom was gone. The house was quiet, she was not home. Dad had gotten a job near Shiprock, New Mexico, so our only car was with him at work. I waited for mom watching cartoons on the TV we inherited from Grandma Walker. I remember at the time the telephone in the house was what they called a "party line" a single line shared by all the houses near us. This meant when you picked up the phone you listened for a dial tone. Most of the time you heard voices because someone else was already using it. We were taught it was rude to interrupt or eavesdrop, so there was no way I could call dad to find out if he knew where mom was. I had skipped school several days that week. I became very worried that the school finally put mom in jail like they were always threatening. I got more scared as the evening progressed.

Late that night Diane, my married adult cousin who lived nearby came to our house to make us dinner and put us to bed. She told us mom was sick and had to be taken care of at the hospital. Diane said mom was going to be fine and would be home soon, but I remembered Grandpa Walker being in that same hospital and coming home different. I remember feeling scared. I have no memory of how long mom was in the hospital. I also have no memory of dad coming home at any point during that time. I only remember that when mom did come back home, she was different. I remember dad and mom did not want to talk about what happened. It hung in the air like a specter and remained a mystery for years. I remember bandages around her wrist. I also remember her crying all the time.

I have since learned that both my parents struggled with significant physical and mental health impairments. I have learned that these health conditions run in both sides of my extended family. I also learned their genetic predispositions were worsened by persistent poverty, social isolation, no health insurance, and neglected health care needs. Today, I know this incident was just one of many mental

health crises during those years. Back then all I knew was mom did not come home with the energy or will to continue to fight me about going to school, so I rarely went.

I began changing schools often as mom desperately tried to help me find an environment where I could thrive. During the six years of elementary school, I attended seven different elementary schools. In the three years of junior high school, I attended five different junior high schools. In the two completed high school years I attended Farmington High School and Kirtland Central High School. All told, in the 11 years of my public educational career I attended 14 different schools.

***Imperfection: The State of Being Faulty, Incomplete, Flawed, or Being Undesirable***

Constant school changes combined with my frequent absences created a vicious cycle. I was not there to learn or make friends, so I fell behind the other students both academically and socially. When I was there, I became more convinced of my own stupidity because I had no idea what they were talking about. I became more convinced of my own incompetency and imperfections. The schools did not hold me back or make me repeat a grade. I advanced with my peers. But I lacked the foundational skills needed to keep up. This made it easier for the other kids to tease, taunt, and bully me. I internalized all of this and became convinced the problem was my own stupidity.

All this made me terrified to go to school, so I pretended to be sick more often. On her good days if mom forced the issue, I learned how to “ditch” school on my own. I remember her watching me go to the bus stop. All I had to do was stand there until the bus was in sight and mom stopped looking. I would then run off into the sagebrush and spend the day down by the river under the cottonwood trees. I fell further and further behind, convinced I was incapable and stupid. I did not even try. I felt defective, unlovable, unworthy, and lonely.

I never mastered simple skills like the multiplication tables. I never learned to spell. I still struggle with simple fractions. In my professional career I have handled the management of tens of millions of dollars. I am forced to use a calculator to do simple single digit multiplication and division. I have never

been confident with simple addition and subtraction. I have written thousands of pages of policy, procedures, and training manuals. None of this would have been possible if my career had predated the invention of word processor software with spell check. While I have become an avid reader, it takes me twice as long to read something than it does others. The legacy of this academic imperfection has been a haunting self-doubt, shame, and sense of guilt that has been my shadow in life.

Today, I also realize the role models I had were not the role models I needed. No adult I personally knew was a high school graduate. I knew of people who had graduated from high school, but these were just names I had no real relationship with. They were people from another world I was not a part of. I did not have a single close relationship with a person who had attended or graduated from college. An aunt had, but my relationship with her was not one of trust so she was never a role model I sought to emulate. Every adult that I knew was either unemployed or had low paying low skill jobs. I did not know an adult who had a trade, craft, or was the member of a profession. Every adult I knew personally lived at or below the poverty line.

To me a job was a necessary evil. A job was just a job. People had to be employed in a job to get money. A job was not a way of life, it was just a way to survive life. I did not know of anyone who had a job they liked, enjoyed, or loved. Every adult I knew talked about how terrible their jobs were. A job became associated with punishment that had to be endured. The only reason people performed a job was because someone else was willing to pay them to do it. I grew up thinking a job was torture. Something adults just had to do to survive.

Graduating from high school was never a realistic aspirational goal. I always knew I would drop out or get expelled eventually. The possibility that I might graduate with my peers was never realistic to me. I did not think I had what it took. So, I drifted through my early high school experience trying to stay invisible out on the margins so they would leave me alone. I was rewarded for hiding by being ignored. I do not remember having a single positive relationship with a teacher. I remember hearing other kids talk

about meeting with a guidance counselor, reviewing their transcripts, planning their course sequences to fulfill graduation requirements. I did not know what a guidance counselor was or where to find one. In high school I signed up for whatever classes I thought looked fun rather than taking courses required for graduation. I remember being surprised to find out during my junior year that there were specific graduation requirements. I was always on the track to dropping out.

I remember hearing peers talking about visiting colleges with their parents. I vividly remember hearing football teammates discussing universities they were interested in attending. I remember seeing recruitment letters, brochures, and college swag received in the mail by some of my peers. David, one of my teammates got a football scholarship from the University of Oklahoma making him the big man on campus that year. Trey got a scholarship to play at New Mexico State University. Matt got an academic scholarship to Arizona State University. I remember feeling envious and jealous. But I knew all of this was for people like them. I was not like them. College was where they belonged. I did not even belong in High School. What I would later identify as learned helplessness had metastasized into certain absolute knowledge my own actions would not change anything, so I accepted the inevitable.

Somewhere in my childish unconscious I aspired for more. Once, when I was in elementary school Dad brought home two black lab puppies given to him by a coworker. For some reason, my sisters and I named them Yale and Princeton. Today I think of that with a chuckle. I know that back then if someone had asked me to tell them what Yale and Princeton were I would have had no idea. I named my dogs after two prestigious Ivy League schools. Yale partied too much one night and drank some antifreeze that killed him a few days later. Princeton lived an exceptionally long life and was my one true companion growing up. He accepted and loved me for who I was. I always felt safe with him. I miss him every day.

During my early high school years, I became painfully aware that while my life was not like most of my peers. The barriers and challenges I faced seemed to not exist for them. But I learned there were

others who had it even harder than I did. I began to recognize that while I did not fit in completely, I could at least pass through this other world unnoticed while many others could not. I realized as the only boy in the family that I had certain privileges that my three sisters did not have. Early in life I recognized gender differences in terms of unequal access to opportunities and unfair treatment. While I felt like a social outcast, I knew others were more excluded, segregated, and isolated. In school I remember there being only one African American kid. I remember he did not have any friends either. I also noticed some teachers treated him even worse than they treated me. My schools had many Native American and Hispanic kids, but I remember realizing they were treated worse than me too.

Today, I look back on my childhood learning experiences with fresh eyes. Until I engaged in this research project, I never realized how deeply I developed a sense of social injustice and a desire to help society recognize that every human being has value. I experienced my own helplessness and hopelessness as a child. I also realized there were other people who felt more helplessness and hopelessness. To me the world did not seem fair. Society did not appear to be structured equally. The words I heard to espouse patriotic American values seemed to apply only to certain kinds of people. Some people were first-class citizens. Others like me were second-class citizens. Many more were not even third-class citizens. People were not treated as equals. Some people were not free. Some people were systematically left out of the American dream.

While I recognized the world did not seem just, I still internalized the blame on my own flaws. If everyone else in America who looked like me could succeed, what was wrong with me? I knew I was incompetent, lazy, worthless, and good for nothing. I could never measure up. I belonged in the shadows where I could remain unheard, unseen, and ignored.

I felt very alone in my own imperfection. I felt out of place at school, at church, and among my few friends. I was unwelcome, unwanted, and an ostracized pariah. I knew things could always get worse. I also knew things would never get better.

But I also felt an early sense of rage at the injustices built into our society. I remember that as a child I wanted to find a way to make the world fairer and more just. Not just for me. I wanted to make it fairer and more just for everyone who had been left out. I wanted to change the world so people like daddy and Tommy could be seen, heard, and valued in society. I wanted to grow up and stand up to the bullies of the world. I wanted to help people like dad, Tommy, and so many others prove society wrong. I did not know words like social justice, civil rights, advocacy, equity, equality, inclusion, or diversity. But I felt these concepts in my core.

I could never contribute to changing society if I had no sense of my own value. I could have no impact if I had no self-worth and did not believe in my own potential. No matter what our cultural mythology told me, no one picks themselves up by their own bootstraps. Human beings are not self-made creatures. Human beings are psychosocial creatures who create themselves in relationships with other human beings. Individual metamorphosis occurs in the safe cocoon of a caring relationship with another human being. We thrive together and we perish alone.

If my life was ever going to be transformed, I knew I had to find value in myself. But I had incarcerated and enslaved myself in my own sense of inferiority. I was trapped in a prison that kept my life constricted and confined to the walls of my internalized jail cell. I was never going to be able to free myself alone. I did not think I could. I did not want to escape because I feared what would happen if I did. I needed someone who could help me find my own bootstraps. I needed someone I trusted who could convince me that I had value, potential, and worth. I needed a relationship with someone who loved me enough to help me love myself. Someone whose eyes could see in me what my own eyes could never see. I needed to look into eyes of someone who really saw who I already was and what I had the potential of becoming.

Her name is Linda. Linda is the personification of my beloved profession.

***Emancipation: The Process of Being Set Free, Liberated, Released, or Unconstrained***

In June of 1989, the summer before my senior year of high school I met Linda. The year 1989 coincides with the miraculous improvement of my personal memory. There are no gaps in my memory like those that proceed 1989.

Linda was living with her older sister working at a summer job as a bank teller earning tuition money for her first year at Southern Utah State College. I only met Linda because my friend Brian's mother was making him take her to a community festival as a favor to a friend. Brian had a girlfriend who was very jealous and happened to be out of town. He was afraid to take Linda out alone fearing his girlfriend's wrath. Brian invited me to come along. He reasoned that two boys and a girl out for an evening could not be misconstrued as a date.

I was hopelessly smitten the first time I saw Linda. She was almost a year older. To me she was a wonderous mirage of blonde hair and blue eyes. She wore a pair of white shorts and a red polo shirt with a Sun West Bank logo on it. I remember feeling like I was in a waking dream witnessing some type of vision. Linda was a unicorn to me. She had graduated from Uintah High School in Vernal, Utah that spring. In the fall she would be in Cedar City, Utah attending Southern Utah State College. I had never talked at length with someone like her before. As I listened, I realized she was a thriving native from the other world I had only occasionally glimpsed. That night I knew something important had happened.

Over the course of the next few weeks, I found every possible excuse to be around her. Linda lifted the veil allowing me to see all the possibilities afforded to people in her world. She showed me opportunities I never knew existed. She made me want to be a part of her world. And the reflection I saw in her eyes told me she thought I could.

That fall Linda left for college. Not long after she called to tell me that she was pregnant. I remember first feeling a mix of terror, fear, anxiety, and cluelessness. Strangely this quickly gave way to feeling free and relieved. I was getting anxious about my exit from high school. I knew I was not going to

graduate. I dreaded the embarrassment, humiliation, and shame of having to explain that to my friends and family. No one knew how far away from graduation I was, they all assumed I was on track. I knew I was either going to be forced to repeat another full year or drop out. I had been dreading the inevitable conversation with my parents about dropping out of high school. Linda's pregnancy liberated me from this internal conflict. Somehow this unplanned pregnancy alleviated my fear of impending doom. It made it easier to inform my parents that I was dropping out of school to get married at 17 years of age. I moved to Cedar City, Utah. Linda and I were married at the end of October 1989.

I was now a 17-year-old adult. I was married, surviving on food stamps, welfare, and charity. We lived in a cheap apartment in the process of being condemned and demolished by the city. Sleeping in a rat-infested apartment knowing we would soon be evicted and have no place to live did not register with me because it all seemed Janicel. But for some reason this was a catastrophic crisis to Linda. She had lived in the same house nearly her entire life and had never experienced this kind of lifestyle. It was a trauma that she had never experienced.

In those early years I left behind a wake of failed dead-end jobs. I got a job in telemarketing. I was trained to cold call people and manipulate them to change their long-distance phone carrier. It did not take me long to learn I do not possess the skills needed to succeed in any type of sales. I also learned I had a deeply entrenched set of personal morals, values, and ethical standards that convinced me I had to have a job that aligned with my sense of right and wrong. Otherwise, I would either fail and be homeless or succeed and not be able to sleep at night. I worked at Taco Time for a few days. I had a weeklong career with Pizza Hut. I worked long enough to receive one full paycheck at a convenience store. I lasted an hour at an assembly line job making camping equipment.

In an ironic twist of fate, I found myself earning \$3.25 per hour as a part-time fry cook at Kentucky Fried Chicken. This job resulted in career advancement when I was hired as an assistant manager of a Golden Coral restaurant in Tulare, California. In Tulare, Linda gave birth to our son Logan.



We were in Tulare for less than a year. The job fizzled out and I had no prospects and no place to call home. We moved our little family into the basement of Linda's childhood home in Vernal, Utah.

We were dependent on the good graces of Sally my less than enthusiastic mother-in-law. I have grown to love and deeply respect Sally over the more than 35 years of marriage with Linda. But back then she treated me with the same disdain as my Grandma James treated my dad, and for similar reasons. Those were dark times for me.

Eventually, I got a job making \$3.25 per hour stocking milk at Smith's Food and Drug Grocery Store. I worked hard stocking milk, bagging groceries, and bringing shopping carts in from the parking lot. I felt this job was demeaning because I knew I was capable of more. But it was a job and my having a job was all that everyone else seemed to care about. If I ever dared to express how much I hated my job, people would tell me to be grateful I even had a job. I was told nobody loves their job. Everyone works a job to get paid and pay their bills not because they like what they do. What I lacked was a work ethic. I was lazy dreamer who needed a reality check. The problem was always inside me. Not long after I was promoted to the graveyard shift stripping, waxing, and buffing the floors. I could not adjust to being nocturnal, when it was clear this job was a dead end with no opportunity for further advancement I quit. I was unemployed again. I ended up being unemployed for a long time.

Failure after failure while trying to get a job on my own became discouraging. I was told I needed to apply for services from the Utah Department of Job Services. This made sense to me because it was clear I just needed a job. I vividly remember meeting in a small cubicle with a woman who introduced herself as my employment counselor.

*"My job is to place you in a vacant job you are capable of doing."* She explained.

She was very efficient. She seemed in a hurry to get me out of her cubicle. She handed me five or six multipage forms on a clipboard and asked me to go back into the lobby to fill them out completely. She stressed completely. I was instructed to let the person at the front desk know when I had finished

filling out every part of the forms. Both sides, completely. She explained that when I had finished, she would bring me back to talk.

When I had filled out the forms completely on both sides and notified the person at the front desk, I waited several minutes for my employment counselor to bring me back to her cubicle. Reviewing these forms, she asked me questions about my education and work experience. She made pointed little comments about all the things I lacked. She never looked me in the eyes. She concentrated on the papers in front of her. I remember feeling like she was searching for the answers only those forms held. When I told her why I had left my previous jobs, she shook her head and made clicking noises with her mouth. I was being sized up and judged as deficient. Everything about it was a transactional exchange. In exchange for her valuable time, I had to complete her forms. In exchange for her valuable advice, I had to answer her questions and accept her criticism. In exchange for her placing me like a potted plant in a vacant job, I had to perform that job without failure.

After several minutes she let out a sigh, tossed my paperwork on her desk, and bluntly informed me that I was completely unemployable. She doubted there was anything she could do for me. She said I need to work on becoming job ready.

*"No employer is going to hire you because you are not job ready."* She said clinically.

She suggested I work on becoming job ready by going back to school to get my high school diploma. She handed me a brochure for the adult basic education program. I explained I had a small family and bills to pay. I needed some kind of job, any job. I needed a paycheck not to be sitting in classes.

I remember her shaking her head in disgust.

*"I am not a miracle worker with a magic job wand." She told me. "Unless you are willing to make the effort to help yourself there is nothing I can do. Employers are not charities handing out jobs to the*

*needy. The only people who get paychecks provide value their employers are willing to pay for. You have nothing of value to offer an employer.”*

I remember her saying these words very loudly in the open office setting. Dozens of people were looking on. I felt terrible and disrespected as a human being. I asked if there was anything she could do for me. She rolled her eyes and reached for a pen and a piece of paper. She told me she was going to set me up for an appointment with one of her coworkers. She said he would evaluate and assess me. She explained the evaluation might identify options that she had not already ruled out.

A week later I returned as scheduled and completed several hours of paper and pencil tests and assessments. I was interviewed by another person for an hour. He was a middle-aged older gentleman with big bushy eyebrows and reading glasses propped on the end of his red bulbous nose. He took notes on a clip board. Like my employment counselor, he never made eye contact with me. All the questions he asked were the same questions my employment counselor already asked. The tests focused on what jobs I had already done in my past. What I liked about those jobs. What I did not like about those jobs. Other tests assessed my ability to read, do basic math, and solve word problems. One test asked me weird questions about the likelihood of me snitching on a coworker who stole money out of the cash register. Another asked if I think people who lie to their boss should be “publicly humiliated.” I don’t know what that test wanted but I remember thinking I must have failed. Not one question asked about my interests. Nothing asked about my hobbies, interests, or talents.

Two weeks later I met with my employment counselor again.

*“Your assessment confirmed what I told you about having nothing of value to offer an employer.”* She affirmed. *“But the good news is that your most viable path to employment is in the janitorial arts and there are plenty of jobs available.”*

She told me the assessment indicated this was the only career that fit my limited abilities. She said it was the only job she thought I had a reasonable expectation for long-term success. In some ways it was encouraging to find out there was at least one place where my limited abilities could be useful.

*“And you were right about one thing.” She reassured me. “Your assessment shows you have no aptitude for learning. You simply do not have the intellectual skills needed to earn a high school diploma. Going back to school is a waste of time for you because there would be no benefit. It is better for us to just get you placed on a job as a janitor.”*

She handed me a written referral to apply for a vacant job at the Smith’s Food and Drug Grocery Store stripping, waxing, and buffing floors on the graveyard shift. Defeated, I walked out of the office and threw the referral in the trash. I had a feeling my last employer had no interest in replacing me with me. All those scientific tests, assessments, evaluations, and the professional judgement of a professional employment counselor confirmed the only job I was capable of was the last job I already failed at.

My experience at the job services office was clinical, efficient, logical, rational, and very transactional in nature. I was not a human being of interest to my employment counselor. I was an object, a thing to be placed in another thing called a vacant job. All those forms, tests, and assessments were used to decide exactly what kind of a thing I was so she could identify where I needed to be placed. Everything about this experience was a transactional exchange designed to meet someone else’s needs, not mine.

My employment counselor called a few weeks later to see if I had applied for the graveyard floor crew at Smith’s Food and Drug. I remember how upset she was that I had not. She told me her job depended on the number of job seekers she referred and the number who got jobs. She indicated I had failed to meet her needs, and that I had failed to meet the needs of Utah’s taxpayers and employers. As I had failed to meet so many people’s needs my case would be closed as I had failed to cooperate. She also told me my family’s food stamps would be discontinued because I was not actively looking for a job.

Eventually I got a job on my own. I was hired by Wal-Mart Stores Inc. At Wal-Mart I found my groove and received several promotions very quickly going from gathering shopping carts in the parking lot to store management. At that time Wal-Mart was rapidly expanding across the Intermountain West, I was promoted to new store setup manager. I felt like I had won the lottery. I was a salaried white-collar manager earning an incredible \$23,500 per year. I was making more in a year than my dad made in any two-year period.

My job was to take the keys to a big new empty 100,000+ square foot building from a construction manager. I then led over 200 newly hired associates in setting up, stocking, training, and grand opening the store in under 10 weeks. I was responsible for coordinating the processing of hundreds of semi-truck loads of equipment and merchandise. I was responsible for managing the installation of shelving, stocking the shelves, pricing, signage, training, and enculturating new Wal-Mart associates. The day after a successful grand opening my little family and I moved on to the next store in the next town.

At this point Linda, Logan, and I had added Brock to the family. We moved every 11 to 12 weeks. The job was mentally and physically demanding. I was working 6 to 7 days per week averaging 16-hour days. Linda was always at home taking care of the boys. She felt lonely, isolated, and miserable. I was at work before my boys woke up each day and got home late at night after they were already sound asleep. I realized I did not know them. They did not know me. Everyone I worked with was divorced and had strained relationships with their kids. That was not the life I wanted. I asked the Wal-Mart Home Office to find me a more stable assignment. I was assigned to be an Assistant Store Manager at the new store in Chubbuck, Idaho. Our family moved to Pocatello.

I now look at a photograph that has always represented a singular moment in space and time where I realized everything in my life had to change. This image resurfaces emotions that ended up changing my entire career path. The tenth of a second before the photographer captured this image my

life and career were heading in the direction of a protracted career in retail management. In the tenth of a second after this image was captured my life and career path veered off course eventually leading me to VRC.

This is a studio photograph of an infant boy sitting in a galvanized steel wash tub with a washcloth and various bath items serving as props in a carefully staged scene. The little boy appears to be exploding with a huge joy filled smile. His eyes appear to glisten with delight.

The baby in this photograph is my son Brock. Sitting at home lonely, Linda decided to bring our boys into the photography studio located at the front of Chubbuck's new Wal-Mart store. It was our grand opening, and I had spent weeks working long days to prepare. I was working. I did not know Linda was bringing the boys in for pictures. She was planning to surprise me with the pictures. I also did not know Linda and the boys had been in the studio for a long time. No matter what the team of photographers tried, Brock simply would not stop crying and screaming. They had tried everything, funny voices, silly faces, tickling, and endless rounds of peek-a-boo. Nothing would make him stop crying. Just as all the adults were preparing surrender to defeat, I walked into the studio to train a team member on conducting a cash register pull. A register pull was the process of clearing cash registers of excess money.

This picture immortalizes the exact moment Brock sees his daddy. It may have been the first time Brock had seen me in weeks. He and I lived in the same house, and I had seen him when I looked in his bed to watch him sleeping. But chances are he most likely had not seen me in weeks. In this picture you are seeing the precise moment he caught sight of his dad. The picture does not show what is going on behind the camera. I was preoccupied with the task at hand. I was only vaguely aware there were customers present getting pictures taken. I saw a flash and I looked up and saw that face in the photograph. I smiled thinking that kid's parents were going to be happy with that smile. Then I proceeded to conduct the cash pull having not recognized my own baby. It took several minutes before I

was startled to see my wife standing there. As I stepped toward her everything clicked into place. That smile was my own baby. I felt like the worst father in the world.

That night I stared at the ceiling of our rented apartment. If I kept this job, I would never be home at night. I would never be able to attend my children's school plays, events, or athletic competitions. They would grow up with an absent dad married to his work. That night I realized I had a job I did not love. I did not love it enough to sacrifice my children for it. I needed a career that gave me work-life balance. A career where I could be home in the evening to be with my family. Where I could have weekends and holidays off. Where I had the ability to be present in my children's lives. If I had no other choice but to give my entire life to my job, it had to be something I loved. I was not living to work, I wanted work so that I could live.

Impulsively I quit. I walked out on the best paying job I ever dreamed of having and an annual salary exceeding anything my parents ever earned. I walked away from the first health insurance coverage I ever had. During my childhood we never had health insurance, and I did not know it existed. Dad's early death was due to a lifetime of untreated and uncontrolled diabetes. My impulsive decision did not come easily.

Again, we moved into the basement of my mother-in-law's house. It had not worked well the first time. I figured a second time would do the trick. I was jobless, hopeless, and had to face an unsympathetic mother-in-law every morning and every evening who seemed to want me tarred, feathered, drawn, and sufficiently quartered.

I was living up to everyone's low expectations, including my own. I felt like everyone was right about me, I was never going to amount to anything and was incapable. In many ways this is exactly what I had been conditioned to expect my life to be like. I had continuously lowered my own expectations of myself because I feared disappointment. Linda went another direction.

***Expectation: A Belief That Someone Can and Will Achieve Something***

The gradual elevation of my own expectations occurred in the psychologically safe and loving relationship I had with Linda. I trusted her completely. Linda leveraged my blind trust to concoct a devious but altruistic plot. Her plotting required stealth, careful gentle manipulation, and the complete conning of her husband. I was sleepwalking through life, so when Linda enlisted me in her grand conspiracy, I never saw it coming.

She launched her secret mission one night at dinner. Casually, she mentioned enrolling in some college classes at the Utah State University (USU) extension campus in our little oil patch town of Vernal, Utah. The “college” campus consisted of two nondescript classrooms in a strip mall shopping center.

As Linda dipped a fish stick into a pool of tartar sauce, she offhandedly mentioned signing up for a ballroom dance class.

*“Hey, do you want to take it with me?”* She subtly planted the seed in my brain. *“It would be fun to dance with my own husband and not have to dance with some strange guy.”* She stealthily added fertilizer. *“I am so uncomfortable having to hold a strange man’s hands and have to press myself against him to learn some of those dances.”* She carefully added water.

I have often recalled this conversation because with those few words and vivid imagery I instantly awoke from my sleepwalking through life. With these words and mental images Linda changed the course of my life forever.

My initial instinctual reaction was no! I did not want to take ballroom dance. Nothing about those two words had any appeal to me. Those were the words I was preparing to say with my mouth. But the image of Linda dancing with some other guy stopped my words in their tracks. She would have to dance with a college guy. A smart guy. A good-looking skinny guy. A guy with a future. A guy who was not currently unemployed living in his mother-in-law’s basement.



*“Yes! That sounds like so much fun.” I lied for effect. “I would love to take ballroom dance with you. Sign me up.”*

This is how my expectations for educational success were raised.

The first night of ballroom dance class Linda handed me an algebra textbook. This surprised and intimidated me. I did not know ball room dance required knowledge of basic algebra. Linda anticipated my confused stare and articulated a clearly well-rehearsed explanation. One class cost the same as taking two classes. She enrolled us in algebra 101 and ball room dance. The first teacher in my life that I recall with fondness is Patty Hayes our algebra instructor that semester. She was patient and somehow made me believe that I was capable of learning math. I barely earned a C grade in her course, but it felt like an A.

I survived that semester, and I thought life would return to Janicel. Having tasted success in phase one of her strategy, Linda next enticed me to take a golf class. That semester she snuck in a total of four classes. We took Golf, Introductory Survey of Western Art, Film and Movie Appreciation, and General Physics. That semester I earned almost a B average in all my classes finishing with a 2.96 GPA. This GPA represented the best grades I had every received in all my years of elementary, junior high, and high school. To that point my highest GPA was 2.0. This only happened one time just so I was eligible to play football.

The next semester Linda registered us for Advanced Survey of Western Art, Basic Geology, Weight Control, and my favorite class Introduction to Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning. That semester I earned a 3.08 GPA which amazed me.

I knew what an Architect was because the dad on *The Brady Bunch* was one. As a child I often pretended to be an Architect frequently drawing floorplans for dream houses I yearned to live in someday. Architecture and drawing were passions because they were solitary pastimes that helped me cope with being homeless and alone. Alone in my imagination I could dream of life in homes of my own

creation. But I had always been told that being an Architect required a college degree and proficiency in math, both were impossible for me.

In my Landscape Architecture class, I earned my first A in a college level course. I remember the professor praised my drawing, drafting, and compositional skills. He said he thought I had a unique gift for creativity and an eye for aesthetics. I remember realizing that my drawings and designs far surpassed those of my fellow students, and this surprised me because I always assumed I was the least talented person in every room. I was disappointed to learn this was the only Landscape Architecture course offered at the extended campus. If I wanted to take more classes in this discipline I would have to move my family to the main campus in Logan, Utah.

Over dinner one night Linda asked me if I had ever thought about taking the GED examination? I honestly had no idea what the GED was. She explained that it was a test. Passing this test was the equivalent of earning a high school diploma. I had no interest in taking a test. I always failed tests. Even the simple tests at Job Services had proven I was incapable intellectually of learning. Somehow, that night I failed to recognize how I had performed the last three semesters in college level courses. I still believed I was incapable, and I was 100% sure I could never pass the GED test.

*"Utah State University has this special admissions category for adults who have the GED." She told me. "We need to get you formally admitted to Utah State University as a degree seeking student. You've earned enough credit hours already that it would not take you long to graduate with a bachelor's degree."*

I was stunned hearing Linda say those words. I clearly remember being stunned because this is the precise moment I realized I was attending college. It may strike you as unbelievable, but mentally I was not a college student. In my mind my wife was the college student. Linda was a fully admitted degree seeking student at USU. In my mind I was simply her side kick. I took whatever classes she took just to be together. She was the college student, not me. I still get emotional goosebumps remembering

this ah-ha moment of awakening. Somehow, I had become a relatively successful college student, and I had not even realized it. Yet somehow this conversation also frightened. The ghosts of my past whispered that I was still an imposter and my relative success in my college courses was a fluke. I was afraid to want more. I was afraid to try for more. I told Linda I would think about it.

*“Here.”* Linda smiled handing me a paper receipt. *“I dropped by the school district to find out about the GED, and they told me the next scheduled examination is tomorrow morning at 9 am. They said the next one is not scheduled yet and may not happen for months. So, I signed you up and paid for it.”*

*“You did what?”* I asked. *“I don’t even have time to prepare. No, this won’t work I will fail it and we will waste this money. Can you get the money back?”*

*“No, it is nonrefundable.”* Linda said looking across the table at me intently. *“Think about it this way, you know how anxious you get when you try to study for a test? Well, when you take the test tomorrow you can just relax and take it. If you pass, great! We get you enrolled into USU and move on. If you fail it, we will know exactly what subjects you need to study to pass it the next time. You won’t have to guess or waste time studying things you already know.”*

*“I can’t take it tomorrow. I am not ready.”* I pleaded for a commutation of my sentence.

*“Well, it is not refundable so if you do not go take it, we lose all the money I paid.”* Linda stated.

I was on the verge of an emotional meltdown. Then Linda made me feel completely safe saying there was zero risk. She said there was nothing to lose by going and taking the test. Success or failure were both positive outcomes she assured me. Passing or failing the test were both steps forward and either outcome put me closer to attaining the goal of earning a college degree.

*“The only bad outcome is not going and taking the test because we get nothing out of our money.”* Linda’s logic was impossible to argue with. And I had already learned that once she set her mind on something it was better to simply help make it happen. I woke up early the next morning tired. I had

not slept all night, and I was completely unprepared. I remember taking the GED examination in the board room of the Uintah School District Headquarters. Returning home I was positive it was all a disastrous failure. Before I walked in the house, I accepted that I would fail, and that Linda would enroll me in basic adult education classes to prepare for a retake.

*"How did it go?"* Linda asked.

*"Pretty sure I failed."* I replied. *"I had to just guess on most of the questions, I have no idea what some of that stuff was."*

*"I guess we just wait and see what the results say."* She smiled and winked at me. I seem to remember a mischievous twinkle in her eye, but that may just be a retroactively constructed memory. Regardless, at the time I was amazed at how sure Linda was that I had passed the examination because I was just as sure that I had failed. As we waited for the results to show up in the mailbox Linda began filling out my USU admissions forms.

A few weeks later a letter in the mailbox contained my passing scores and my GED certificate. I remember feeling the hair go up on my neck as I held a certificate in my hand telling me I had earned the equivalent of a high school diploma. There were no bands playing pomp and circumstance and there was no long commencement speech but standing there next to my in-law's mailbox wearing a pair of shorts, an old tee-shirt, and plastic flip flops I graduated from high school. I looked at Linda stunned.

*"I told you so!"* She stuck her tongue out at me and punched my chest with her fist. *"Let's go to Arby's and celebrate."*

In May 1994 we moved our little family to the ivy-covered campus of Utah State University in Logan, Utah. We lived in Aggie Village an on-campus married student housing complex. Locals referred to Aggie Village as the "lambing pens" because of the prolific birth rates of its residents. We contributed to this stereotype when Linda gave birth to our third and final child Kylie.

Dad and mom were always worried about me. They had moved to Vernal, Utah to be close to our young family. When we moved to USU, dad and mom also moved to Logan. Earlier in his life dad had picked up some college credits from various institutions and had eventually obtained his high school diploma through an adult basic education program. Dad decided to apply for admission to Utah State University to work toward his lifelong dream of earning a bachelor's degree.

My first academic term on a real university campus was summer semester 1994. Summer semesters on campus were shorter terms with only a handful of students on campus because of limited course offerings. It was an incredible experience to be able to take my first two university classes sitting right next to a fellow student who was my own dad. I have very fond memories of taking those classes with dad. Frankly, I learned that summer just how intelligent my dad was. Dad helped me get through that first semester on campus because he helped me master the coursework. That semester I realized my dad could have been a successful professor if he had been able to access the right opportunities.

I remember one day dad and I sat studying together in a basement student lounge located in the Old Main building at USUS. He looked around us and then he looked at me. He had this content smile on his face and his eyes seemed to glisten.

*"Can you believe where we are right now?"* Dad asked.

*"What?"* I replied failing to discern a deeper meaning in his words.

*"Just look at where we are."* Dad said motioning around the room with his hands. *"You and I are sitting on a beautiful university campus drinking from the fountain of knowledge together. You and I are together on our exploration of learning. This is the life."*

I remember this struck me as kind of hokey. I looked back down at my textbook.

*"Kyle, there was only one thing I ever wanted to be all my life."* Dad said looking out the basement window watching people walk across the quad. *"The only thing I ever wanted to be was a*

*college student. If I could do it all over again, I would just be a lifelong college student. I would never leave. I would just keep learning forever and earn every degree available."*

I remember this struck me as odd. At the time I did not think I enjoyed learning. It was hard arduous work. While I was grateful to be a college student, I viewed learning as an economically necessary transactional exchange. It was a means to an end. In my mind I had to endure this experience to emerge with a piece of paper that would assure me better earning potential and more stable job opportunities. For me learning was a joyless process of drudgery. My childhood trauma haunted me, I still disliked school. I was focused on what life would be like once the process of learning ended with my graduation.

*"Why would you want to be a forever college student?"* I asked.

*"I think the best way to enjoy the journey of life is constantly learning new things."* Dad said sounding like a USU commercial. *"I love being able to fill my mind with new information. Each new idea connects with things I already know making me see everything new and differently. When I am learning new things, it is like I am being reborn with each added piece of puzzle I will never solve. I just love being a student with my son."*

This conversation resonates differently today. As I worked to remember and describe this conversation in written form, my emotions and thinking were stirred. I debated omitting this conversation from my narrative because I worried about its relevance to this study. I now realize this conversation has central relevance and is significant to the research questions investigated in this study. I ask your permission to allow me a brief diversion in my narrative so that I can fully flesh out why I believe this conversation with my dad is relevant to this study.

Dad was trying to tell me that learning and personal growth is a basic human need. Human thriving is dependent on our innate curiosity, inquisitiveness, and intrinsically motivated drive for learning. For my dad, education is a transformational experience. Learning empowers and fuels our

species transcendence. Learning is a holistic symbiosis of means and ends. Dad believed learning was at once a practice, habit, lifestyle, process, and our essential way of being humans. Learning was never a finished end-product. Dad was trying to tell me that the purpose of learning was to learn how to continue learning. The outcome of learning was not possessing answers. For my dad, the outcome of learning is possessing more questions. For dad learning was not about being able to regurgitate verbatim specific information valued by employers. Learning was about feeding the basic human need for curiosity, discover, and exploration. I know dad wanted a college degree so he could live his vocational calling. He wanted a career where he was rewarded intrinsically and extrinsically for doing his life's work. But getting a job was a secondary motivational factor for dad. My dad sought learning and education because it intrinsically rewarded him by feeding his heart, mind, and soul. This is why dad always wanted to be a career college student. It would take years for me to fully understand what dad was saying.

My 53 years on this planet have led me to believe our society is mired in a transactional exchange thinking-based worldview. As a collective entity our society seems incapable of applying transformational thinking to address social problems. Transactional exchange thinking appears to be our social default setting. I have come to believe this is because transactional exchange thinking better fits our inherited flaws. As a species we are not patient. We prefer being comfortable. We have a limited attention span. And we want immediate results. Transactional exchange thinking is easier to use. We are comfortable using it, and we are convinced it works because we see immediate results. We are like heroin addicts, the immediate results generated by transactional exchange thinking produces a high that is extremely satisfying. We tend to ignore that these highs rarely last. We also fail to recognize that getting immediate short-term results comes at a high price. Transactional exchange thinking inherently produces unanticipated long-term consequences.

Society has overly applied transactional exchange thinking and the principles of scientific management and free market capitalism to nearly every collective endeavor. It seems like the only tool

we know how to use. As the old saying goes if the only tool you know how to use is a hammer every problem looks like a nail. Transactional exchange thinking is societies hammer and every collective endeavor has been treated like a nail.

The subject of the conversation I had with my dad all those years ago is no exception. Transactional exchange thinking has turned learning, education, and our educational systems into efficient rational bureaucratic assembly lines. These assembly line systems churn out fact regurgitating workforce widgets meeting the basic needs of the economy. Learning has been completely repackaged as an end-product neatly wrapped and sold to the marketplace. All resources are focused on optimizing the system to consistently execute a specific series of transactional exchanges that efficiently transfer a limited body of knowledge from mind to another mind. The selected limited body of knowledge is determined by what is valued as useful to employers. Every human being that interacts with the system is transactionally evaluated, measured, assessed, appraised, valuated, and priced according to their perceived worth to the system and usefulness in the workforce marketplace.

Transactional exchange thinking assumes all problems are caused by flawed human beings. Flawless systems are limited by being dependent on flawed people. The solution to every problem is to create more bureaucratic systems and structures to limit, constrain, restrain, control, and minimize the influence of people. Transactional bureaucratic management is necessary to create, monitor, and enforce system control structures. This kind of thinking values and prioritizes standardized rules, policies, processes, procedures, hierarchical concentration of decision-making authority.

In education it has stimulated a uniform cookbook approach to formalize curriculum standards. Transactional exchange thinking requires both professional educators and students to behave transactionally. It values obedience, compliance, conformity, uniformity, consistency, predictability, and process fidelity. Transactional thinking worships quantitative data that validates system performance. In this type of thinking the only things that count are those that are easily counted. If it is difficult to count



it does not matter. Standardized testing and quantitative measures are used to optimize system efficacy and efficiency. Because quantitative numbers become the primary system performance measures, these numbers serve as the system's only existential justification. Transactional thinking risks replacing the original existential purpose of the system with a counterfeit purpose of manipulating and generating numbers to ensure system self-preservation. These measures are often used to ascribe blame to the flawed human beings who are assumed to be failing the system. Many times, this thinking leads us to hold people accountable for outcomes produced by work they perform as directed by the system. The performance of which they have little responsibility, control, or discretion.

Even higher education has succumbed to this transactional exchange paradigm. Universities create employer driven academic programs, workforce responsive degree offerings, and business or industry informed curriculum standards. Higher education has adopted quantitative transactional exchange performance measures quantifying student enrollments, turn ratios, attrition rates, graduation rates, and the number of jobs attained by graduates.

From managed health care systems to social service and welfare programs, no collective human endeavor appears to have escaped the gravitational pull of transactional exchange thinking. I have invested time on this conversation about learning with my dad for a reason. This concept will become central to the exploration of my lived career experiences as a professional member of the PVR program organizational psychosocial cultural milieu. In the ethnographic narrative these concepts will become a central focus because the PVR program is not unique in terms of the overuse of the transactional exchange worldview. I plan to explain that the PVR program psychosocial culture is only unique in that the predominant transactional exchange thinking paradigm that has become the universal center of cultural gravity is wholly incompatible, incongruent, misaligned, and inherently contradictory in an organization born to achieve a transformational purpose, informed by transformational values, producing transformational outcomes, aimed at long-term social change. More on this latter.

My first three years at USU my goal was earning a bachelor's degree in landscape architecture and environmental planning. I thought I had found my vocation. During those first three years I gained confidence in my drafting and drawing skills. I was surprised to discover I was uniquely creative when compared to my peers who often requested that I be on their project teams because I developed a reputation for my ability to creatively differentiate our project from other team projects enhancing individual grades. Being chosen to be on teams was a new experience for me and I found myself feeling more competent. One professor had a national reputation and had trained in the profession at Harvard. He told me that my aesthetic sensibilities were well suited to succeed in the profession. Things seemed to be coming together nicely.

My childhood experiences and the behaviors I learned to survive ended up derailing my achievements. I failed to recognize something important. The program had four large drafting studios. Program majors were assigned by class standing to a studio space each semester. At the time I thought working in the studio late into the evening was an option, not an essential and important part of the discipline's professional culture. During the first semester I tried to work in the studio. Other students were always hovering, looking at my work, making comments that I only heard as critical. Old feelings of self-doubt, shame, and inferiority surfaced. Linda bought me a drafting table and helped me set up my own drafting studio in a spare bedroom. I was more comfortable working alone and secluded. I could keep my ideas hidden away until they were fully ready to be presented. I preferred bringing a never-before-seen product to class on project presentation days. My work always got more of a reaction from my peers because it was the first time they were seeing my ideas, and they were only seeing the fully developed final product. All the other presented projects were less novel because everyone else had watched them evolve from initial conception to the final product. I completely stopped doing any work in the studio.

What I failed to realize was the unintended effects of my self-imposed social isolation. I thought the quality of my own individual work was all that mattered. I learned that my seclusion from my fellow students and from the professors came at a tremendous cost. I failed to form any interpersonal relationships. I was a stranger to them, and they were all strangers to me. I did not realize in the studio they were becoming connected to each other personally. In the studio professors were becoming emotionally connected in relationships with students who they got to know, believe in, and wanted to see succeed. My fellow students were forming psychologically safe relationships with professors that created the conditions allowing them to take risks and push the boundaries of their skills. I learned too late that little techniques were taught during class time. The studio is where the professors shared the tricks of the trade. Collegial collaboration was a principal component of program because of its importance in professional practice.

I was not in the studio to demonstrate my ability to collaborate in the spirit of collegiality. My self-seclusion unknowingly affected my grades. The program was designed to be highly competitive, and grades were awarded based on factors beyond the quality of the final project. My first year in the program I earned outstanding grades. In my second year my grades began to decline on projects. I felt frustrated because peers were receiving higher grades for projects, I felt were not always comparable to mine. Eventually this turned into feeling that I was being treated unfairly.

I requested a meeting with the program director who had also been one of my professors. I asked why I got a low grade on a project that I felt was one of the top projects produced by the class. I remember he told me that every evening before he goes home, he walked through the studio to talk to students. He looked at their initial ideas, gave them feedback, and helped them explore their ideas. He told me that he and the other professors had noticed I was never present in the studio. The faculty attributed my absence to being lazy or not committed and dedicated to the profession. He explained that project grades reflect more than the merits of the final product. He said the faculty graded on the

process students used to arrive at the final project because it reflected learning, development, and skill growth.

*"We can't grade your learning process because you are never in the studio."* He summarized.

*"Why don't you attend studio hours?"*

I told him I worked out of my home studio, and I was emotionally transparent about why I was less comfortable and confident working in the studio at school.

*"My advice to you then is to change your major."* He bluntly said in a dismissive tone. *"Landscape architects do not work alone. They always work in collaborative environments and teams. Sometimes that team is the professional and a group of clients. Sometimes it is a team of fellow or multidisciplinary professionals. A lot of projects require them to work with communities and citizens or politicians. Every project I have ever been a part of professionally was accomplished in a transparent collaborative process from start to finish. If you can't make yourself work more in the studio you need to find a different major. I don't think you have what this profession requires."*

I left his office crushed. I was ready to quit. Not just quit the program, I was ready to drop out of USU entirely. Linda encouraged me to get some advice from someone else on the faculty. I met with my favorite professor and asked for his advice. This brief conversation made it clear to me that the faculty already judged my case and formed a unanimous opinion. During this conversation I was notified that at the end of that academic year the program rank ordered all 48 students in my class cohort according to overall GPA. He informed me that the program's accreditation required them to limit the number of students who were allowed to "matriculate" into the program's advanced courses. He told me they only matriculated 28 students each year and that based on my current GPA I would not matriculate. I understood I was being told to find my own exit before they showed one to me. I found another place I was not wanted.

Linda insisted I remain in school and encouraged me to take a large variety of classes during the next semester to explore options. I explored potentially changing my major to geology but found the idea unattractive. I considered political science. I explored careers in anthropology, art, and philosophy. Nothing felt like a natural fit. In hindsight I always wondered why I never explored education majors. USU had an outstanding College of Education with a wide variety of majors. I never explored these options. I later wondered why. Today I think I harbored a great deal of hostile resentment towards the teachers I had experienced during my childhood. I had developed a low opinion of educators at the time.

It was a sociology course that enthralled me and pointed me in the direction of sociology as a major. That first class focused on studying economic inequality, social injustice, civil rights, and public policy. At the time public debate was focused on welfare reform with many loud voices villainizing and demonizing people who experienced pervasive poverty. The stereotype of the “welfare queen” was becoming a frequently used trope to demean those who used the social safety net. People experiencing intergenerational poverty were being labeled as lazy parasites who needed to be forced to get a job and stop leeching off taxpayers. The funny thing was my politically conservative upbringing overrode my own childhood lived experiences and I internalized and accepted the truth of these prejudices.

I remember this course shook me to my core. While studying government statistics on poverty in America I tended to be listen to my favorite radio program hosted a conservative pundit. Suddenly I was feeling a sense of cognitive dissonance as I heard the firebrand of my political ideology state things as fact that were contradicted by the data. I remember realizing he never cited the source of his statistics. In class I was learning the data showed most people on the nation’s welfare rolls were children, people with disabilities, and the elderly. But on the radio my ideological guru was declaring many welfare recipients were able bodied working age loafers taking advantage of a free ride funded by hard working taxpayers. The conflict between what I was learning and the narrative I had chosen to believe were incongruent. This class opened parts of my mind that I had unknowingly closed.

As I continued taking sociology classes I found the academic discipline validated the lived experience of my entire childhood. Deeply repressed self-recrimination, shame, and internalized guilt blaming myself for my own poverty was challenged by a perspective that poverty was the product of flaws and deficiencies in the social environment. Rather than focusing on what is wrong with an individual person, I discovered a discipline entirely focused on investigating what was wrong with society. Why did our society systematically consign certain groups of people to life on the margins and in the shadows. The sociological worldview changed the way I viewed my own childhood and gave me hope that applying human science could transform society and improve the lives of little kids who are just like me.

I changed my major to sociology. Over the next several semesters it felt like I intellectually feasted on every sociology class USU offered. I thrived studying sociology. My grades improved. In the fall of 1998, I made the Dean's List earning a 3.80 GPA taking five different classes. This was the highest GPA I had ever earned in a single term. I felt rather good about making the Dean's List. For a guy who did not have the intellectual ability to benefit from adult basic education classes, I had really come a long way.

In the spring of 1999, I graduated from USU with a Bachelor of Science degree in sociology with a minor in social psychology. Commencement was unbelievably emotional for me. My peers had graduated once before from high school. They had experience with a similar graduation ceremony. They had worn the scholar's cap and gown before. Graduating from college was still meaningful to them, but for me this was my first time. The first time I heard my name called out as I crossed the stage for a handshake and a piece of paper that was tangible evidence of my academic accomplishment. I cannot describe the pride and sense of achievement I felt. I was not the first in my family to engage in higher education, but circumstances allowed me to be the first to graduate. Dad graduated from USU the following spring. He was immediately accepted in a master's degree program. My older sister Janet

graduated with an undergraduate degree from Brigham Young University-Idaho. Janet went on to complete a master's degree at Idaho State University. Carol, my younger sister earned an undergraduate and graduate degree from Weber State University. Mom was inspired to complete her high school diploma through an adult education program and graduated not long after.

Dad and mom certainly fostered a family of thriving lifelong learners.

After graduation I learned that becoming a sociologist required a graduate degree. Despite my accomplishments in my undergraduate work, I did not think graduate school was something I could achieve. My cumulative GPA was not ideal, and I was still convinced somewhere deep inside that I was inferior. I did not belong in graduate school.

I found myself earning just above minimum wage again. I got a job working at a youth sex offender rehabilitation treatment program. I was a residential center supervisor responsible for the care and feeding of 8 children between the ages of 12 to 14 who had been adjudicated, convicted, and promptly labeled sexual offenders. Eventually I learned every single one of those children had significant histories of abuse, neglect, and lived with disabilities. In this job I learned to see each human being not the labels that become primary identities. I learned to love children who were not even loved by their own mothers. I was also exposed the horrors of children's lived experiences that made my childhood look idyllic in comparison.

It may sound strange, but I absolutely loved that job. It was the hardest, most emotionally devastating, and difficult job I ever had. And I loved it. My work made a difference in someone else's life. The time I spent at work gave me a small paycheck, but it made me feel like the richest person in the world. I was entrusted with the care of eight very vulnerable children who had been tortured physically, emotionally, and sexually throughout their short lives. To some of these kids I was the first adult who treated them like Janicel kids. I was the first adult they were willing to trust a little. I was the first adult that treated them as valuable human beings worthy of a better future. Many of the adults these kids

experienced only saw them as criminal predators deserving of life imprisonment, and they told them so. I asked about what they wanted for their future, and when they told me they could never achieve success in life, I told them I knew they could.

In this job I was surrounded by a team of coworkers who experienced things that very few people can comprehend. This job became a bonding experience because no one working outside of this environment can possibly understand what we saw every day. This was my first experience of belonging to a tribe. We connected to each other and supported each other because no one else could. We belonged with each other because our experiences made it hard for us to belong with anyone else. We have maintained these bonds over the years as we all drifted to other lives and other work settings. We still occasionally get together over dinner and laugh as we retell stories that make our spouses and children uncomfortable. You had to be there with us to get it.

At this time in my life, I don't think I was aware of just how much I had changed. I was more self-aware and had more self-confidence. I also felt more capable and less flawed. The expectations I had for myself and the expectations I had for my future had been raised to heights I would have thought impossible. I no longer felt like a helpless victim trapped by my circumstances. I finally felt a sense of control over the events of my life. I finally felt the sense that I was not broken and flawed.

I loved the job I was doing, but it did not give me a sense of purpose. It was important work, and it was rewarding, but I just did not feel it allowed me to make a positive impact. Linda had unleashed an inner monster in me that I never knew existed. She taught me to constantly learn and be on the lookout for new growth opportunities. I realize now that she helped me understand what dad had tried to tell me. I was ready to take my next learning adventure, and I was ready to find more than a job. I was ready to begin searching for my vocational life purpose.



***Vocation: A Calling, Mission, Life Purpose, Niche, or Way of Being***

That night was like any other night. I was working with Tom. I had never met or worked with Tom before. He was assigned to the other residential center near Promontory Point. I was only working with Tom that night because he was covering the shift for a sick coworker. Tom and I were strangers when we had a conversation that helped me find my life's purpose.

I liked Tom immediately. Tom looked like a young doppelganger of Micky Dolenz from the television show The Monkees. Tom was incredibly talented. He was a vocalist in a popular a cappella group that regularly performed at large venues and had recorded several albums. Tom was also an aspiring actor who had been cast in the leading role in a theatre production of Joseph and The Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat. Tom seemed to naturally emit a self-confidence and self-assuredness that was palpable. I never met someone with Tom's self-confidence who was also humble rather than arrogant. Tom seemed to have all the self-confidence I continued to lack. Tom and I were sitting on the couch monitoring the boys as they completed their daily homework.

*"What do you want to do when you grow up?"* Tom asked with a wry smile and a slight chuckle in this voice.

I was surprised by how quickly I responded. I said I wanted to be a mental health therapist and move up in the company. I just blurted that out. After these words left my lips, I remember having to process what I had just said. I had not consciously thought about any of this before. I had to stop and figure out where that had come from. It seemed to erupt from some unconscious hidden part of my mind that had been doing some thinking without including me. I wondered if my brain and Linda had been conspiring behind my back.

I wanted to have a bigger impact on the lives of the kids I had grown to love. Every week I had sat silent and helpless observing family group therapy sessions. I listened to the nightmares of abuse, neglect, and trauma that had been inflicted on these children. I was required to be present at these

family group sessions. I was there to observe and be available if I was needed to isolate one of the kids during an emotional meltdown. Most of the time I felt useless sitting there silently. The company's mental health therapist facilitated the family group therapy sessions, and I remember being impressed with her professionalism and skill. She seemed to be able to genuinely help the kids deal with emotions and traumas that fueled many of their self-defeating and predatory behaviors. She seemed to see the authentic version of each child and recognized their potential. She seemed to know how to help them heal. I wanted skills like those. I wanted to be more useful. I loved this job but, in many ways, I felt like a glorified overeducated babysitter. My impact was limited because I was required to comply with strict policies and procedures. Her impact seemed unlimited because she was a professional free to act, speak, and make decisions.

*"You need a professional license to do that in Utah."* Tom continued. *"You have to have a master's degree to get licensed."*

Tom got up from the couch and walked to a trash can to throw away an empty bottle of water. He stopped and looked over Ammon's shoulder and helped him correct a math problem on his assigned homework. He returned and sat down on the couch.

*"In Utah there are a few licensure options that would qualify you to be a therapist."* Tom broke the silence. *"To be a licensed clinical social worker, which is an LCSW, you need a master's degree in social work. There are several master's degrees that will make you eligible to be a licensed professional counselor or LPC. I think marriage and family therapy, mental health counseling, school counseling, and there are others. Utah also has licensure categories for graduate level educated psychologists. I think any one of those licenses would qualify you to work as a therapist here."*

*"Humm."* I said letting these new ideas soak in.

*"I thought about becoming a therapist. I am in a master's degree program at Utah State University. It's called Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling."* Tom continued as he took a bite out of an

apple. *"I only picked that one because the federal government gave me a scholarship that pays all the tuition, books, fees, and a small monthly living stipend. The only catch is I have to work in the public vocational rehabilitation program two years for each year I accept the scholarship. Maybe you should look into it."*

*"Wait, you're getting paid to go to graduate school?"* I raised my eyebrows in disbelief. One of the stories I had been telling myself was that graduate school was too expensive even if I somehow got accepted.

*"Yea. It's a pretty sweet deal. The whole program is only 48 credit hours, most people can finish it in about 18 months."* Tom continued. *"I am pretty sure you can get the LPC in Utah with that degree. I think you just have to take two or three additional classes that are not required for the program."*

*"So, is that what you plan to do? Become a therapist?"* I asked.

*"That was my original plan. But then I learned about Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling, and it seems a better fit for me."* Tom said as he finished his apple. *"I think I like the idea of being a counselor who also has a budget. You know most counseling, or therapist jobs just do talk therapy or help clients access resources from community programs. VR Counselors are the only professional counselors I know who are given a pot of money in a budget they manage to do more than just talk therapy; they can buy stuff to help clients get their needs met. It just seems more impactful to me."*

That night and this conversation connected me to Tom. That night he and I became fellow pilgrims on a journey seeking to experience VRC. Tom and I have remained friends since that night. Tom has had a long and distinguished professional career.

I am grateful for so many matchmakers in my life who have connected me to relationships that changed my life. My friend Brian had introduced me to the love of my life Linda. Her love and vision provided the scaffolding I needed to free myself from my self-imposed impediments. Tom is the

matchmaker who introduced me to the other love of my life, the profession of VRC. It is Tom who planted the seeds that would eventually grow into the reason I fell in love with my profession.

To this very day I have absolutely no memory of telling Linda about my conversation with Tom. At the time, this conversation was interesting but not necessarily significant enough that I felt the need to share it with Linda. Today I know that at some point I must have mentioned it to her. But neither her nor I remember how or when I put this on her radar. All we both remember is what she did when she learned about my conversation with Tom.

*"Hurry up, we need to go."* Linda said, tossing my car keys across the living room.

I assumed she wanted me to drive her to the grocery store so she could pick up some ingredient she forgot to buy for dinner. But her sense of urgency was confusing. As I got into the car Linda directed me to drive to the College of Education and Human Services building on the USU campus. Linda had been working at USU and I assumed she needed to run a work-related errand. I parked the car as she frantically tried to find something in her purse. She pulled out a piece of paper with handwriting on it.

*"Okay, we are meeting with a Dr. Garth Eldridge on the fourth floor in ten minutes."* Linda said as she handed me the piece of paper. *"He is the program director and chair of the Rehabilitation Counseling Department."*

By this time in our marriage, I had stopped asking questions. I followed Linda into the elevator and then followed her as she found the right office lobby. We sat waiting for a minute or two and I remember wondering what was about to happen to me.

Dr. Eldridge wore bifocal glasses, and his head was topped by a thinning mane of white hair. His skin seemed redder than Janicel, like someone who was flushed with anger or embarrassment. I later would learn this was just his Janicel complexion. I wondered how old he was. I thought he had to be close to retirement. It felt like I was meeting with somebody's grandpa. The look in his eye and the tone of his voice made me feel welcome and safe. He asked me to call him Garth.

Linda asked more questions than I did. It was obvious she had come prepared. I realized she must have done some research because she asked questions using terms, I had never heard her use before. She asked questions I would never have thought to ask. At times I felt uncomfortable. It was like I was an outside observer watching two people talk about my future in front of me. This would have been disconcerting in any other context. My relationship with Linda made me feel cared about and completely safe. The most salient memory I have of this meeting was how passionately Garth described Rehabilitation Counseling.

*“What do Rehabilitation Counselors do exactly?”* I finally asked.

*“Well, let me explain why the Rehabilitation Counseling profession exists.”* Garth proceeded to give me a brief historical overview of the social injustices that people with disabilities face in American society. He briefly told me about the disability rights movement and the evolution of the PVR program. *“Rehabilitation Counseling is the only counseling profession with the knowledge, skills, abilities, and philosophical approaches that help people with disabilities maximize their employment opportunities, independence, and social inclusion.”*

*“So, they help people with disabilities get jobs?”* I clarified.

*“It is not as simple as getting them a job. Rehabilitation Counselors work to identify a vocation that is an ideal fit for each individual client.”* Garth went on to talk about how the profession discovers the individual’s unique strengths, abilities, capabilities, talents, skills, and hidden potential to identify an employment setting that supports success. He told me that people with disabilities are typically defined and constrained by what their disability keeps them from being able to do. Rehabilitation Counselors focus on what they can do, leveraging strengths in the right vocational setting.

*“I prefer the word vocation rather than the word job.”* He told me. *“A vocation is more than a job. A vocation is employment that is personally meaningful where we get a sense of purpose.”*

*“What do Rehabilitation Counselors do on the job each day?”* I wanted to know what this looked like in reality.

*“They can do whatever is necessary depending on what each individual client needs.”* Garth explained. *“The public vocational rehabilitation program was designed to be personalized, individualized, and customized because every person is unique and needs very different supports. No two people are identical. Even people with the same disability face very different challenges and have very different interests and needs. Rehabilitation Counselors focus first on getting to know each client holistically, they take the time to find out as much about them as possible so they can help them explore options to select an option that best meets their strengths. There are really very few things that the law does not empower a VR Counselor to do if they can justify that the client needs it to achieve vocational employment.”*

*“That sounds interesting. It isn’t just placing people in vacant jobs then.”* I reflected thinking back on my own experience with an employment counselor.

*“No, you do much more than that. You may do that for some clients because that is what they need.”* Garth said. *“But first you must build a relationship with each client in order to really know who they are, what they are interested in, what they are capable of doing, and what kind of environment they need to succeed. You may end up sending some of your clients to apply for available jobs because those jobs fit their vocational goals. But you do that only after you know it is the right kind of job for them personally. For other clients, their vocational goals may not be represented in the pool of available vacant jobs. VR Counseling is far more complex than just connecting people to available jobs.”*

Every word Garth said resonated with me. I thought about how I grew up feeling inferior, marginalized, isolated, segregated, and incapable. I thought about the frustration of feeling trapped and prevented from reaching my full potential. I thought of people like Dad who had no problem getting a job but never found a vocational life calling. I thought of people like Tommy, Gene, and Amy. I thought

about myself. I thought about all the jobs I hated and failed at. I thought about what life would be like if everyone found their place in the world where they can use their talents to thrive.

*"It is about more than jobs."* I mumbled to myself.

*"The word vocation has a different meaning than the word job. Most jobs are just jobs, a vocation is having a sense of purpose."* Garth clarified. *"In our culture our vocation is our sense of identity. When you meet someone new, the first thing they usually ask is what you do for a living right?"*

*"Yes, they do."* I replied. *"I usually just tell them what I do for a living."*

*"Think about that."* Garth said. *"Telling someone what job you have is just stating a fact. Having a job does not necessarily mean it gives you a sense of self-worth or is something you are proud to share. A vocation is different because we do a job, we are proud to identify ourselves with because they give us a sense of purpose. Have you ever had a job that meant so much to you that it was a part of who you are?"*

*"I've had jobs I hated and felt embarrassed to do."* I reflected. *"And I have had a few jobs I enjoyed more. But no, I can't say I have ever had a job that made me proud to say this job is also who I am as a person."*

*"That is the difference between a job and a vocation."* Garth said. *"And I will tell you a secret, you are more likely to not only succeed in a job that is part of your vocation, but you are also more likely to feel a sense of belonging, inclusion, and social connections with your coworkers. People in jobs come and go. People in vocations form relationships because they stay."*

Garth painted an image in my mind of a profession where I could help people find their own place to fit in and succeed being who they already were. I envisioned a profession that provided equal access to opportunity. Garth mentioned there were more vacant jobs than there were VRC graduate students indicating I would be able to find a job in the profession. In fact, Garth said most of his students got a job offer before graduating.

I remember Linda asked something about an entrance examination. She jotted down a note about my needing to take something called a Miller's Analogies Test. A week later She handed me a receipt securing my seat in the MAT examination session the following morning. Once again, Linda pointed out there was nothing to lose, except the money she had already paid. My MAT score was high enough to be accepted into graduate school. A few weeks later the mailbox contained a letter from Garth notifying me that I had been accepted into the program and would be receiving a Rehabilitation Services Administration Scholarship to pay tuition, books, fees, and a monthly stipend.

During graduate school I discovered a great and noble quest I wanted to make my life's purpose. I was inspired by what Garth had said about the unique benefits that can only be found in a personally meaningful vocation. But I quickly noticed that my new profession seemed to be a house divided. It even seemed to disagree on the most basic elements. Like what we called ourselves.

Vocational appeared to be contested. I noticed some professionals proudly identified themselves as Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors carefully enunciating all three words. Others identified themselves only as Rehabilitation Counselors. I noticed the ones who called themselves Rehabilitation Counselors seemed embarrassed or dismissive of the word vocational. I wondered why? As I intently listened to what they were saying I realized many saw no distinction between the words job, employment, or vocation. Contrary to what Garth had emphasized to me, these words were used synonymously to describe a single identical entity. All these words seemed to mean a job. Some who seemed to bristle at the word vocational had a more holistic and universal conceptualization of the many life issues they assisted people with disabilities to address. Some who seemed to embrace the word vocational appeared intently concentrated on helping people with disabilities get jobs. It seemed that a minority ascribed to Garth's differentiation of job and vocation, but I noticed these individuals were represented in both camps.



Rehabilitation also appeared to be in dispute. Again, I immediately identified two factions. One centered on a definition of rehabilitation focused on helping people with disabilities to regain, restore, or adjust to functional limitations caused by the impairment. This group seemed to prioritize helping people with disabilities to accept, adjust, adapt, remediate, treat, or ameliorate the disability to maximize life functioning. The other faction seemed to prioritize placing clients in jobs where disability limitations could be accommodated. This group seemed more intent on maximizing the functioning required by the job.

Counseling was also a word that appeared to be under debate. I noticed what appeared to be a professional split personality disorder based on where the professional practiced. I noticed professionals in private practice and the profession's educators appeared to deeply identify as counselors. This group seemed to thrive in courses like counseling theories, counseling techniques, and counseling skill development. The language they used was clearly aligned with counseling and guidance. This faction was centered on using counseling skills to meet the holistic needs of each client. The counseling faction focused on things like housing, transportation, education, independence, community integration, and vocational employment. The other faction seemed more likely to work in the public VR program. This group seemed to disassociate from the counselor identity. This group regularly pointed out that we were not therapists. This group seemed more interested in classes like casefile documentation, caseload management, vocational evaluation, job placement, and job development. I remember sensing this group was centered on operating a bureaucratic system to maximize the number of clients placed in jobs. This group focused on jobs, placing less emphasis on things like transportation, housing, education, independence, or community integration.

I did not know what to make of this seemingly divided profession that seemed to disagree on what it does, how it does it, why it does it, and for whom it does it. I assumed that this division was primarily a function of differences in practice settings or diverse individual professional identities. I

noticed all of this, but I thought I would figure it all out in time. I went on with my studies without giving it much thought. However, as I read more of the profession's literature I developed a sense of incongruence, inconsistency, and a kind of professional misalignment. Sometimes it seemed that our words and practices did not match. I began to wonder if this was at the heart of why the profession's house seemed divided. I wondered if the profession was so nebulous that people were able to define it however, they chose to define it. Instead of a single unified profession, it appeared to be a confederation of diverse professional identities.

I stopped ruminating on these thoughts early in my graduate program. Something happened along my own journey that profoundly entrenched my own professional identity as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. My life experiences made all of this much less academic. It became very personal.

Disability had always been a part of my life. I did not realize it. I had never labeled it disability. As I entered graduate school and began learning about the history of disability in the United States, my lifelong connections with disability were gradually revealed. I realized how central disability had been in my life. For the first time I understood that both my parents lived with disabilities and that these disabilities had some impact on my childhood. I realized for the first time that Tommy, Gene, and Amy were special education students living with disabilities. I recognized significant disabilities of my uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, and many other key people in my life. Then disability became an even more prominent part my lived experience while I was studying VRC.

My sister Janet gave birth to my beautiful nieces Kimberly and Ashley several years before. Kimberly and Ashley appeared to experience normative development in their early years. Around the age of three or four Janet started noticing concerning delays and troubling behavior she did not understand. For years Janet sought help from medical professionals and both girls underwent numerous tests. Both girls started exhibiting behaviors and symptoms that seemed to progressively decline, and it

upended family life. Eventually both were diagnosed as living with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities.

By the time I was in graduate school I witnessed my older sister's life change forever. I witnessed her marriage disintegrate as she was forced to prioritize the needs of her children. Janet adapted to a new life with vastly different expectations. Her role as a mother of two children with significant developmental disabilities changed what she had expected to be her future. I witnessed the stressors and lack of support faced by young parents learning how to adjust to a new life where disability becomes a permanent feature. I began to witness firsthand how society and our social systems fail people with disabilities and their parents. I watched as Janet heroically ignored the many expert voices that urged her to institutionalize her daughters. I watched as Janet worked to ensure that Kimberly and Ashley enjoyed the right to live their lives surrounded by their family and friends in their own home. I watched my sister become an expert on federal and state laws so that she had the knowledge she needed to fiercely advocate that her girls be treated legally, ethically, and humanely.

At the same time dad's years of untreated and unmanaged diabetes and other health conditions gradually resulted in diabetic retinopathy. Dad and mom struggled to accept his blindness. He underwent a series of laser eye surgeries that only expedited rather than reverse his blindness. Dad did not want to accept a life with blindness. He resisted any efforts to learn how to adjust and adapt so that he could live successfully with blindness. Already prone to major depression, dad descended into a depressed state that frightened mom. Dad seemed to have completely given up on life. While I do not think he attempted self-harm during this time, I do think he was hoping for death.

I was learning the distinctive interventions, values, and philosophical frameworks of VRC. At the same time, I was witnessing how disability impacts lives in the absence of qualified professionals. Kimberly, Ashley, and Janet were adjusting to a life constrained by how others identified, labeled, and categorized them based only on what they could not do. Their opportunities were limited because

people failed to see what they could do and failed to recognize their hidden potential. They experienced people who had low expectations based on stereotypes, biases, and prejudice. I witnessed my nieces become dehumanized and objectified. They were not even afforded their human right to autonomy. Even the people who were trying to help did not know how. Their interventions unintentionally served to further disenable and disempower. I witnessed dad lose his sense of control, his sense of worth, and his sense of hope. The most debilitating loss was when dad no longer felt that his life had any purpose.

Every professional who served dad focused only on his deficits. It was not their fault. It is how their professional disciplines and society trained them to address disability. The problem was the disability. The problem was blindness. These professionals were kind, caring, and genuinely trying to help. They simply lacked the specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to effectively help someone learning how to live in a one-sized-fits-all universal environment that disables those who have diverse needs. Instead of seeing the environment as the source of the problem and working to adjust it to better support him, their help protected him from that environment making it easier for dad to withdraw from the world.

Disconnected and lonely, dad sank deeper into isolation, seclusion, and exclusion. Kimberly and Ashley were also isolated, segregated, and sequestered in contained classrooms. Their opportunities determined by their weaknesses, limitations, inabilities, incapacities, and paternalistic thinking. At every step I witnessed how well-intended uninformed helpers unknowingly made disability more limiting, confining, impactful, restricting, and more dominant in their lives.

Vocational evolved into a word I not only embraced but hold sacred because of these experiences. Helping people with disabilities gain access to vocational opportunities is the distinct primary clinical intervention of my profession. It is our unique contribution to health and wellness. A vocation is therapeutic in and of itself because it optimizes competency, connection, and fosters a sense of autonomy. In Latin *vocatio* is the calling or life purpose that a person was born to do (Merriam-

Webster, n.d.). The French word *vocis* means using or finding our voice (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). A vocation is our unique calling where we find and use our voice living with a sense of purpose. A vocation is not the same thing as a job or employment. A job is a transactional exchange that is dependent of being motivated by receiving extrinsic rewards or avoiding negative consequences. A vocation is at transformational relationship motivated by intrinsic rewards received from doing the work itself. A job buys groceries, but only a vocation feeds the human soul.

Rehabilitation is another word that became transformed through my graduate school and life experiences. I embrace this word because it reflects my profession's distinctive values and philosophical frameworks. It is the second unique clinical intervention employed in my profession that is therapeutic in and of itself. Our brand of rehabilitation has a specific meaning. Our use of the word rehabilitation does not focus on the individual with a disability. We do not fix or cure the disability. We do not focus on disability related deficits. We do not require the person to change or try to make them something they are not. My profession is just like the Oakland Raiders. Our brand of rehabilitation starts with an obsessive singular focus on each person's unique talents. We then identify the environmental conditions they need to thrive vocationally. We do not rehabilitate our client. We rehabilitate the cultural and built environments preventing them from leveraging their strengths to succeed. We don't make them fit the environment we rehabilitate the environment to fit the individual emancipating themselves to achieve their full potential.

Counselor and counseling are words that also became transformed by my lived experiences juxtaposed with what I was learning in graduate school. When I entered graduate school, I thought counseling was a technical science applied by an expert professional. In my coursework I focused on learning counseling theories and how to apply clinical counseling techniques. I learned the concepts of talk therapy, motivational interviewing, confrontation, cognitive reframing, and many other strategies. I had a great deal of anxiety about my counseling skills because it felt mechanical, unnatural, and

inauthentic. I thought I would improve with practice and focused on applied use of what I was learning. I began to worry that I did not have the ability to master counseling techniques, and I was beginning to feel like an imposter. A single conversation with Dr. Garth Eldridge freed me of my anxiety and changed the way I viewed counseling and what it means to be a counselor.

*“To be an effective counselor you need to be familiar with the theories and techniques, but never let yourself believe that is what helps people change.”* Garth told me. *“You are too worried about what you are doing. Focus more on who you are being and a little less on what you are doing. Essentially counseling is just being in a human relationship. Quality relationships are the only thing that truly achieves success in this business.”*

I started thinking about my relationship with Linda. I began to realize she was a skillful and effective counselor who helped me transform my life not because of what she was doing but because of who she was being. She did not tell me what my goals should be, and I never felt her pressure me to just get a job. She was there supporting me, removing barriers, and helping me find my own path. Its psychological safety of our relationship that served as the cocoon that spurred my own metamorphosis. Loving human relationships have transformational power because they are not transactional exchanges. When two people care about each other they invest time and effort to listen and really understand each other. They invest in being present, engaged, committed, so they can see who the person really is and what they have the potential to become. I fully embraced Garth’s conceptualization of being a counselor because I was transformed by a healthy loving counseling relationship myself.

This was what I wanted to do when I grew up. I wanted to help people access their vocational calling so they could live with a sense of purpose enhancing their sense of autonomy, competency, and connection to society. I wanted to help rehabilitate the environmental contexts that prevent people from maximizing the use of their strengths so that they can unleash their full potential and thrive. And I wanted to be the kind of counselor who creates a safe relationship space of trust and caring so that I

could help people the same way Linda helped me. I discovered my vocational calling, and I learned my entire life had been preparing me for this work.

***Motivation: The Purpose or Reason for an Action or Behavior***

In the fall of 1999, I was invited to attend an evening reception hosted at the USU Center for People with Disabilities. I was told that the Assistant Secretary of Education responsible for Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services at the U.S. Department of Education was visiting campus. They told me her name was Judith Heumann. The reception had been planned to allow her to meet students in the various disability related programs. I was told there would be hors d'oeuvres and light refreshments, so I went.

At the time I did not know anything about Judith Heumann. I knew she was a presidential appointee serving in the Clinton administration. I did not know I was going to be meeting a disability civil rights legend. I did not know I would be meeting someone that would become a kind of personal hero. I did not know that I was going to meet someone who would say something that would haunt and inspire me throughout my professional career.

I do not remember what I was expecting in meeting an Assistant Secretary of Education appointed by the President of the United States of America. I expected to meet a stuffy career bureaucrat or worse, a politician. All I know is Judith Heumann exceeded all my expectations. Dr. Smart introduced me to a middle-aged woman wearing big horn-rimmed eyeglasses and a stylish business pant suit. She was sitting in a powered wheelchair with her hand wrapped around a joystick attached to one arm of her chair. Subtle movements of her hand expertly repositioned her chair to face to whomever she was talking. She had a huge warm smile. Her smile was genuine and contagiously authentic. She had big bright eyes and seemed to have a genuine interest in each person present. It was a small reception. Only a handful of students and a few faculty members sat in the large lobby space.

I look back in awe. Knowing what I do today about Judith Huemann, I realize just how incredibly lucky I was to meet her, let alone have a significant one-on-one conversation. As she engaged me in small talk, I learned she had lived at one time in Berkley, California. I told her I was born in Fremont just South of Berkley and it seemed to connect her to me at some level. She spoke fondly of living in the San Francisco Bay Area.

My brief conversation happened before I learned about her work with Ed Roberts at the Center for Independent Living. Before I learned about her work advocating for The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Section 504 regulations that was an initial step by Congress to ensure and enforce the civil rights of people with disabilities. Only recently, as I read her memoir, I learned she and I were collocated at another time in our lives. While I was a 5-year-old child across the bay in Fremont, Judith was on the other side of the bay in San Francisco. At the time she also would have been on the evening news and in newspapers, but I highly doubt that I was aware. In 1977, Judith Huemann and more than 100 people with disabilities occupied a federal office building. The sit in lasted 28 days and the peaceful protest resulted in the signing of federal regulations protecting the civil rights of people with disabilities.

That evening at USU Judith Huemann simply asked me what I was studying.

*“Why do you want to be a Rehabilitation Counselor?”* She inquired.

I can't remember how I answered that question. Whatever my answer was I got the feeling it did not satisfy her. She looked a little troubled and I wondered if I had said something wrong. I clearly remember what she said to me in response.

*“Do me a favor. Don't become a Rehabilitation Counselor if you are not clear about your why.”* Judith said. *“The job requires a very personal sense of purpose if you are going to do it right.”*

She explained her own lived experience as a consumer of the public VR program and the barriers she faced with a VR Counselor who became the next in a long line of professionals she had to fight tooth and nail to be heard, appreciated, seen, and supported. She told me that she thought her VR Counselor



did the best they could but that they had become an apathetic bureaucrat prioritizing the needs of the program over the needs of people with disabilities.

*“Kyle, promise me one thing.” She seemed to plead. “Barriers come in all shapes and sizes. For me, a simple six-inch curb or stair that most people just hop over without notice may as well be the Great Wall of China. People with disabilities already face barriers most people never notice. Promise me, if you become a Rehabilitation Counselor don’t let yourself become the next barrier your clients have to overcome. Don’t use people with disabilities to meet the needs of the program. Learn how to use the program to meet the needs of people with disabilities. That is the program’s real purpose.”*

*“Use the program to achieve its real purpose.”* Judith Heumann told me.

What did she mean by real purpose?

A month later her words echoed in my mind as I sat in a meeting of USU’s Master of Rehabilitation Counseling Program Advisory Council. I remember again feeling out of place in this meeting. I was only a graduate student. I was a novice to the field and had no experience in the profession. Yet I was sitting in a room full of seasoned expert veteran professionals and several prominent public VR program executive level administrators. I remember the person I was most attentive to that day was the person who helped me germinate the seeds that Judith Heumann had planted. That person was Dr. Petersen.

Dr. Petersen was the Executive Director of a state vocational rehabilitation agency. I remember being in awe. He had a presence in the room that seemed to make him the center of gravity when it came to the opinions expressed in the advisory council. At the time I did not realize that this was partially a function of his being the largest single employer of the graduate program’s graduates. It seemed like Dr. Petersen’s expressed opinions carried weight in this room. It is funny to think about how impressed I was at the time because I only remember one thing he said that day.

*"I don't think you can be a good Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor unless you understand the Preamble of Rehabilitation Act of 1973."* Dr. Petersen said during that meeting. *"It is too easy to forget our real purpose."*

There it was again. Another person of influence telling me to keep my eye on our real purpose. Looking back on it now, I have the years of experience to understand how easily people and organizations attention and behaviors get hijacked by unconscious counterfeit or alternative purposes. But back then I could not fully understand the implications of what these two important influencers were trying to tell me. It was like they were both sharing some secret wisdom that went beyond what I was learning in my courses. I wanted to know what this secret wisdom was and why it seemed so important.

At the library I located and read the Preamble of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. I had taken enough Rehabilitation Counseling classes that I thought I knew the purpose of the public VR program. I remember reciting the words without conscious thought. To assist eligible individuals with disabilities to prepare for, obtain, and maintain employment and maximize independence. The way Judith Huemann and Dr. Petersen had used the term *"real purpose"* made me suspicious. Was there some secret real purpose only to be found in the preamble of the act?

In the Preamble to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, I read the Congressional findings.

1. Millions of Americans have physical or mental disabilities and the presence of disability in society was increasing.
2. People with disabilities have historically been one of the most disadvantaged minority communities in America.
3. Disability is a natural part of the human experience. It does not diminish the right of individuals to live independently, be afforded self-determination, to make choices about their own lives, to contribute and participate in society, to pursue meaningful vocational

- careers, and experience full inclusion, integration, and participation in our economic, political, social, cultural, and educational systems.
4. People with disabilities continually experience discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, education, transportation, communication, recreation, institutionalization, health care, voting, and accessing public services.
  5. The goals of the Nation include providing people with disabilities tools to make informed choices and decisions to achieve equity and equality of opportunity (Rehabilitation Act of 1973).

As I read these words, I realized the PVR program was established to be a social justice program. The purpose was not just getting people jobs. The real purpose was creating a freer and more equitable society. Congress specifically stated what Judith Huemann and Dr. Petersen had called our real purpose. The real purpose of the public VR program, and by extension the VRC profession created to make it work, was to empower people with disabilities to maximize vocational opportunities, self-sufficiency, independence, and full social inclusion and integration in our communities.

Congress also made clear that the program must prioritize serving those with the most significant disabilities because they face seemingly insurmountable systemic barriers, prejudice, bias, and discrimination. Congress anticipated that the program could potentially prioritize serving the easiest and least costly consumers who were also more likely to obtain a job. In the law Congress clearly expected the program to invest time and resources to achieve high quality sustainable vocational outcomes that are individualized, customized, and tailored to meet the unique needs of each consumer. This real purpose requires skill, expertise, knowledge, patience, and long-range transformational thinking. In defining this real purpose. Congress was not looking for easy answers, quick fixes, or quantifiable jobs numbers.

The program was originally designed to be a social justice program equalizing access to opportunity. Congress originally aligned the PVR program with education not workforce development programs. Congress was clearly trying to create a program to address deeply entrenched psychosocial, economic, civic injustice, and inequality. They were creating a government social justice program to lead the way in securing the equal rights of citizens with disabilities. The Congress that wrote these words did not expect immediate gratification demanding the program generate quantifiable jobs numbers in bulk to justify its continued existence. The program's existence would be justified as long as people with disabilities continue to be marginalized, segregated, isolated, excluded, and denied the basic rights of American citizenship.

Congress intended to create a transformational civil rights program leveraging transformational human counselor-client relationships to achieve transformational social change providing access to transformational vocational opportunities. That was the real purpose Judith Heumann urged me to remember if I chose to become a member of the VRC professional tribe.

***Attachment: Sense of Bonding, Connection, and Belonging in a Relationship with Others***

As I was nearing the end of my graduate program, Dr. Eldridge called my home phone. He had never done this before. I had no idea at the time, but he was about to give me a gift that I credit for keeping me attached to the profession throughout my career. Even during the disappointments and discouragements, it was my membership and identity as part of a larger tribe of fellow crusaders engaged in the same great and noble quest that stoked my passion for Rehabilitation Counseling. I did not know it at the time, but I was about to be welcomed into my professional tribe.

*"Kyle, would you ride to Salt Lake City and have lunch with me tomorrow?"* He asked.

I remember being apprehensive hearing this request. Dr. Eldridge was the chair of my master's degree program. He had never asked me to have lunch with him. He seemed to me at the time an inaccessible guru that I had somewhat idolized over the last year of coursework. I had no idea why he

would want to have lunch with me let alone ride in a car all the way to Salt Lake City together. Then I assumed the worst. Something was wrong. This is a trap. Maybe I did something wrong, and he was going to take me to lunch to take the sting out of informing me that I was being expelled from the program.

*"I would love to."* I lied.

At the appointed time, the next morning Dr. Eldredge picked me up in front of my apartment and we drove to Salt Lake City. I remember engaging in only light inconsequential small talk over the course of the next one-hour and thirty-six-minute drive. I remember being surprised as he pulled into a business office park in Murray, Utah, parking in front of five story building with a sign that said Workers Compensation Fund of Utah. An odd choice for lunch I thought. He mentioned we were a little late and waved me to follow.

After having our driver's licenses inspected by a large and serious looking armed guard we were buzzed through a security door into a long hallway. Dr. Eldredge led me into a conference room where six to seven other people sat around a large table eating boxed lunches and talking. Dr. Eldredge handed me a box lunch and bottle of water that was sitting on a table near the door and motioned me to an open chair at the table.

Over the course of eating lunch and casually listening I became aware that I was sitting in some type of board meeting. The board of directors meeting was being presided over by a lady sitting at the head of the table who appeared to be an expert on Roberts Rules of Order. I kept hearing the organization referred to as URA, I had no idea what it was. At some point I was only half listening. In my memory I remember only hearing the lady at the front of the table say something about opening the floor for nominations.

*"Madam President I nominate Kyle Walker as a candidate for the office of President-Elect."* Dr. Eldredge said firmly as he stood up across the table from me and pointed.

*“Dr. Garth Eldridge has nominated Kyle Walker as a candidate for the office of President-Elect, do I have a second?”* the woman at the head of the table quickly, as if she were suddenly in a hurry.

*“I second the nomination.”* Another person at the table I had never met before declared.

*“I have a nomination and a second, are there any opposed?”* the lady at the head of the table said. I thought about opposing. Shouldn't I at least have the chance to have someone explain to me what was going on? I was too slow.

*“All in favor say Aye?”*

*“Aye.”*

*“Aye.”*

*“Aye.”*

*“Aye”*

*“Motion passes.”* The lady at the head of the table said as she hit the table with a wooden gavel. *“Are there any other nominations from the floor?”* She paused for perhaps a full second.

*“Madam Chair, I move we close nominations and commence with the casting of ballots.”* I do not remember who exactly said this, the rest of the meeting was a bit of a blur. In my memory it seems as if this was again Dr. Eldridge, but I admit it could have been one of the strangers at the table.

A shoe box with a slit cut in the lid was produced and an index card was handed to everyone at the table except for me. The guy next to me whispered I could not vote because I was not a verified paid member of the organization. Heads looked down as people wrote on the cards, folded the cards in half, and then got up from the table to insert the cards into the slit in the lid of the shoe box. Once everyone around the table but me had submitted a ballot, the lady at the head of the table asked Dr. Eldredge to join her in the tabulation of votes. As there were only six or seven people in the room, I am comfortable in my memory that the tabulation was executed rather quickly.

*“Having received unanimous support and the plurality of the cast votes, Kyle Walker is hereby recognized as URA President-Elect.”* Madam President stated. *“Congratulations, Kyle welcome to the board.”*

On the drive back to Logan Dr. Eldridge explained that I had just won an election to serve as President-Elect of the Utah Rehabilitation Association over the course of the following year. He explained this was really an election to a three-year term of responsibilities. As President-Elect my only duty during the coming year would be planning, organizing, and executing the organization’s annual general membership conference. The second Presidential year I was responsible for convening and running monthly board meetings and managing the day-to-day financial operations of the organization. The third year I would be Immediate Past-President responsible for recruiting a slate of candidates and monitoring an election to replace outgoing board and officer positions. Which he indicated he had just successfully executed as the current Immediate Past-President.

I remember him telling me about my needing to pay for a student membership in the National Rehabilitation Association or NRA which cost about \$75 per year. He handed me a trifold brochure that looked like someone had photocopied photocopies of a photocopy original somewhere at the dawn of time. He told me the NRA membership fee made me a member of the Utah Rehabilitation Association or URA, the state chapter of the NRA. He emphasized how important it was for me to fill out the membership application and mail in my check as soon as I got home.

*“You really need to be a paid member if you want to be President-Elect.”* He added.

I learned that Dr. Eldredge had just successfully executed his last official duty as Immediate Past-President. He also recruited me into the oldest, and at the time, largest national membership organization advocating for quality services for people with disabilities. The board of directors who had just elected me to this new office were members of the professional tribe where I would finally feel a sense of belonging and connection.

I learned their names and where they worked over the next year. I remember Ken and Dawn. Both worked in public VR. Shawna worked at the Veterans Administration VR program. Chris worked for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints as a Rehabilitation Counselor at Deseret Industries. Christine was a Rehabilitation Counselor who worked in the Disability Services Office on the campus of the University of Utah. Kim worked as the Rehabilitation Counseling Supervisor at the Workers Compensation Fund of Utah. Paul worked for the Brain Injury Association of Utah. I was being welcomed into a professional tribe that shaped my professional identity primarily as a Rehabilitation Counselor.

Later, when I began working in public VR, I noticed many of my colleagues did not share my professional identity as a Rehabilitation Counselor. For some working in the state VR agency, it that was just a job title. Many of my peer's professional identity was centered in being state employees primarily. Over time I would come to appreciate how this significant difference in professional identity gave my career longevity making me more resilient to disappointment and less likely to quit. In many ways what kept me engaged in the profession over the following years as the distinct professional identity I formed as part of the Utah Rehabilitation Association tribe. URA became the place I belonged.

The following year the URA board of directors voted to pay to send me to the National Rehabilitation Association Annual Conference in Biloxi, Mississippi. I remember being amazed seeing the large ball room filled with hundreds of my follow professionals. In Biloxi I met Rehabilitation Counseling professionals from all over the country. I met professionals from public VR, private VR, researchers, educators, and paraprofessionals working in a variety of VR settings. I met preminent scholars from the profession who had written my graduate school textbooks or whose names I recognized from our professional journals. I met administrators from other state VR agencies from states like Mississippi, Texas, California, Washington, and Oklahoma. I also met people who worked as Rehabilitation Counselors at large insurance companies. The following year I represented URA at the national conference in Nashville, Tennessee. Early in my career I was unknowingly creating a national network of



my fellow professionals, the tribe I was becoming identified with as an accepted member. These formative experiences cemented my professional identity development and deepened my attachment to my profession.

Early in my career I served three full 3-year terms as URA President-Elect, President, and Immediate Past President. My presidential years were 2001, 2002, and 2004. I attended National Rehabilitation Association Annual Conferences in Nashville, Tennessee, San Diego, California, and our chapter hosted one in Salt Lake City. In the years I was not serving in an officer position I continuously served as a member of the Board of Directors. Those early years grounded my professional identity, and my NRA membership and involvement have continued over my career. I have served on regional boards, the national board, and have sat on the NRA executive council.

I have always been grateful that Dr. Eldridge took the time to invite me to lunch that day all those years ago. In breaking bread with my future colleagues in that room, I was inducted into my tribe. A tribe that extended far beyond the public VR program. I joined a band of fellow crusaders engaged in our great and noble quest to achieve social justice for people with disabilities. My tribe helped me develop a professional identity that grew deep roots over time. Those roots kept me attached to my profession even during challenging times. Even when I was tempted to leave, my professional family was why I stayed. Unfortunately, my profession is divided and does not have thriving professional membership organizations today. Most counselors in the public VR program are not members in any professional organization. This lack of tribal community and belonging renders Rehabilitation Counseling as simply an occupational job title rather than a deeply rooted professional identity. It is extremely easy to abandon a job we no longer feel meets our personal needs. It is much more difficult to leave a profession that makes us feel like part of a social movement where our work and identity give us much more than a paycheck. It is harder to desert a vocation that gives life purpose and a sense of belonging.

***Transactions: Executing Exchanges of Goods or Services, Doing Trade Interactions***

The Master of Rehabilitation Counseling degree program at Utah State University required me to complete a practicum and an internship. Because I lived in Logan, Utah, I reached out to the local office of the state agency to see if they would allow me to complete my practicum there. Janice was the Supervising Counselor in charge of small office. Janice said she wanted to meet me and get to know me before she would advocate with her boss to get approval for a practicum.

I remember the first time I met Janice. She was a grandmotherly woman in her early sixties with kind eyes and a knowing smile. Janice wanted to know a little about me, so I explained what I was hoping to get out of the practicum experience and told her about my full-time job working the graveyard shift in Brigham City at Youthtrack Inc., a sex offender treatment program. She asked if I was planning to go into public practice as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. I told her I was keeping my options open, but my plan was to obtain state licensure as a Professional Counselor so I could become a therapist at Youthtrack.

*"That will certainly pay better."* She laughed.

I remember Janice telling me that the state agency did not pay practicum or internship students for their time. I had heard this from other students in the program, so I was not surprised. I remember Janice saying she thought the agency viewed practicum and internship experiences as a burden rather than a benefit to the agency. She said they had experiences with prior students being upset about having to put in uncompensated work time when they should be grateful for having been approved to complete the practicum or internship.

Janice and I agreed on a schedule that would work for both of us to complete the required practicum hours. But she told me repeatedly that she needed to get approval from the agency Executive Director. Janice said her boss, Karl was the District Director. She explained that all requests like this

required her to write a memorandum seeking approval. She took my phone number and said she would call me when she finds out more.

I nervously waited for a couple of weeks without word from Janice. I began to worry my practicum had been denied. I was worried about what I was going to do. There was a deadline for students to have a practicum site reviewed and formally approved by the university. That deadline was fast approaching, and this was the only option I had explored. I began calling Janice every day, leaving voice mail messages. There were no responses. I began to panic. I also was feeling rejected again. I remember telling Linda I was going to give up. Linda told me to go back into the office and ask to see Janice.

*"It is harder to ignore someone who is in front of you."* Linda reminded me.

So, the next day that is what I did.

*"Oh, I am so sorry Kyle."* Janice's face was flushed red as she embarrassingly came out to the lobby to bring me back to her office. *"You have been on my to-do list for a week. You and a hundred other things."*

Janice informed me that Karl had supported her request and advocated approval of my practicum to the Field Services Director. The Field Services Director had advocated my practicum to the Chief of Field Services who had some questions that required Karl and Janice to write and submit a revised written memorandum regarding my details and the details of the prospective practicum. I remember them specifically having to add a sentence stating that I had been informed that my work time during the practicum would be unpaid and that I had stated my understanding and consent to this precondition. Once satisfied by the revised memorandum, the Chief of Field Services advocated on my behalf to the Director of the Division of Rehabilitation Services. Janice explained that the Division Director had met with the Executive Director regarding my practicum. Questions were asked about potential risk, legal liabilities, and worker compensation issues as they related to providing an unpaid

practicum student access to an agency worksite. The Human Resource Director and State Division of Risk Management consulted with an Assistant Attorney General responsible for employment litigation against the state. A release form was created that I would be required to sign.

*"I am sorry I just did not get a chance to call you and tell you our Executive Director approved it all last week. As soon as you sign this release form, you're good to go. Can you start tomorrow?"* She said with a smile that failed to hide what I interpreted as a mix of hopeful desperation. *"I could really use your help with that unending to-do-list I mentioned."*

I borrowed an office phone and called the university. I was able to get the practicum approved over the phone allowing me to start the following day. I read the required release form and signed it. It simply stated that I understood that this was not a legally binding job offer and that I consented to provide my work hours on an uncompensated basis. When I went back into Janice's office, she let out a deep breath. I remember thinking it was odd that she seemed so relieved when only that morning I was the one on pins and needles.

*"You told me before that you work graveyard shifts and have been able to do all your school reading while at work. Did I remember that right?"* Janice asked me as she walked to the bookshelf in the corner of her office. *"Do you work tonight or is this a day off?"*

*"Yes, I work tonight."* I confirmed. *"My shift ends at 8:30 in the morning and it usually takes 35 minutes to drive back to Logan, so is it alright if I come here tomorrow morning at say 9:30?"*

*"Oh, yes sure, no problem. Show up whenever you can."* She said giving me the impression she was not a stickler for punctuality. She pulled a 4-inch thick three ring binder from the bookshelf and handed it to me. It was heavy. *"Read as much of this tonight as you can, if you don't finish it by tomorrow morning don't come into the office. Just keep reading until you have read the entire thing. When you finish, come into the office and we can get started."* She said handing me an office key.

I clarified she did not want me to return to the office until I had read the entire 4-inch-thick policy and procedure manual I now held in my hands. She confirmed and indicated there would be a test. I remember she also indicated I was useless to her until I knew the policy manual. That night I fought to stay awake while reading chapter after chapter of government policies, procedures, rules, and processes. I only made it halfway through that night. I sheepishly reported this back to Janice expecting her to be upset. She told me I had made better progress than she had expected. But she held firm that I was useless to her until I had read the entire manual.

*"You don't have to update me every day. I really don't need to talk to you again until you have finished reading it."* She repeated indicating again that there would be a test.

It took three graveyard shifts to get through the manual to a point that I felt relatively confident that I could pass Janice's test. I remember walking into the office feeling as if I was embarking on a great adventure. I was finally going to experience being a Rehabilitation Counselor fighting for equity, equality, and social justice.

Janice was out of the office my first day. Barbara, one of the other Rehabilitation Counselors took me under her wing. She showed me my temporary workstation set up in the supply room where a folding card table sat with a telephone, several yellow legal pads, and several pens. Barbara showed me around and introduced me to the other Rehabilitation Counselors Devin and Chuck. She also introduced me to Tina who introduced herself as the office secretary.

Barbara took me back to my card table and handed me a quarter inch thick stack of paper stapled together in the upper left corner. As I thumbed through the papers, I recognized it was a list of names, addresses, telephone numbers, and several other data elements that I could not decipher. As I flipped through the list Barbara began giving me directions in a rapid-fire fashion.

*"Janice wants you to start going through this list. Call every number and ask to speak to the client, that's their name there."* Barbara said pointing her index finger. *"If the person who answers the*

*phone asks who you are just tell them you are with the state and that you need to talk to the person on the list."*

*"Okay."*

*"You can't say anything about being from rehabilitation or anything, our clients have the right to confidentiality and sometimes their own family does not know they are working with us. Also, the word rehabilitation makes people think the person is a crack addict or a felon, so avoid using rehabilitation. Just say you are with the state, and you need to talk to that person."* Barbara said again pointing at a name on the list. *"When you talk to that person."* Again, she pointed at a name on the list. *"Tell them Janice asked you to call and get an update on how they are doing, if they have any updates for Janice, and most important ask them if they have a job yet."*

*"Okey Dokey."* I replied. I remember thinking this was just busy work Janice asked Barbara to give me while she was out of the office. I was convinced when Janice returned, I would be given real Rehabilitation Counselor tasks. For now, I would just prove myself by doing what I was asked.

*"If you do not talk to that person,"* again she pointed at another name on the list, *"ask if there is a better time to call to reach that person."* Again, pointing at another name on the list. *"If they say anything about that person being at work, write it down on that legal pad. Be casual and ask where they work, if they tell you any details write it on that legal pad, get as much information as the person who answered the phone is willing to give. Got it?"*

*"Got it."*

*"If you don't talk to that person and you don't get any other information highlight the name on that list with this yellow highlighter."* Barbara said handing me a yellow highlighter. *"If they say that person has moved or is dead or something write that down and any details you can get on that legal pad and use this blue highlighter to highlight the name on the list."* Barbara handed me a blue highlighter as I began to consider the need to be taking notes.

*“Now, if they say they need something or tell you they need to talk to Janice highlight the name on that list with this orange highlighter. If they say they are in school, in some kind of job training program, or have been meeting with a therapist, doctor, or job coach, anything like that jot it down on that legal pad and mark their name on this list with this purple highlighter. Are you getting all this, or do you need to be writing this down?”*

I grabbed a legal pad and started taking notes. Barbara proceeded with other instructions and color-coding designations and eventualities. Then she handed me a scrap of paper with several letters, numbers, and symbols written on it.

*“This is Janice’s password to IRIS. IRIS is our case management system. It stands for something like Integrated Rehabilitation Information System or something.”* She said waiving a hand dismissively above her head. *“At the end of the day go to Janice’s office, type in her name and this password on the IRIS log in screen. If you need help, come see me and I can show you how to do it the first time.”*

*“You will be pulling up each of these client’s electronic case file and entering updates.”* Barbara continued. *“Any notes you made on that legal pad have to be noted in the case.”* She went on to tell me how to generate a case note update in the system. She told me how the system was built with a catalogue of *“templated”* pre-formatted case notes for things like an attempted client contact. She told me some of my notes will not be covered by the existing templates. In that case I had to write my own narratives. Barbara emphasized that I needed to write these notes as if I was Janice. She told me how to carefully word these case notes. She told me how to save and print every note I produce. I was instructed to end my day by paperclipping all the case notes I produced and leave them on Janice’s chair for her review in the morning.

Over the next three days I never saw Janice. I was told she was out of town at an agency mandatory training. I spent those days attempting to contact all 137 of Janice’s clients. I remember

asking Barbara if 137 clients on a single caseload was normal. I found the prospect of managing a caseload this size while also providing individualized counseling and guidance unimaginable.

*"No, Janice's caseload is much smaller because she is also a supervisor." Barbara said.*

*"Smaller?" I asked. "I was thinking that was too big."*

*"Ha! You are funny." Barbara laughed. "The average Rehabilitation Counselor caseload is something like 220 or 230. Supervising Counselors are allowed to have smaller caseloads because they also have management responsibilities."*

*"I don't understand. How can you spend the time needed to really understand each client and their needs if you have that many on your caseload." I asked naively.*

*"You can't." She said bluntly. "It is a little hard for me to explain but think about it like this. Every year we are judged by the total number of 26 closures we achieve. A 26 closure is one where the client got a job and kept it for at least 90 days. That is the only thing that matters when it comes to how they judge your performance. If you do not produce at least 28 status 26 closures every single year you end up on corrective action or disciplinary action. They fire people for not getting this minimum number."*

Barbara went on to explain that there was no way to achieve these numbers unless you focused on keeping your caseload large. She told me large caseloads enabled a counselor to supplement what she called actively earned status 26 closures with passively earned status 26 closures.

*"Look at it like this, you have no control over the number of 26 closures you will get in any given year. There are so many variables at play. The luck of the draw on referrals, economic conditions, you know, stuff like that. Some years you may produce more than the 28 they require. Other years you won't. Some clients may need more services and take longer to get to a job. Some clients need less and are easier to get employed. You never know what you are going to have to work with each year." Barbara took a seat.*



*"To keep this job, you have to constantly be thinking about status 26 closures." She continued. "In good years once you get your 28 active 26 closures, you stop and sandbag the rest for next year. In bad years when you do not have enough active 26 closures you have to have a large caseload. You have to have a source of passively earned 26 closures. People who you got into an Individualized Plan for Employment and then just disappeared on you. You can always find some deadwood who got their own jobs along the way."*

*"Deadwood? Sandbagging?"* I sought clarification.

*"Deadwood. Those are the clients who just kind of disappear into the woodwork after getting into a plan. It happens all the time. Clients just drop out of sight; you won't have time to keep track of them all. Sandbagging is just waiting to close a case successfully until the new federal fiscal year. The federal fiscal year runs from October 1<sup>st</sup> to the end of September."* Barbara explained.

As I sat listening to the nuances of the job, I began to realize why Janice assigned the work that I had been doing. My practicum experience was meeting Janice's needs. After Barbara left my office supply room, I looked at my practicum guide and worried that these assignments did not reflect the job tasks required for my practicum. I worried that I was not going to learn how to be a real Rehabilitation Counselor. I told myself to be patient. Maybe this was all a test? I was sure when Janice returned to the office I would engage in real Rehabilitation Counseling activities.

Eagerly anticipating a change of pace when Janice returned the following week, I entered Janice's office early Monday morning. I remember I had thumbed through my counseling theories and techniques textbook the night before eagerly anticipating my first face-to-face experience with a real client.

*"Hi Kyle."* Janice said looking through the stack of case notes I had left on her chair. *"Wow, you really worked your way through my caseload. This is awesome. Nice job. You might just keep me from getting fired."* She said with a wink.

*"Hey Janice, are you going to share him with us?"* Barbara said standing at the door next to Devin. *"We both need to keep our jobs too."* She said waiving her hand between Devin and herself.

*"Yeah,"* Devin added, *"his practicum won't last forever. I figure he could secure my job for one more year."*

I remember that at the time I thought this was playful office banter. That is until Janice assured them that she had been working on a *"Kyle Rotation Schedule."* I remember hoping this was all an initiation or hazing ritual teasing the practicum student. I started to become discouraged when Janice asked Barbara and Devin to go back to their offices and print out their caseload lists to give me. I began to worry I would never get any exposure to the real work of counseling in this practicum.

Week after week, day after day, my practicum tasks became a routine. I cycled my efforts between caseloads. One day I found myself discouraged eating lunch in the small, shared breakroom. Janice, Barbara, and Devin joined me around the table.

*"Late night working last night?"* Janice asked confusing my discouragement with being tired.

*"No, I had last night off."* I replied lethargically.

*"Well, I thought you either looked tired or discouraged."* Barbara added without looking up from what she was doing.

*"Maybe he is having second thoughts about his career decisions like the rest of us."* Devin smirked as he opened a brown paper lunch bag.

*"Come on, tell Grandma Janice what ails you."* Janice said looking over the top of her bifocals.

*"When do you think, I will get to do the things listed in the practicum guide, you know, doing things Rehabilitation Counselors do?"* I responded. *"I mean, you won't be able to sign off on my successful completion of the practicum if I don't do what Rehabilitation Counselors do."* I attempted to make my case.

*"You are doing what Rehabilitation Counselors do."* Barbara said licking peanut butter off a white plastic spoon. With a slightly grunting chuckle she added, *"what does this practicum guide say we do?"*

*"Show me the practicum guide."* Janice said reaching her hand across the table.

I reached into the backpack I had hung on the back of my chair and pulled out the practicum guide that listed specific Rehabilitation Counseling job duties that I had to complete to successfully pass my practicum. Janice took the guide and began reading aloud.

*"Complete 100 hours with 40 clock hours of direct face-to-face service with actual clients developing and applying counseling skills."* Janice read aloud. *"I think you almost have that finished already."*

I was confused and incredulous. In my mind I had not had a single face-to-face conversation let alone a counseling session with a client. Before I could interject, Janice continued reading.

*"Participate in case conceptualizations, case staffing sessions, and solution identification and intervention or rehabilitation service planning activities. Students are required to present case conceptualizations at least twice during the practicum for supervisor feedback."* Janice indicated I had already done all that. I began to wonder how my definition of those words differed from her definition of those words when she began reading aloud again. *"Students must demonstrate and be evaluated on their applied use of counseling skills, counseling competencies, and professional behaviors during client sessions."*

Janice looked across the table at me with a look of genuine confusion. She then told me that I was doing these things every single day. I could not tell, but I assumed she was teasing me. I know my eyes were darting from Janice to Barbara in disbelief. Barbara nonchalantly stuck a white plastic spoon into her jar of peanut butter. Retrieving another scoop, she looked up and pointed it at me.

*"That is what you've been doing."* She mumbled as she slowly put the plastic spoon in her mouth.

*"No, I haven't done any of that."* I finally cracked. *"I haven't met anyone face-to-face; I have not done a single counseling session. I have not done any client conceptualizations. I have not done any of that. All I have done is paperwork and phone calls to track people down and find out if they happened to have landed a job. I don't think consoling the family of the five clients I learned had died this year can be called counseling."*

Janice, Barbara, and Devin exchanged knowing glances. Devin returned to digging the last remaining piece of strawberry out of the bottom of his yogurt cup. Barbara smiled and shook her head.

*"Kyle, you have been doing 100% of the exact same job every single Rehabilitation Counselor in this agency does every single day. The only difference is you have been doing it on caseloads assigned to someone else. Everyone else does this every day on their own caseloads, there is no difference."* Barbara offered.

*"Yep. The real job is not the glamorous kind of counseling they teach in graduate school is it?"* Janice inquired. *"First, there is not enough time for that. To do what they teach in graduate school our caseloads would have to be a quarter of what they are. And graduate school never teaches you about meeting performance standards, managing all the required paperwork, tracking down clients who disappear, doing data entry, and managing a caseload. Those are the real priorities, which is like 95% of the job. You must do all that just to occasionally engage in any face-to-face client counseling and guidance."*

*"My master's degree program never told me I would lose my job if I did not get at least 28 successful 26 closures every year."* Devin chimed in. *"I had to accept we really are not counselors; we are just case managers. At the end of the day all that matters is doing all the paperwork right and getting 28 successful case closures every year."*

I sat and listened as the idealized version of my chosen profession succumbed to the applied reality of practicing in this office. I wondered if I had just gotten a practicum in the wrong office by chance. Did I find myself in the only office with a group of burned-out apathetic veteran counselors who had lost their passion? I left the office troubled and brooded on this conversation.

I reached out to several of my fellow students who had already been employed in other state VR agencies while they were working on their graduate degrees. I was disheartened to learn they shared the consensus that Janice, Barbara, and Devin had shared with me. From my limited sample it appeared the design and expected performance of the job did not vary from office to office, nor from one state agency to another state agency. I began to wonder if public VR was the right practice setting for me?

*“Kyle, the reality is very different from what they teach in the ivory tower. Yes, you will occasionally get to use your counseling skills. And you will have clients you really bond with and can make a difference for. I cherish those moments and wish I could have more of them. But that can’t be what you expect to be doing on this job, or you will not last.”* Hailey who worked in another state’s VR agency told me over the phone. *“But that just is not the main priority of the job. I try to do my best to meet my client’s needs. But first I have to make sure I am meeting the needs of the agency. That is paramount. I can’t meet any client’s needs if I don’t meet the agency’s needs first.”*

*“Yeah. I struggled to accept that too.”* Steve who worked in a state VR agency told me. *“Honestly, I almost quit because I felt like such a fraud. I realized my passion for really helping people was not achievable on a grand scale like my entire caseload. I guess I accepted that I needed to really focus on helping the few I can. The only way to make a difference for those few is to keep my job. I have to sacrifice meeting the needs of most of the people on my caseload so I can generate the number of closures the agency needs to justify our existence to the politicians.”*

I remember hearing the voice of my mother.

*“Kyle, remember who you are and what you stand for.”* Mom always called out to me as I walked out the door and into the world.

I was only beginning to understand just how much my profession and the public VR program prioritized meeting its own needs rather than prioritizing the individualized needs of people with disabilities. I remember hearing the words of Judith Huemann and Dr. Petersen to remember the real purpose of the profession and public VR program. I was only beginning to see that the primary purpose of the program had become meeting the needs of the program. All thinking, all actions, and all work tasks were under the overwhelming gravitational pull of bureaucratic inertia.

I admit I was confused about how a public program with such a clear existential mandate could have developed a psychosocial culture that appeared completely incongruent with that real purpose. I also remember slowly becoming aware of a weird organizational cultural form of dissociative split personality disorder. I remember meetings, communications, documents, policies, rules, and other cultural artifacts used wording that on the surface seemed aligned and congruent with the program’s real purpose. The words all said one thing, but the day-to-day actions seemed to say something else entirely. I remember becoming aware of this and I assumed everyone was aware of the seeming hypocrisy of this organizational duplicity. I would slowly learn that many were aware and troubled by this at an unconscious level. Later many would tell me they could feel it but could not put their feelings into words. Others said they suspect they had to repress these feelings or else the job would have been too frustrating. Others would later tell me that they just got used to it and stopped thinking about it. It became normalized and automatic.

Just before I completed my practicum two things happened that would change my plans. I had been employed at Youthtrack Inc. for over four years and had been planning to remain after completing my graduate degree. The company was sold and a reduction in staff was announced. My job was going to be eliminated within the next six months.

Because I felt so uneasy with my practicum experience, I began exploring job opportunities in private VR settings. I interviewed with an insurance company focused on workers compensation services based in Tennessee. I also interviewed with a large disability management company based in Seattle, Washington. During both interviews I was told there was a preference to hire Rehabilitation Counselors who had one or two years of experience in the public VR program. They felt this experience helped keep their costs down and increased profitability because these professionals could help clients obtain expensive services through the public VR program. I was encouraged to start my professional career by working in a state VR agency for an abbreviated time. They both urged me to reapply after a year or two working in public VR.

*"How are you doing Kyle?"* Janice asked in her usual way as she entered the supply room that doubled as my practicum workstation. *"Hey, did you hear, Bill the Rehabilitation Counselor in Brigham City resigned. Jack the Chief of Field Services, you've heard me talk about Jack attacks, right?"*

*"Yes, everyone has mentioned Jack attacks."* I said uneasy.

*"Well Jack called and asked me to see if you would be interested in applying."* Happily drawing out the last word in song. *"That job was open for recruitment for almost a year before Bill, it is a hard one to fill. I dread having to cover that caseload again."*

I had been working in Brigham City for nearly four years at Youthtrack Inc. I realized this vacancy was ideal for me because I could land a job that did not require me to relocate my family. Janice assertively helped me log onto the agency's human resource website and locate the job announcement. She stood over my shoulder and encouraged me to apply. I told her I would later that night.

*"No Kyle, I really think you should do it right now."* Janice urgently encouraged.

She helped me complete the complicated application process. Janice then performed her signature golf clap as I hit the submit button. Janice assured me that I was a lock for the position and

began preparing me on what to expect working in that office. At the time it was a single counselor office. Janice told me that was ideal for me because you can stay off the agencies radar.

*“In a one counselor office you have a little more autonomy to structure the job the way you want.”* Janice claimed. *“They won’t pay any attention to you as long as you get your 28 successful closures, and your case files don’t cause any audit findings.”* She reminded me.

Several weeks passed without any word. Janice encouraged me to give the human resource manager a call. My perception and memory of this call is vividly clear because it was traumatic for me. I was abruptly informed that I was screened out of being interviewed for the position. He offered no reason for me being rejected. When I pressed that I was qualified to be interviewed for the job, he stated I was screened out for reasons that seemed arbitrary and vague. His voice was cold, clinical, and impersonal. He ended the call abruptly. I was not encouraged to apply for other positions in the future. I remember getting the feeling that I was rejected and would be wasting my time applying for other positions. I remember processing this with Janice and hearing the dismay in her voice.

A week later the Brigham City position was filled with a candidate who had a bachelor’s degree in special education and no experience in vocational rehabilitation. Janice was professional but seemed to share my dismay. I began to apply for positions outside the state. I often wonder what my career path would have looked like had I landed that Brigham City position. Not getting that job was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

Two weeks later I received a phone call from the state agency. I was shocked to find myself talking to a vastly different person than the one I had previously experienced. He called to inform me that another Rehabilitation Counselor position had just opened in the Valley West District Office in the Salt Lake Valley. In my memory of this call, he eagerly encouraged me to submit an application. He told me that he thought this position was an ideal fit for me and my educational background.



This job would require a relocation, so I told him I would have to discuss it with Linda. He said he understood and hoped I would apply. He emailed me information on agency policy for relocation expense reimbursement. He also emailed me information about the office location and a list of affordable neighborhoods in the vicinity. I felt like a valued profession that was being headhunted. I was needed, wanted, and openly recruited.

My interview was in a moderate sized conference room in West Valley City, Utah. The interview panel was made up of five managers. I do not remember the names of three panel members. But two interviewers would go on to have a profound influence on my career. Russ was the Field Service Director and Josh was the District Director. Russ and Josh hired me in my first professional position and became career long professional mentors.

I look back on the disappointment of being rejected for the Brigham City job with a unique perspective today. Had I been hired for the vacancy in Brigham City I would never have had the opportunity to be mentored, coached, influenced, and shaped by Russ and Josh. Isolated in a rural one counselor office would have limited the opportunities I ended up benefiting from. Brigham City would have been a great office to spend my professional career in. It was not the potential career launching pad that I found in the Valley West District Office.

I was offered and accepted the job. It was late August 2000. I was finally going to become an official Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor.

Linda and I found and bought a brand-new house in a middle-class neighborhood in West Valley City, Utah. We relocated our three young children. While my two sons had attended kindergarten and first grade in elementary schools in Logan, my children would go on to attend the same elementary school, junior high school, and high school. They were able to build lasting friendships and relationships with their teachers. They grew up with a sense of stability and belonging that I never experienced as a child bouncing from one school to another. My children grew up over the next 15 years in that house.

Once we moved in it would become the only house my children lived in until they moved out as young adults. I can't help but to appreciate the fact that my children experienced a stable sense of security, attachment, and belonging because their dad was able to find more than a job. I found my vocation, through my vocation I found myself, and by finding myself I was able to provide my children with much more than a paycheck. My salary as a master's degree level Rehabilitation Counselor was \$12.37 per hour. The salary was low. I was never going to be well off. But I learned that my vocation paid me intrinsically in ways that made me wealthy beyond measure.

***Subjugation: The Action of Dominating, Controlling, or Governing Something or Someone***

My first day as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor was at the Valley West District Office on the west side of the Salt Lake Valley. Valley West was an urban office located in Taylorsville, Utah. The office was staffed by 16 Rehabilitation Counselors, seven secretaries, three Supervising Counselors, one rehabilitation technician, and one employment specialist. Josh was the Valley West District Director.

I learned on my first day that Josh had just recently been promoted to the District Director role. He had previously worked in the South Valley District Office. Because of this he was both the new boss and an office outsider. My new coworkers were unfamiliar and suspicious. Josh had been forced to introduce himself to the new office by dealing with some longstanding personnel issues his predecessor had been working to resolve. By the time Josh took over the role these issues had reached an end point. Josh had to take difficult action on his first day in his new district. This had not endeared him to his new team who interpreted his actions as part of a larger move to "clean house." My peers that day were nice, cordial, and welcoming to me. But they were clear that they were uneasy and uncomfortable with recent changes and were full of fear and apprehension.

Josh was away from the office on my first day. I remember he was at an agency meeting. My new colleagues used the opportunity of his absence to shape my expectations of Josh and my new job. The underlying message I was hearing was the office was a battlefield between two factions. There was

an “us,” the overloaded, micromanaged, and overloaded front-line client-facing staff who had little professional autonomy or discretion but were solely accountable for results. And there was “them,” the management, administrators, and bureaucratic bean counters who controlled everything, made all the decisions, but took no responsibility for the results. On my first day I remember feeling like I was being told that I had to choose a side.

My first day in my new profession was memorable. It was memorable because the last hopes I had of practicing the idealized vision of my profession were dashed immediately. I was only in the office a couple of hours when I realized the Judith Huemann’s comments to me were going to be a problem. Congress may have intended to create a transformational civil rights program leveraging transformational human counselor-client relationships to achieve transformational social change providing access to transformational vocational opportunities. But Congress had asked that program to be run by a transactional bureaucratic system leveraging transactional exchanges of goods and services to achieve transactional successes by transactionally closing people in transactional jobs.

I was escorted to my first professional office by Pam the Executive Secretary. She told me as the “newbie” I would be in the “potty office” a term I remember thinking was odd.

*“Don’t worry,” Pam reassured me, “the way counselors come and go you won’t have time to decorate before you get a better office.”*

My new office did not look or feel like what I expected the office of a professional counselor to look or feel like. It was cold and bureaucratic. I remember thinking it looked like the stereotypical government welfare office. A large metal avocado green World War II era army surplus desk sat crammed against a wall in one corner. Enormous piles of paper were stacked on its surface. I noticed a missing desk leg had been replaced by a grey cinder block. I remembered thinking about my childhood station wagon bedroom that sat tirelessly propped up on similar looking cinder blocks. It suddenly felt like home.

A couple of five drawer avocado green filing cabinets sat in the opposite corner. The top of every cabinet was stacked high with piles of paper and files. I wondered why the files were not in the drawers. Pricilla opened several drawers to show me they were crammed full of other files already.

Two aged and stained fabric chairs sat next to the door. They appeared to have been a pale blue at some point in the past. I tried not to think about the origin of the various streaks of stains that gave them more of a mustard pale blue hew. The soiled carpet may once have been a lighter grey, but it is difficult to tell. Fluorescent lights flickered and buzzed overhead. I remember an almost strobe light effect that immediately began to generate a headache.

The reason Pam teased me about being assigned the “potty” office became evident. My office was one of only two offices that sat directly across the hall from the public restrooms. The aromatic scents emanating across the hall was attributed to broken exhaust fans and the lack of ventilation. The ambiance of my new professional office was a mix of welfare office and a construction site porta potty. I was struggling to conceive how I could dress this up to be more welcoming and inviting.

Pam explained there were 239 people with disabilities who were clients assigned to my caseload. At the time the word caseload landed oddly in my ears. I did not know why at the time. It just seemed an odd word choice for a professional counseling practice. It felt like a word that was indicative of a welfare office. Caseload also sounded very heavy. It sounded like a burden of great weight. I immediately envisioned myself being crushed by the overwhelming weight of 239 case files bursting with bureaucratic forms and documents. I remember that every time Pam used the word caseload my shoulders dropped a little more.

Pam again opened a filing cabinet drawer to show me my caseloads casefiles. At the time I accepted the word casefile without much thought. I expected a counselor would be responsible for documenting client progress in a casefile. It would take me several years to begin questioning the psychosocial cultural lexicon I was being taught my first day. Every word in the shared lexicon was

program-centric rather than human-centric. We referred to those we served as clients. But most words we used rendered clients dehumanized cases identified by a case number assigned to a caseload with a caseload number, receiving services in compliance with the case service policy manual, all clearly documented in standardized forms contained in a casefile.

We even had a number system to refer to what kind of case we served. An applicant was a status 02 case. A case that was eligible but had not developed a service plan was a status 10 case. A case receiving disability restoration services was a status 16 case. A status 18 was in a job training program. A status 20 was job ready. A status 22 was a special kind of case that required careful attention because this case was working on a job and 90 days in this status produced the only thing that really mattered a status 26 case closure. A status 28 case closure meant the case had failed to get or keep a job for 90 days. Pricilla explained it was my job to meet the needs of this numerical system by managing the transactional exchanges required to move a case from status 02 to status 26.

Having introduced me to the vital basics of the essential functions of my position, Pam left me on my own.

I shut the filing cabinet drawer and looked at my new office. Before I got the chance to do any interior decoration, Todd stuck his head in my door and asked me to conduct an initial interview for a new applicant sitting in the lobby. Todd was one of three Supervising Counselors in the office. Todd explained the applicant had an appointment with a counselor who was out sick. Todd apologized for not doing this himself. He had his own client sitting in his office. No one else was available. He asked me to conduct the initial interview and make sure all the paperwork was complete. Todd then promised to help me get the case registered in the IRIS case management system on the sick counselor's caseload.

Joe was a middle-aged gentleman who walked into my office slightly hunched over. I could tell by the way he walked that every movement he made caused pain. I could not tell where the pain originated because it appeared that his neck, back, and legs were all hurting. I began by asking him

questions about his disability. Where can I obtain his medical records. I asked about his work and educational history. I asked how his disability prevented him from getting or keeping a job.

After gathering his information, I turned to the brick like desktop computer sitting on my Army surplus desk. I logged into the case management system using my own credentials for the first time. I knew how to use the system because I had done so disguised as Janice throughout my practicum. As I began entering Joe's Social Security Number into the system, the first step to register a new case, the system notified me that he had a previous case that had been closed successfully employed just the week before. Having read the agency's policy and procedure manual thoroughly during my practicum, I knew reopening a case that had formerly been closed successful required careful vetting. It may even require me to get approval from agency administration.

*"Um, Joe. You said you have not had a job in 10 years."* I said confused. *"Did you lose the job we closed you successfully in last Monday?"*

*"What job?"* he shot back. *"I have not had a job in 10 years. You must be mixing me up with someone else."*

Joe told me he had called three weeks ago to get an appointment with his counselor because he needs help to get a job. He said his counselor told him his case had been closed because he had been hospitalized and out of contact for over a month. He said he was told that he would have to reapply for services again in October because his case was already closed and could not be reopened until after October 1<sup>st</sup>. Joe was clearly irritated and felt that he was being forced to jump through unnecessary hoops. He asked me what date the computer said his previous case was closed. When I told him it was closed last Monday, he was livid.

*"She said it was closed already when I called three weeks ago to make an appointment."* Joe elevated his voice. *"I am so sick of all the run around I get at this place."*

*"I'm sorry." I tried to calm him down. "I will get this straightened out, maybe there was just a miscommunication somewhere."*

*"I really liked my former counselor." Joe said taking a deep breath. "I don't know why she closed my case. I told her I was going to be in the hospital for a while, you would think she could have kept my case open. She knew where I was."*

I clicked on the closure letter and asked if he had worked for Standard Oil Company. He reiterated he had not had a paying job in 10 years and had been in a hospital for several months. I remember being suspicious. I realize today that I was assuming the worst in Joe. I was sure he was lying to me for some reason, and I did not want to start my first day in my new office being conned into making a mistake. I looked at the name of the counselor on the closure letter from the week before. It was Dottie. I knew Dottie already. I knew Dottie was in the office. I told Joe I needed to go verify something. I told him I would be right back and left him sitting in my office. I walked to Dottie's office to find her in the hall escorting a client to the front lobby. Dottie told me to have a seat in her office and she would be right back.

Dottie and I were already familiar with each other. I first met Dottie in a summer semester class at Utah State University. I remember being struck by sitting in a graduate class with a woman who was as old enough to be my grandmother. What I remember most about our first meeting is that Dottie looked a lot like my Grandma James. It was uncanny. They could have been twins. Dottie looked so much like my Grandma James that she made me nervous. Would she be mean to me too?

Over that summer semester I connected with Dottie because in my mind she was the bizzarro world exact opposite of my grandmother. They were twins visually but came from opposite versions of reality. Grandma James was prim, proper, and very conservative. Dottie was irreverent, hilarious, and seemed to accept everyone. Dottie was a veteran counselor with more than 27 years working for the state. She said she was an "old school" Rehabilitation Counselor hired before there were any

qualification standards. I remember she clearly resented being forced to take master's degree classes to keep a job she had done for decades. My grandmother lacked a filter and said whatever she thought but those thoughts were usually casting judgement on how someone was not living up to her standards. Dottie lacked a filter too, but her thoughts were usually self-deprecating and irreverent. Grandma James did not seem to care if she hurt someone else's feeling, Dottie seemed to not care about what other people thought of her. I remember her showing up for a mandatory sexual harassment training and asking the agency's Executive Director if he wanted to sit on her lap. Dottie often made me squirm. She also made me laugh sometimes at the same time.

When Dottie returned to her office, I explained what was going on with Joe. I told her I wanted to make sure I was not being deceived for some reason. I asked her about the events that led to the successful closure of Joe's former case.

I remember Dottie's face flushed. She looked like little kid caught pilfering cookies from the cookie jar. She sheepishly got up from her desk, stuck her head out to look down the hall, and then closed her office door. She sat back down looking at the soiled carpet between us.

*"I made that one up."* she whispered embarrassed.

*"What?"* I said not understanding.

*"They were going to make Josh fire me."* Dottie explained. *"I just needed one more 26 to get them off my back."*

The federal fiscal year ended the last day of every September. To process a client's case to a successful status 26 closure required moving the case into working status at least 90 days before the last day of September. Dottie told me that to keep her job she had been taught to move cases she had lost contact with into working status by June each year. Then in early September she had a friend who worked at the Department of Workforce Services. She had her friend check the new hire registry our agency did not have access to. By doing this she would find clients who had indeed found jobs. Dottie



said this strategy always resulted in her having enough 26 closures. Dottie confessed that last week she was one short of the 28 successful closures required by the agency. She had already received disciplinary and corrective actions for not meeting closure numbers recently. She knew this time they would fire her.

*“Joe had been out of contact for so long I just assumed he was working or moved out of state. I closed his case successfully. I just made up the employer.”* Dottie said. *“Most of our clients end up getting jobs along the way. They don’t always call and tell us. Once they get what they want from us they are hard to track down.”*

I was shocked and disappointed. I had thought Dottie was someone of integrity who genuinely cared about her clients. During my practicum in the Logan office, I had witnessed the impact of the prioritized pressure the agency placed on Rehabilitation Counselors to meet performance quotas specifying a minimum number of successful status 26 closures. I knew the staff in the Logan office felt so much pressure to generate status 26 closures. I had learned the techniques they used to make sure they got their numbers including keeping caseloads high and supplementing actively earned 26 closures with passively earned closures as Susan had described to me. While I found those techniques distasteful and incongruent with the purpose of the program, none of those techniques were as illegal and fraudulent as falsifying documentation. Dottie sensed my moral indignation and naïve self-righteous judgement.

*“Kyle, you are going to find out that if you want to keep this job you have to find creative ways to get the numbers they demand.”* Dottie said unapologetically. *“I care about helping my clients. It is the only thing that keeps me going. We don’t get paid well, the only thing that keeps me coming to work is the chance to really help someone change their lives for the better. I do that as much as I can. But to be able to do that I have to do what it takes to keep the job too. At the end of the day all that matters is your numbers. They don’t think we have any impact unless it ends in a status 26 closure.”*

Dottie asked me to go back and register Joe’s new case. She asked me to convince Todd to let me open the case on my own caseload. Dottie did not want to have to explain all of this to the counselor

who was out sick. She asked me to expedite finding Joe eligible based on the documentation available in his former case. And she asked me to do all this and simply move forward without calling attention to her actions. She told me her job was in my hands.

I went back to my office and finished helping Joe register his new case. I felt conflicted by this incident for a long time. I had been on the job one day and already I was facing an ethical dilemma. I chose to do what Dottie requested. I have had to give myself some grace for making that choice. In the ensuing months I witnessed Dottie do other things that made me regret not saying anything.

One day after lunch I pulled into the parking lot. Dottie stood at the large window of her office holding a client's service plan amendment over the top of the client's application. Her tongue sticking out as she carefully traced the client's signature. I was new, but I already knew what I was seeing. I did not ask; I did not want to know. I did not tell either. In the ensuing months I also witnessed many acts of Dottie's selfless service to her client's. I once saw her asking her client when he had eaten his last meal because she thought he was losing too much weight. When he told her he had no money for groceries I watched in disbelief as she reached into her pocket and handed him all the money she had in her possession. That same day I sat next to Dottie in the lunchroom and noticed she was simply drinking a bottle of water. Another counselor asked if she was going to eat something, and Dottie just said she was going to go to the sandwich shop for lunch but decided she was not hungry.

I knew her behavior was unethical. But I also saw behavior that made me wonder if I was as committed to my clients as she was to hers. Being so new to the profession I attributed her unethical behaviors to a flaw in Dottie's character. Eventually I would come to remember what I learned growing up watching the Oakland Raiders. Some environmental contexts bring out only the worst in people.

At the end of my first day as a Rehabilitation Counselor, three of my new colleagues entered my office. Kent sat down in the chair next to my door. Mark, a counselor who was blind stood leaning against the door jamb clutching a long white cane under his folded arms. Shawna stood next to my desk.

They introduced themselves and welcomed me to the office. They also seemed to be intent on making sure I did not escape my first day without being appropriately initiated.

Kent had been in the profession for over 10 years. He had a master's degree in Rehabilitation Counseling. He was one of the few counselors in the office who also held the CRC (CRC) credential. I learned that Kent started his career working at the state VR agency. Kent told me he quickly realized he was not a good fit for the job and quit. Kent then practiced as a Rehabilitation Counselor working for a private rehabilitation provider. He spent five years in private practice and had then returned to the state VR agency.

*"I quit the first time because the only thing that matters here is getting numbers, 26 closures."* Kent warned. *"My first time working here I felt like I was the only person who cared about trying to find out what the client's needs were and trying to address them. You know, like focusing on meeting client needs. I just got frustrated because I felt like client needs really did not matter, all that mattered was me meeting the outcome numbers. My entire job had nothing to do with vocational counseling, it was just sticking people into jobs and hoping they kept them for 90 days. The numbers that matter are only the ones used to justify the existence of the program. I was naïve. I hated feeling like I was using clients to produce the numbers our administrators used to prove we were effective. I felt like those numbers obscured the truth. They really said nothing about the quality or long-term viability of those jobs, most of my 26 closures have recycled through the program every other year because I put them in jobs where they can't succeed over the long-term."*

Kent warned me that my new job was not going to be anything like what I learned to do in graduate school. He told me I would burn out in a year if I held on tightly to my expectations and aspirations for a career helping people maximize their employment.

*"I was trained to be a counselor meeting the needs of people with disabilities so they can maximize employment."* Kent said using the frequently used language of the profession. *"We don't do*

*that here. We just get people jobs and hope like hell they can keep it for 90 days so we can get a 26. I started looking for other options. I got a much higher better paying job at Corvell a private vocational rehabilitation company doing workers comp return to work kind of stuff. I only had a handful of clients. I focused on helping injured workers return to work with their employer as fast as possible. Finally, I thought I would be focusing on the needs of my client. Huh, what a joke.”*

*“Sounds like it wasn’t what you expected?” I asked.*

*“I am embarrassed to say that it took me a little longer to figure out there than it did for me to understand things here. The injured worker was not really my client. My real client, the only client who really mattered was the policy holder, the client’s employer. My job was racking up as many billable hours as possible while trying to get the injured worker back on the job site as fast as possible. Revenue and return to work ratios were my only performance metrics. We pushed hard to get clients back to work as fast as possible. It saved the employer money. They could avoid having to pay out long term disability. It also made them harder to get sued for workplace safety issues. The needs of my clients didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was revenue. It felt manipulative and dishonest, even worse than here.”*

*“Is that why you came back?” I asked.*

*“I came back as soon as I could. At least here I can occasionally do some good. I took a pay cut to come back here.” Kent looked at the newly framed master’s degree diploma sitting on my desk. He pointed at it. “Kyle, you won’t be doing much of that here. Here all we do is jobs, jobs, jobs.”*

*“So not much counseling and guidance?” I asked.*

*“Funny, no. This is nothing but casefile and caseload management.” Kent said. “If you say anything about being counselors around here you will be told we are not therapists and that our only job is getting client’s jobs. It is a factory floor, and your job is producing paperwork, filling out forms, creating perfect casefiles, and getting your status 26 closures.”*

At the time, I remember Kent struck me as the quintessential prototype of the burned-out apathetic bureaucrat going through the motions necessary to get to the end of each day and eventual retirement. Over the years I often heard administrators refer to Kent as being retired-in-chair. When you first meet someone and form an initial perception it is not always based on having accurate information. I assumed Kent did not find his way into the profession for what I thought were the right reasons. I assumed Kent only viewed this as a job, not a profession. I assumed he never cared about social justice or the equality of people with disabilities. And I assumed I was different. I believed I could never turn into a burned-out pessimistic bureaucrat. Overtime, I learned my initial perceptions of Kent and my assumptions about myself were all wrong.

Shawna and Mark both seemed to share Kent's assessment of working at the state agency. Both confirmed that the only thing that the agency management cared about was the number of 26 closures. Shawna asked to see the list of master's degree courses I had taken in graduate school. I pulled my transcript out of my backpack and handed it to her. I remember that the conversation devolved at this point as Kent, Shawna, and Mark had fun rewriting the master's degree curriculum to make it better aligned with the reality of the job.

*"Okay, this class is a good example."* Shawna chuckled. *"Introduction to Rehabilitation Counseling, that class should be Introduction to Bureaucratic Case Management."*

*"A survey of techniques, methods, and strategies to facilitate job placement and retention for 90 days."* Kent began describing the course syllabus as he stroked his chin thoughtfully. *"Students will learn how to avoid all contact with working clients until the case is closed."*

*"A good one."* Mark added. *"I wish I had taken Professor Kent's class."*

*"And this one needs to go, Counseling Theories and Techniques."* Shawna continued.

*"I propose that be replaced with Cover Your Ass with Casefile Documentation 6100."* Kent urged.

*"That would have been more helpful."* Mark confirmed.

This playful disparaging of my academic transcript continued for the next half hour at which point I began to find myself becoming defensive.

*“Did I waste my time and money on my master’s degree?”* I asked.

*“Well, I would not call it a waste. But you didn’t need it to get this job.”* Mark added. *“Most counselors don’t have a master’s degree, the few that do usually have a master’s degree in social work or special education. Most just have bachelor’s degrees. You get paid the same as they do and there is no difference in what you do every day.”*

*“Did any of my classes prepare me for this job?”* I pleaded looking at Shawna.

*“That Job Placement class, you will get your money’s worth there.”* Shawna said pointing at my transcript. *“The rest of these classes maybe not so much.”*

I was relieved this conversation was interrupted as other coworkers stepped in to introduce themselves and welcome me to the office. Most felt compelled to share their own Rehabilitation Counselor war stories which confirmed the growing consensus. I remember being overwhelmed by how genuinely discouraged, emotionally disengaged, and resigned they all were about the job. I remember having doubts about my decision. I also heard the words of Dr. Eldridge and Judith Heumann, and I worried that the great and noble quest they had recruited me into was not to be found here. Over the next year and a half my doubts only grew as I witnessed the human toll exacted by the organizational cultural environment. A human toll that resulted from their failure to thrive in this context.

***Professionalism: Competence, Skill, and Expertise Standards Expected of a Specialist***

Three days later Josh provided a much-needed professional counterbalance to my first day. What Josh said and did that day reminded me of why I had fallen in love with my profession and convinced me could still be that in this context. I just had to keep myself focused and avoid becoming a mindless bureaucratic caseload manager. I also needed to remain focused on whose needs should come first.

*"Kyle, your 9 o'clock appointment is here."* Diane's voice came over the speakerphone.

It was Thursday October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2000. As previously mentioned, my first client experience had been meeting with Joe on my first day. The next two days had been spent in new counselor orientation training. Today I would be meeting for the first time with my own clients who were already being served on my caseload before I was hired. John would be my first.

For a moment I thought about pulling and quickly reviewing John's casefile. When I opened the filing cabinet drawer, I am overwhelmed by how crammed it is with files. I don't find his name and move to another drawer. After unsuccessfully thumbing through a sizable part of the 239 active casefiles I give up. I shut the drawer and decided to find out who John was from John himself. Why start a new relationship by reviewing what the last counselor thought about John? I decided to start my relationship with John with a clean slate.

I walked to the front desk. Surveying dozens of faces waiting in the lobby I called out his name. No one responded.

*"John."* I said a little louder while casting a side glance at Diane who was now working to check in another client. There was still no response. Twenty or so faces stared back at me. Just then the glass front door opened and a frantic looking man in his late forties made eye contact.

*"RRRR you Kyle?"* he barked while aggressively stomping on a sparking cigarette crushing it into the lobby carpet.

*"Yes, are you John?"*

*"That is what they tell me."* he said pushing past the splintered wood half-door next to the receptionist desk. *"Where are we goin?"*

I take the lead guiding him to my office. As I do, I am immediately overcome by the smell of tobacco smoke mixed with extreme body odor and a faint hint of whiskey. John entered my office and

took a seat next to the door. I began to formally introduce myself, but John abruptly interrupted and demanded that I just hand over his *"purchase order"* so he could get his new tires installed.

*"Sorry?"* I stuttered reconsidering my need to review his case file. *"You are here to get a purchase order for new tires?"* I asked as I walked to the filing cabinet to locate his casefile. I found it in the bottom drawer rather than filed alphabetically. I noticed it was very thick, three or four inches thick. As I began closing the drawer my eyes noticed the next casefile also had John's name on it. Two thick files? I wondered how long John had been receiving services.

I took his casefiles to my desk and began to rifle through all the forms and paperwork. Everything in the first file appeared very dated. I could not find anything a with recent date and could not find anything about a request for new tires. I thumbed through the other file as I asked him if his former counselor had agreed to pay for new tires.

*"Look asshole, I am tired of being jerked around by you people."* John said as he stood and moved aggressively toward me with his hands balled in fists and his chest puffed out.

The second file was even older than the first and contained nothing that would help me understand the request for tires. John was now standing right next to me brushing up against me. I am immediately intimidated, uncomfortable, and unprepared. My first real meeting with a client appeared to be escalating to violence. My brain raced, my autonomic nervous system activated, and I began preparing for a fight or flight.

*"Listen you jackass, I dropped off the three quotes your paper-pushers made me get. I was told it would be approved to be added it to my plan today. I need them installed today."* He asserted, his fists clearly trembling. *"Are you telling me you lost those quotes?"*

*"I am sure they are here; I just need to find them."* I said rifling through the second file. *"This might take a minute; can I get you a bottle of water?"* attempting to calm him with a show of human kindness. He just stared down at me.



*"Where the hell did, they find you? The DMV?"* he said as he turned to return to his chair. He sat down and intently started at me with his fists still balled up at his sides.

I realized there must have been a third more recent casefile because nothing in the first two files is dated within the last two years. I stood up and returned to open the bottom drawer. I found no other file with his name on it. I began to panic. I returned to my desk and logged into the electronic case management system typing in his name on the search screen. No less than 7 formerly closed cases appeared on the screen. I find the currently active case at the top of the list. I opened it and began reviewing the electronic documents. Johns Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) does not include new tires. So, I began reading the former counselor's most recent case notes. Again, I found no mention of tires. I continued searching note after note. No tires.

At this point I realized the former counselor had stored all Johns former closed casefiles in the bottom drawer. I return to the file cabinets and start looking through the other drawers and found a four-inch-thick file with recent dates on it. I closed the drawer and returned to my desk. As I opened the file three pieces of torn wrinkled folded yellow paper fell on the floor. I picked them up and noticed they were three separate quotes for the installation of four new tires on a used 1998 Dodge Durango.

*"Well holy shit you found them!"* John said as he sits back and folds his arms across his chest. *"Your mother would be proud. Now get me my purchase order so I can get out of this dump you call an office."*

At this point I tried to reset some boundaries. I informed him that I was happy to work hard to help him, but he was being inappropriate and hostile. I told him I did not deserve to be spoken to or treated like this.

*"If you and I are going to work well together we need to be respectful of each other."* I stated in what I thought was a reasonable and calm tone.

*"Look mother fucker,"* John lunged toward me stopping just short of physically touching me. "I tell you what to do. Got that! You never fucking tell me what to do. You work for me. You are my employee. My taxes pay your fucking huge salary so you ain't the boss here you got it?" this last point he emphasized by digging his index finger into my chest.

My mind raced through my graduate school classes, but not one thing prepared me for a fight to the death over four new tires. I decided to try a different approach.

*"Okay, you can't talk to me like this, and I will not allow you to physically assault me..."* I began but was immediately cut off.

*"Assault you?"* John yelled. *"Look asshole, if I wanted to assault you, you would be lying on the floor already bleeding out. I never assaulted you because you are still alive mother fucker."*

*"Okay, we are done here."* I said stepping past him into the hall. *"Leave the office or I will call the police."*

*"This is a public building you can't kick me out."* He yelled as dozens of people in the office stopped what they were doing and stared nervously. People scurried away. It became clear that no one was going to step in to back me up.

*"Leave or I am going to call the police."* I said pointing to the front door.

John picked up a chair and threw it across the secretarial area of the office. At this point I looked at Diane sitting at the front desk. *"Can you please call the police?"*

With this, John moved toward the front door. His hand slammed loudly into the glass, and he stopped and pointed menacingly at me. *"This ain't the end of this fucker. I will be seeing you again real soon."* Violently he threw the door open and left the office. I nervously watched as he stopped across the parking lot and go in his Durango. His tires squealed as he drove out of the parking lot.

What had just happened? I felt like I was going to faint. My heart felt like it was beating in my throat. My mouth was dry, and my hands and feet were ice cold. I was numb and angry and sad all at the same time. I was also shaking and embarrassed. Everyone watched me go back to my office.

Several veteran counselors walked into my office to see if I was all right. I tried to act like it was no big deal, but I was unconvincing. They wanted to help me process what just happened.

*“Kyle, this was not your fault.”* Rebecca reassured me. *“Your job is to get these people a job and that man is clearly not employable. He can’t benefit from services. Just close his case as a failure to cooperate and unable to benefit.”* These words were part of the culture’s lexicon adopted from the federal regulations and formally defined and operationalized in the agency’s case services policy and procedure manual.

*“He should never have been found eligible in the first place, he is not employment ready, he needs to be institutionalized.”* Frank concurred. *“Just mail the 30-day notice of failure to cooperate closure letter.”* He said as he showed me where to find this templated pre-canned letter in the electronic case management system. *“Just print, save, sign it, mail it to him and close his case in 30 days. Don’t waste time on the ones who will never get a job.”*

I read the templated letter on the monitor. The language matched this situation very well. I wondered why this template already existed in a canned format.

*“Does this happen a lot?”* I asked feeling tears forming in the corner of my eyes.

*“Well, yes. Not always as bad as that, but I use this letter all the time.”* Shawna said. *“We just don’t have time for this kind of nonsense from these people. You won’t keep this job if you don’t get at least 28 successful status 26 closures every year. You won’t produce those numbers wasting time on someone like that. In this job you must know when to fish and when to cut bait. That guy will never get or keep a job for 90 days, cut bait.”*

I knew they were right. But I was also shaken and felt uneasy. I sat for several minutes at my desk, numb, shaking, angry. I had a nagging feeling I should talk to Josh about this. During this incident Josh had been out of the office in meetings. I wondered if it was wise to bring this incident to Josh's attention. Would he blame me? Would he think I lacked the skills to do my job? I was tempted to remain silent and hope that Josh never found out. This is not the way I wanted to start my job.

Not long after this incident I noticed that Josh had returned to the office. His office door was open. I decide to address the issue directly and deal with any consequences.

*"Hey Josh, do you have a minute?"* I said knocking on his office door frame.

*"Kyle, you bet, come in. I heard on my way back to the office you had a wild one this morning?"*

Josh said waiving me in while motioning to a chair. *"Tell me about it."*

I explained what transpired. As I retold the story began feeling angry and defensive. My hands shook and my voice cracked. My stomach was churning. I explained how the interaction ended. I repeated the advice I had received from my veteran colleagues. Josh listened and nodded seeming agreement. I told Josh that I intended to close John's case as a failure to cooperate and unable to benefit from services. I told Josh I had printed the closure notification letter and had it ready to mail. Josh simply listened. I did not perceive any judgement. I did not perceive that he was assessing blame. He sat back and drew in an exceptionally long deep breath.

*"I think you did a great job Kyle. It sounds like you remained calm and did everything you could to de-escalate the situation. I totally support your decision and agree. He is obviously not employable and based on what you tell me there is no way he can benefit from services in terms of getting and keeping a job."* Josh told me to move forward with closing John's case.

*"Not exactly the kind of thing you thought you were getting into, is it?"* Josh asked putting his hand behind his head.

*"No, I thought I would be helping people."* I confess.

*“Well, there is some of that. You just got the other side of it right from the start.”* Josh said.

I stood up to go back to my office to mail John the 30-day closure letter. When I got to his door Josh called out to stop me. His facial expression looked curious.

*“Do me a favor. Before you go mail that letter, can you grab the client’s file and come look at it with me?”* Josh says inquisitively. *“I just want to look at a couple of things to make sure all your ducks are in a row. You never know how the appeals process will go.”* Josh said reminding me that I did not have the final say on closing John’s case. John had the right to appeal my decision.

*“Sure, do you have time now or should I come back later?”* I asked.

*“I’m good right now.”* Josh said.

I returned to Josh’s office carrying all five casefiles documenting the VR service John had received over the last 10 years. Josh looked up from his desk and started laughing.

*“Well, I see we have a little history with this guy.”* Josh again motioned me toward a chair next to his desk.

I asked which volume Josh wanted to begin with.

*“Let’s just focus on his current case, the one you are going to close.”* I find that file and set the others aside.

*“You said his name is John, right?”* Josh asked and I nodded confirmation. *“What disability does John have? I mean why did we determine him eligible for VR services in the first place?”*

I had no idea. I began flipping through documents that took me backward in time. I found the eligibility letter written more than four years earlier. As I looked through the file, I noticed that in the four years of this case John has worked with nine different Rehabilitation Counselors making me his 10th. I point this out to Josh who tells me that is sometimes a warning sign that a client is either “counselor shopping” attempting to find a counselor who will just do what they want, or it could be an indicator of a personality disorder that makes John difficult to work with resulting in frequent changes

as the client burns through counselors. In this case Josh assures me that my caseload has a long history of frequent turnover and guards against us making any assumptions.

*“Maybe he blew up at you today because of frustration.”* Josh offered. *“It has to be hard to never know who your counselor is and to have to keep starting over again.”*

*“Okay, he was found eligible because he was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Alcohol Use Disorder, and Intermittent Explosive Personality Disorder.”* I read aloud. As I read the letter for the first time, I regretted not taking the time to pull John’s file for a review prior to our meeting.

*“Interesting.”* Josh says. *“That certainly explains what you saw this morning. That is a lot of stuff to deal with. When you think about how often counselors come and go around here, I am surprised more clients with mental health issues don’t blow up.”*

I found myself feeling empathy for John.

*“Do you mind looking at his Individualized Plan for Employment?”* Josh said casually. *“I wonder what kind of disability related services we have been providing him?”*

I thumbed through several iterations of John’s unusually complex and fluid IPE. I noted at least eight vastly different vocational goals over the last four years and a seemingly endless number of plan amendments adding services here and there that did not appear to have any connection to the vocational goals. I noticed plan amendment after plan amendment for the purchase of various tangible goods. Tires three years ago, new brakes, a new muffler, and lots of gasoline for his car. I saw amendments for clothing and a few months’ rent to his landlord. I noticed several amendments paying for tuition, books, fees, and occasionally tools for a variety of community college training programs. I found nothing that indicated any of these programs were completed.

*“Do you see anything about what we did to address his disability?”* Josh asked again as I thumbed through documentation. *“With those disabilities I would be looking for something about him*

*receiving psychological treatment like counseling or psychiatric treatment like psychotropic medication management.”*

I continued reading and flipping through pages.

*“Sometimes we pay for the disability restoration services but sometimes we use comparable benefit programs like Medicaid or private insurance?”* Josh mused.

*“I can’t find anything. I can’t find any disability restoration services in John’s plan.”* I looked up confused.

I had been trained that a disability restoration goal was an agency mandated requirement for all plans. As an eligibility program an individual is eligible for services based on having a disability that resulted in substantial barriers to employment. As such the agency argued that all clients should receive services that have the potential to ameliorate, improve, or decrease the impact of disability related functional limitations. If a client’s disability could not be ameliorated, disability restoration services may include disability adjustment, adaptation, acceptance, and skills training to compensate for disability related functional limitations.

*“What?”* Josh said as he sat back in his chair. *“We never provided anything to address his disabilities. We never offered mental health treatment, therapy, counseling, or medications?”*

At this point Josh had me skim through all the previously closed case files. The documentation told a remarkably similar story. A pattern emerged where John was found eligible time after time based on serious mental health impairments that resulted in behaviors that created volatile intimidating toxic relationships with his ever-changing list of counselors. Every counselor appeared to provide John’s requested tangible goods and then jumped right into either job training or job placement. Eventually each case was closed because John was told he had failed to cooperate, and he was unemployable and unable to achieve a job outcome.

*"We are justified in closing his case based on how he treated you today." Josh said. "But is that the right thing to do for him? I feel like we failed John over and over again. What do you think?"*

I had already sheepishly tucked my professional tail between my legs. I had recognized that John had not been well served. I realized I was simply repeating the same past institutional bureaucratic centered behaviors. Josh just sat there silently looking at me. I remember it being an uncomfortably long pregnant pause. Josh was giving me the space to process.

*"I think I should at least try to reengage him. Maybe offer to pay for some mental health treatment?"* I offered.

*"You could, that might work." Josh said thoughtfully. "But you need to be prepared for the worst. You could just piss him off more. He could refuse. He could show up here tomorrow and demand you come out to the parking lot for a fight."*

*"He might. I just would not feel good about myself if I did not at least try." I responded. "If he shoots me down, that is on him. Not making the offer is on me. At least I can feel like I tried."*

I will be forever grateful for what Josh told me next. Josh told me his greatest challenge professionally had been to stay grounded as a professional Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor in an environment that tried in every way to turn him into a bureaucratic case manager. Josh urged me to never let myself become an apathetic case manager who only cares about the clients who can serve my own needs for an easy successful 26 closure.

*"My first few years on this job was a soul crushing experience." Josh told me. "People are forced to decide. Do I become the bureaucratic robot the system wants me to be? Or do I become the professional counselor my clients need me to be? Many people around here choose the first option because it is the path of least resistance. Some people can choose the second option, but they have to continuously fight to stay on that path because the system makes it so hard."*



Josh reminded me that the veteran counselors who had advised me to close John's case because he was unemployable and could not get or keep a job were ignoring the catch-22 no win situation this placed on clients. To be eligible they had to prove they had a disability that made them unemployable without necessary VR services. Once they were deemed eligible, we demanded they be job ready and employable without taking the time to provide the VR services we claimed were necessary for employment.

*"If John was work ready and employable he would not need you. He would not need someone with your specialized education, skills, and knowledge. John needs someone willing to do the hard work it takes to be there with him as he frees himself from the impacts of disability."* Josh told me. *"That is our real purpose. We are here to use the program to meet John's needs not to punish John because he can't meet the program's needs."*

I went back to my office and picked up the telephone. I called John's number. At that time, many people did not have voice mail. John's phone rang and went to an answering machine. I listened to John's pre-recorded message and waited for the beep. I began to feel anxious about how to word my message. Panicking, I hung up. Ashamed I dialed the number again a few minutes later. I had prepared a handwritten script on a legal pad. Again, I listened to his recorded greeting and waited for the beep.

*"Um. Hi John, this is ah Kyle the Rehabilitation Counselor you met this morning. Hey, I uh. I uh I just wanted to reach back out and see if you are all right and uh, see if we can schedule a time to meet and start all over again. I really regret how things went this morning; I wish I would have done things differently and I am sorry about how that all went down. Anyway, when you get this message give me a call if you can. Tomorrow, I have appointments scheduled all day, but I am more than willing to meet with you during my lunch hour if that works for you. I take lunch from 12 o'clock to 1 o'clock. If that works for you call me back and let me know. I may not be sitting at my desk, so feel free to leave me a message if tomorrow works. I usually pick up a sandwich at Schlotzsky's, I would be happy to pick one up*

*for you, just let me know. It is the least I can do to try to make things right between us. Anyway, give me a call when you can."*

As I hung the phone up my second line immediately began ringing and I noticed it was John's phone number. Obviously, he had been sitting there listening to the message I just left. I nervously picked up the phone not knowing what to expect. I braced for the worst.

*"Kyle, its John." He said with somber subdued voice. "Yes, can I come see you tomorrow at 12 o'clock? Thank you for being willing to see me during your lunch. I really appreciate it."*

I asked if he wanted me to pick up a sandwich for him and he demurred at first and mumbled something about him owing me. Eventually he agreed to let me buy him a Schlotzky's Original. The phone call ended with not much else said between us. That night I had difficulty sleeping. I replayed our negative interaction repeatedly in my mind. I alternated between feelings of guilt and feelings of self-protective outrage. Tomorrow at noon?

The next day my stomach was in knots all morning and I became increasingly anxious as noon approached. When John entered the office just before 12 o'clock he appeared somehow smaller, more vulnerable, and less intimidating. Our appointment turned out to be uneventful. We amended his IPE so that I could pay for his new tires. John agreed to put his new tires to use by attending mental health therapy sessions with a psychologist I recommended and referred him to. John admitted that he had needed to get some professional help for a long time. He told me he could never afford it because he had no income and no insurance. John said I was the first counselor who had offered to help him get into a therapist.

John told me about some medications that used to help him when he had health insurance and was seeing his doctor on a regular basis. He told me when he lost his insurance, he had gone into debt trying to maintain his mental health treatments. He stopped seeing his doctor and stopped taking his

medications. Things spun out of control for John. He told me that his wife abandoned him and took his precious baby girl with her.

*“The two most important people completely disappeared from my life.”* John chocked back his tears. *“I think she was so scared that I was going to kill them in one of my rages. She had to have changed her name; I mean they just vanished. Poof. Gone. Left me here alone with only myself to rage at.”*

We agreed to help him get in to see his doctor and back on his medications. We worked to complete an application for a free medication assistance program to help him stay on his medications beyond the three months I was limited to. John cried. I cried. I felt like a Rehabilitation Counselor.

We agreed to start fresh and focus first on the tires, therapy, and medications. Once we had that all sorted out, I agreed we would explore his employment goals and make sure we were setting him up for success. I walked John to the door of my office. He stopped and turned to face me. He held out his hand to shake mine. I shook it, and he pulled me in for a half arm man-hug. I continued to walk him to the lobby making small talk. I felt good about the reset we had accomplished and had hope that our relationship could help him achieve his goals. I wished him well and we agreed to meet again in a couple of weeks. I went home that night feeling better about myself as a professional.

The next morning, I ran into Rebecca in the parking lot on the way into the office.

*“Hey, I saw that angry client in your office again yesterday.”* Rebecca said as I held the door open. *“Did Josh force you to keep his case open?”*

*“No. Not at all. Josh told me I could close his case, and he would support me.”* I explained. *“I just wanted to try something else first. And who knows, maybe it will work.”*

*“Oh yeah. What are you trying that just might work.”* Rebecca chuckled.

*“Well, I got him to agree to get in to see his doctor for a medication check and I got him to agree to seeing Dr. Brown for therapy.”* I said proudly.

*“Big mistake rookie.”* Rebecca interjected. *“All of that kind of stuff is so expensive and drains your caseload budget. It also becomes difficult to get out of, there is no exit plan for getting out of that. It takes way too much time and never gets you closer to getting him on a job he can keep for 90 days. You are going waste so much money and your effort into a case that may never end up getting closed status 26. Never look a gift horse in the mouth, if someone gives you a justifiable reason to close their case do not hesitate.”*

I felt like the organization’s psychosocial culture was sending me mixed messages. The lexicon consisting of the words we routinely used made me feel like Rebecca and the more senior counselors were right in recommending I close John’s case after his angry outburst. I heard a lot of talk about being stewards of taxpayer funds and I heard many words that made me believe part of my job was to avoid throwing taxpayer money at a problem that was not guaranteed to result in a successful 26 closure. On the other hand, the culture’s lexicon continued to use words like individualized, customized, tailored to meet the unique needs of each eligible client. I was also hearing words about rehabilitation, counseling, guidance, disability restoration, and providing necessary VR services regardless of cost or duration of time. I also was hearing the words Josh spoke to me about why the program exists and why my clients need my unique specialized skills. In someways I began to feel like the psychosocial culture had a split personality disorder. It said one thing but did another. Words and actions did not seem congruently aligned.

As I entered my office that morning the light was blinking indicating I had a message waiting on the answering machine. I hit play and placed the phone to my ear.

*“Kyle, its John again. I just left your office a few minutes ago. I want to thank you Kyle. After our first meeting went south, I just knew you were going to close my case and give up on me like everyone else. I wouldn’t have blamed you if you did. Everyone else in my life has given up on me, so I am used to it.”* John paused and sniffed his nose. I heard him take a moment to blow his nose.

*"I don't blame anyone for giving up on me. It's not their fault. I really am a broken terrible person, and I am not easy on people. I know that. I hate that part of me. It is not who I want to be. I just get so fucking depressed and when I get depressed, I am not a mopper. When I get depressed, I get angry. I target all that anger on other people. I don't know what I would do if I aimed that all on myself."*

I could tell he was struggling with tears as he said these words.

*"Kyle, when I left your office after that big blowout, I thought I had ruined my last hope. That is what you were, my last hope. I was so depressed that morning and I really wanted to make you like me, but for some reason I just blew up at you. I was so damn sure you were going to close my case. I uh, I came home and drank every bottle of booze I had left. I put my little dog out in the yard. I could never hurt her; she is so sweet and has loved me no matter what. I put her out because I didn't want her to see me do that. I kept thinking about how traumatic it would be for her to be locked up in the house with me like that. So, I put her out. I loaded my dad's old shotgun, the only thing that son of a bitch ever gave me."* John gave a sad chuckle.

*"For some damn stupid reason, I got stuck in this debate in my head about where to do it. Ain't that stupid? I thought about lyin' there on the couch and doing it. I was worried it might take weeks for anyone to come looking and find me. For some reason I kept thinking that couch was given to me almost new. I thought someone else could use it when I was gone, but not if I did that on it."* Suddenly the message timed out, but there was one more after it.

*"Sorry Kyle got disconnected or something. Anyway, as I was saying I was trying to decide where to do it and my telephone rang. It startled me to be honest. I listened for them to leave a message, but they just hung up. I sat down in my recliner and decided that was as good a place as any. My wife hated that recliner as much as she hates me. Doing it there would remove both from her world. Anyway, I was feeling the booze at that point, and I think I had talked myself into it when the phone rang again. I*

*waited and listened. I heard your voice tell me I had one more chance and I knew there was one person who had not yet given up on me."*

I worked with John for three years until I received a promotion. John continued working with yet another counselor as I was replaced. I will not tell you John did not continue to struggle with his mental health. He continued to go through cycles of good times and tough times, but he learned how to better manage his responses. His medication regimen evened things out for him. John ended up graduating from an electrician apprenticeship program and got a job installing some kind of oilfield instruments for an oil company in the Uintah Basin of Utah. He never reunited with his wife or daughter. But years later I did get a short email from John simply telling me thanks for being willing to be his one last hope.

What harm would I have done to John if I had handled my job as the series of transactional bureaucratic exchanges like my fellow counselors had coached? What if Josh had not taken the time to walk me through my professional decision making and helped me put John at the center of my focus? John transformed his life. He has had a successful career as an electrician in Utah's oil patch. What if I had failed to provide the human relationship, he needed to make that difficult transformation?

John reminds me so much of why I fell in love with you at first sight and why I wanted to be a VRC.

***Disappointment: Sadness or Displeasure Resulting from Nonfulfillment of Hopes***

Today, I sit in my office reviewing an old electronic copy of a staff roster from my first year in professional practice. I survey the familiar names as my memory recalls each face triggering memories both happy and sad. As I sit here today, I am struck by the realization that of the 16 counselors working in that office on my first day, only two remained a year later. I was a senior veteran VRC in the office before I even completed my 1-year probationary period of employment. I was promoted to a Supervising Counselor in the office just as I was finishing my second year of employment. I always took

pride in my meteoric climb up the organizational hierarchy. I always thought it reflected the quality of my work and skills. Today, I realize I may simply have been one of the last ones left.

I worked in the Valley West District office from October 2, 2000, until October 21, 2005. I was a Rehabilitation Counselor for 25 months, a Supervising Counselor for 20 months, and then served as the District Director for 18 months. At that point I was promoted to an administrative position at agency headquarters experiencing consistent promotions over the next 10 years. The pride I have always had looking at my accelerated rise in the organizational hierarchy is tempered today by the realization of how many careers stalled and were abandoned.

I look at another electronic copy of a staff roster and I realize that staff turnover had always been a constant and pervasive problem at the state agency. Looking at staff rosters over the years I see my original colleagues replaced by replacements who got replaced by their replacements in an endless cycle. This endless cycle of turnover was an accepted norm in the psychosocial culture. Professionals did not seem to be valued. They were disposable interchangeable and nonessential parts. Everyone believed results came from the system. Outcomes were produced by the processes and structures. The only time turnover was viewed as a problem was when the system's needs were not being met.

The front-line psychosocial culture defaulted to an attributional theory that turnover was primarily caused by low salaries. Occasionally I heard some voices express concerns over unmanageably high workloads and unreasonable production demands. But these voices were always drowned out in the demand for higher salaries.

The bureaucratic management culture needed other answers because in state government there was limited ability to pay higher salaries and growing the number of full-time government employees to meet workload demands was politically impossible in an environment where program administrators were constantly being asked to "*do more with less.*" And program administrators worked within a state government context that demanded quantitative program performance metrics to justify

funding and program existence. For these reasons, the management culture attributed the turnover problem to hiring the wrong people. For some reason, the agency was hiring people who were incompetent, lazy, lacking professionalism, who were not dedicated.

In my second year, I was invited to participate in a focus group. I remember feeling enormously proud of this because I was told my invitation was the result of Josh recommending me as a high performer. The focus group was facilitated by an organizational management consultation firm contracted by state agency administrators. The consultants were hired to investigate the agency's star performers to identify the characteristics and attributes we had in common. The deliverables from this initiative were an ideal candidate profile and an objective pre-hire examination. The examination provided hiring committees with a numerical score indicating how closely each candidate matched the ideal candidate profile. The resulting process was adopted and used for more than 10 years. The high turnover continued unabated.

As I survey the names of my fellow counselors I am also struck with other painful memories from my early years in the profession. In real-time as these events unfolded one at a time, it was easy to fail to recognize the pattern. Today these individual data elements form a pattern only recognized with hindsight. A consistent pattern emerges from the dark recesses of my professional lived experiences. These patterns haunt me with troubling implications. These patterns make me realize just how much my fellow VRC were failing to thrive in this environment.

In my first year, Josh asked me to go to Mark's apartment to check on him. Mark was a Rehabilitation Counselor who had not shown up to work. Mark and I had been close because the agency had sent us to a new counselor training program for a week at the University of Northern Colorado. Mark was blind, so traveling together was a bonding experience. At the time Mark lacked confidence in his travel skills. Mark and I got to know each other well on that trip, and even through my father had



gone blind later in life, this trip was the first time I got to personally experience a small portion of what it is like to experience a built environment designed only for those with sight.

The day I drove to Mark's apartment to check on him remains an emotional memory. As I walked up the stairs, I could not help noticing his front door was open and his keys were hanging from the doorknob. Because of the neighborhood crime rates and a recent murder a block away, my heart went into my throat. I knew Mark had been victimized several times by muggers targeting him because he was blind, vulnerable, and not a reliable eyewitness. I remember fearing I would walk in on a murder scene.

As I called out Mark's name there was no reply. Wading through his apartment strewn with empty beer cans and stepping over puddles of vomit, I found him in the fetal position on the floor in his bedroom. I remember calling his mother first. I don't know why I called her first. I just thought I would call her and then an ambulance. She asked me not to call the ambulance until she arrived to assess the situation. I did as she requested worrying the whole time. He was unresponsive and I was worried he was going to die before she got there. I don't remember how long I waited, but when his mother arrived, I helped her move Mark to the bed. By then he was beginning to moan, and I could see slow movements of his head. His eyelids seemed to flutter as if he was trying to regain consciousness. His mother asked me to go to a convenience store down the street to get several cups of coffee. She refused to let me call an ambulance and thanked me for helping. I retrieved the coffee and returned to find Mark sitting up slightly in his bed. His mother had put a tee shirt on him. His eyes occasionally opened and then shut, and he began forming a word here and there. I watched as she helped him drink some of the coffee. At this point I was feeling uncomfortable and useless. I was relieved when his mother dismissed me to return to work. She asked me to tell Josh that Mark was just sick with the flu.

When I got back, Josh was waiting in my office. I did not have to lie. Josh intuitively knew what I had found. He did not ask what happened. Josh just wanted me to tell him that Mark was alive. I later

learned Mark had been placed on a performance improvement plan the day before because he was not producing enough 26 closures. Mark was convinced he was going to be fired. He was raised believing his blindness was the punishment of God. Divine retribution to humble a sinful and evil person. For Mark, blindness reflected his own unworthiness and every failure experienced were further reminders of his debased unworthy nature. Years later Mark confided that he attempted to end his own life the night before I found him.

*"I can't even kill myself right."* He told me.

One incident like Mark's is a data point. But as I look at these staff rosters from all those years ago, I see names that form a pattern. Monique was institutionalized several times during her short VRC career. Shawna had an epic in office nervous breakdown when she was convinced she was being monitored through her office computer. Over the years I have checked in on Shawna using social media. After her brief time as a VRC she experienced homelessness, substance abuse, and underemployment. Pat began losing her hair. Eventually we learned that she was dealing with work related stress by pulling her own hair out. Gayle spent six months on the job and then quit because she said the pressure of the job resulted in her relapse into substance abuse. Gary also relapsed after maintaining sobriety for over 20 years. His relapse occurred just one year into his first job as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. Mary was a counselor who attempted to overdose herself over the weekend while in her office. I remember sitting in my office reading an email when Pam came in and told me there was a body in the conference room. The hair still goes up on the back of my neck when I think of that moment. Pam and I found Mary unconscious on the floor of the conference room where she had been for at least the last 48 hours. The paramedics were able to revive her, and Mary would recover from this attempt to end her life. But she resigned a month later and told me that the job was designed to ensure failure. It would take me a few years to understand what she meant by that.

These names represent the few who stayed long enough for me to witness their struggles. Most of the names I see in these early rosters came and went so fast I have no idea how the job may have impacted their lives. I only know they voted with their feet. Widespread profession abandonment is a symptom of a larger issue. Abandonment can be a form of resistance. Professional abandonment can indicate disappointment and nonfulfillment.

Pete was a VRC who came to the job with a traumatic background having survived a truly abusive childhood. Pete and I connected quickly because he had grown up in New Mexico too. Before Pete was a VRC, he struggled with his own challenges and personal demons. I knew the nature of our work might be difficult for Pete the first time I met him. I resisted giving him the welcome aboard, now let's talk about reality speech Kent had given me just a couple of years before. For Pete, the hard part of the job was feeling pressured to manipulate his clients into jobs he knew set them up for failure just to ensure produced his required status 26 closures. He wanted to be a counselor like the one he wished he had had access to in some of the darkest moments of his life. Pete wanted to be able to invest the time to create a real relationship with each client so he could really help them find the place where they could thrive.

Pete became frustrated within months as he realized the way the job was designed, monitored, and measured made all that impossible. Pete's problem was he cared too much and could not ignore the injustices the program's culture was imposing on both staff and consumers. Pete immediately noticed our words and deeds did not match. He was the first person who called my attention to how program-centric the entire psychosocial culture was.

Pete was the second coworker that Josh asked me to perform a wellness check on. Pete had not shown up to work and was not returning phone calls. Because of what had happened with Mark, Josh did not make me go alone. He agreed to meet me at Pete's house. No one answered our repeated knocks on the door. Attempts to make phone contact went unanswered and I could hear his phone

ringing inside the house. I had an eerie feeling. So, did Josh. We cautiously walked around the house apprehensively standing on tip toes to peer in windows for any sign of Pete.

I can't remember if I saw Pete first or if it was Josh. All I remember is how the hairs stood up on the back of my neck as I realized I was looking at a pale naked human body lying on the floor. I remember thinking immediately that Pete was dead. Josh called the police, and we waited on Pete's front lawn. The police arrived and made a forced entry. An officer took Josh and I aside to take our statements on the driveway. The officer took our names and contact information and asked for our identification. At first his questioning made both Josh and I a little defensive because the officer thought Josh and I may have harmed Pete.

Sirens reverberated in the neighborhood as several fire trucks, several police cars, and an ambulance arrived. Pete's neighbors were peering out front windows or staring from front porches. I remember watching the paramedics run into the house carrying big toolboxes. I don't remember how long Josh and I stood there being interrogated by the police. It felt like forever. I remember Josh and I both staring at that front door waiting to see if your friend was dead or alive. Eventually the paramedics emerged with Pete strapped under a blanket on a gurney. He was not conscious, but I remember being relieved that he had not been placed in a body bag. They loaded him in the ambulance and left with sirens blazing.

The police informed us that Pete was still alive, but they doubted he would make it to the hospital. The officer told us everything in the house looked like an attempted suicide. Free from the suspicion of a criminal act, Josh and I were released to return to work under our recognizance.

Pete survived and eventually returned to work. In 2004 I was honored to present him with the Valley West District Office *Counselor of the Year Award*, ironically for having the most status 26 closures that year. I noticed after this incident Pete approached the job differently. He seemed resigned to connecting his clients to vacant jobs. His performance numbers went up and the agency was thrilled.

Years later Pete told me he threw away the award I had given him because his performance numbers did not mean he made a difference in his client's lives. Pete left the agency a couple of years later. He died in January of 2018 at the age of 51.

My memories of Dottie still bring me to tears. Dottie was the third coworker in less than three years that I was asked to perform a wellness check on. In early December of 2003 Josh asked me to meet him at Dottie's house located on the Eastside of Salt Lake City. Josh's voice sounded gravely concerned. He told me Dottie had failed to come to work and was not answering her phone. This had become so Janicel for the two of us. I remember asking Josh what he was thinking. I remember at the time my mind went straight to our experiences with Mark and Pete.

Josh shared that he was worried. He told me that he had been under pressure to address Dottie's poor performance on 26 closures. He told me that the day before he had informed Dottie that she had 90 days to officially file for retirement. The agency was giving her an ultimatum. Officially retire after 27 years of service, or the agency would terminate her for cause resulting in the loss of her retirement benefits.

I remember being surprised to learn that Dottie had failed to meet the successful closure quota. Dottie had stopped manufacturing closures to meet the requirements. Looking back, I wonder if my interactions with Dottie about her having made up Joe's successful closure had made her feel guilty. Whatever the reason, Dottie had decided to just do her job and let the chips fall where they may. That year she only produced 16 status 26 closures, and the agency wanted more. I have often wondered how the quality of the lives of those 16 human beings compared to the lives of the 32 human beings the average counselor closed successfully that year.

I sensed Josh felt personally responsible. Josh cared about every human being he interacted with. It is what made him a great VRC and a good boss. I know Josh was conflicted by the things his job required him to focus on. At the same time Josh and I had become so enculturated in the number

centric culture that we believed our own jobs depended on staff meeting their performance quotas. We had accepted that the only measure of VRC performance was the total number of 26 closures each year. Josh had done his job, but his empathy for Dottie made him feel guilty.

Josh and I found Dottie naked and unconscious sprawled across the floor of her hallway. This experience had become all too familiar, every detail was repeated. I remember calling 911 as Josh forced his way into her house. He was busy trying to revive Dottie on the floor in the hallway as I searched through her mail to give the 911 operator the street address.

When the ambulance arrived, the paramedics did all they could. Dottie died in transit to the hospital. She ended her life by swallowing a bottle of prescription sleeping pills washing them down with an inexpensive bourbon. I asked Josh if I could go home for the rest of the day.

*"I think that would be good for both of us."* Is all Josh said as he got into his silver Mazda Miatta and drove away.

At the time, I sensed Josh was deeply affected by Dottie's suicide. I got the sense that this experience changed him. I don't know for sure, but after this Josh seemed to question the agency's singular focus on the quantity of 26 closures. This was about the time my conversations with Josh shifted to discussions about the quality of our outcomes and how they reflected or did not reflect the program's real purpose. When Josh used the term real purpose my mind flashed to Judith Huemann and Dr. Blaine Petersen. I also remember this is when Josh and I started discussing the need to develop what he called higher level counseling skills in staff. I was not yet clear on what Josh was telling me, but he was planting seeds in my brain that would eventually sprout.

I attended Dottie's funeral. To this day her funeral is the most memorable and impactful funeral I have ever witnessed. It was held in a new age church located in a small strip mall. The church was in the corner of the L-shaped strip mall in between an Indian fast-food restaurant and a shoe store. I remember thinking how much the church setting reflected Dottie. It just seemed right. Dottie was not

about fake fronts or pretense. Her own majestic beauty was found in the heart of the ordinary, mundane, and temporal.

I remember the female reverend was dressed in a purple and white version of the black and white suit traditionally worn by Catholic priests. I remember the reverend had a ring pierced through her nose and I spotted several tattoos on her hands and one on her neck. I remember thinking how different this church experience was from my Mormon childhood.

The reverend said to call her Mother Marge. She lifted a mason jar above her bowed head. She closed her eyes as if in prayer. On the bottom of the jar, I could see a candle with a flickering flame. Mother Marge then spoke directly to the universe on behalf of Dottie's friends now gathered. Mother Marge asked the universe to welcome its reunification with the atoms of stardust that had temporarily given Dottie's life energy form. She then blew out the candle in the jar saying we had now released Dottie's energy back into the universe from which she had originally come.

I was surprised by the turnout. Every seat was occupied. Around the edges of the room dozens stood leaning against the walls. I noticed several people in wheelchairs. I noticed several people who had prosthetic devices or were missing limbs. I noticed several audience members focusing on the sign language interpreter who made the event accessible. It was a small space. I surveyed the room estimating it contained more than 100 people. I remember this alarmed me because every wall of the church had signs clearly stating that Salt Lake City had formally declared the capacity of the room to be 50. I remember thinking this too was apropos for Dottie, willfully violating yet another government regulation on her way out.

Mother Marge announced that Dottie had requested a funeral with no eulogy. She said Dottie had requested that anyone kind enough to come to her funeral be given an opportunity to share from the heart and have the chance to be heard. I remember giggling a little as I realized Dottie's funeral was going to turn into an open mic night. I had been raised not to laugh at funerals, so I repressed the giggle

with guilty self-recrimination. Knowing how irreverent Dottie was, I worried about the stories her friends were about to share. I became even more concerned when Mother Marge informed us that the service would continue until everyone who had something to say was heard. I remember thinking this too reflected Dottie. She wanted the focus to be on human relationships not an arbitrary deadline for a successful funeral outcome.

I will never forget that funeral. At first, I wondered if all of Dottie's friends were comedians. I have never laughed so hard anywhere, let alone at a funeral. One person after another got up and told the funniest, raunchiest, and most enlightening stories about Dottie. It felt like Dottie's energy hung in the room rather than making that return trip to the universe. I remember feeling extremely uncomfortable about some of these stories. I also remember thinking that Dottie had fully embraced living a life on her own terms. It was noticeably clear that Dottie marched to the beat of a different drummer. There were times the audience and I were laughing so hard I began feeling pain in my ribs and got a headache.

Then there was a sudden shift in the mood. An older gentleman in a wheelchair rolled himself to the microphone. He proceeded to tell the story of his car accident and losing his ability to walk. He talked about Dottie being the best VR Counselor he could ever have hoped for. I sat in awe listening to him talk about an intermittent 15-year relationship that he credited with saving his life. He said Dottie gave him hope and made him feel like his life had purpose. I realized he was describing a relationship that restored his sense of control, built his self-confidence, and restored his sense of self-competency. I realized I was hearing the story of a real professional who lived true to the program's real purpose. He then spoke with pride about the career he found because of Dottie's help. I remember he never used the term job. He never said Dottie helped him get a job. I distinctly remember him saying Dottie helped him find his purpose in life.



The flood gates seemed to open as Dottie's former clients stepped or rolled forward to take their turn at the microphone. A former client who was deaf used sign language to tell us how much Dottie meant to her life. Another former client talked about his struggles with severe mental illness and how Dottie became his only lifelong friend. My tears were uncontrollable as one person after another got up to share how their Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor had saved their lives, saved their marriages, helped restore their families, and given them self-confidence to deal with life's many challenges. I remember one former client told the story of how Dottie provided his young children Christmas presents each year for the three years he was receiving VR services. Dottie paid for his children's toys out of her own pocket.

The impact Dottie had on the people in her world was palpable that night. The legacy of her professional life was in these faces. I was overwhelmed by what I heard. I was introduced to a professional who deeply cared about each person and did everything she could to help them achieve real success. I heard stories that made me realize Dottie was patient. Dottie did not look for easy solutions or quick fixes. Dottie had an appropriate sense of urgency based on what her client needed. For some she acted quickly and for others she took the time they needed no matter how long it took. Dottie was transforming lives not transacting services.

Many stories ended with client's achieving some form of occupational success that was meaningful to them. They did not happen immediately, some took decades. Many times, it was the work Dottie had done years earlier that made success possible much later, long after the VR case had been closed unsuccessful. I remember being overwhelmed with emotion as I realized only a few of these amazing vocational success stories ever showed up in the form of quantifiable 26 closures. I learned that night that Dottie produced outcomes of both quantity and quality. The numbers the system was constantly counting did not count the work Dottie did that really counted.

Dottie was never married. She never had children. She had no siblings. The one true love of her life was her profession. She loved VRC because it gave her the ability to help people in ways no other profession could. When Dottie could not generate the only outcomes that counted, she had adopted questionable ways to keep her job. I learned at Dottie's funeral that keeping her job was not a selfish self-interest. Dottie wanted to keep her job so that she could continue doing the work she found so personally meaningful. Somewhere along the way she decided to stop manufacturing the 26 closures that the system counted. When she could no longer generate the numbers, she was informed she could no longer keep the only thing she ever genuinely loved, her profession. The profession that gave her life purpose. Without it she no longer had a reason to live. She left us on her own terms. Her funeral was the catalyst that made me start questioning everything about our professional context.

In Dottie's will she left a surprisingly significant financial estate to her one true love. She bequeathed her earthly possessions to the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors working in the Valley West District Office on the date her will was executed. The money was to be divided equally. By the time the executor of the will issued checks only two VRC remained who personally knew Dottie. But Dottie's generous heart resulted in 15 counselors receiving an inheritance. For 13 newly hired VRC this inheritance came from a stranger they had never even met.

To this day this remains the only financial inheritance I have ever received in my life. I have been the benefactor of several valuable nonmonetary inheritances. But the only one that came in the form of a check was the one I got from Dottie. I used that money to do something completely frivolous and irresponsible because I think Dottie would have wanted it that way.

In time I would realize attending her funeral was a more valuable and lasting inheritance. Her death became a turning point in my own professional career. At Dottie's funeral I fell back in love with my profession, and I began to resent what the PVR program psychosocial cultural milieu was doing to it. I began to resent what it was doing to those we were supposed to be serving.

***Discouragement: Loss of Confidence, Enthusiasm, and Sense of Dispiritedness***

I had been a part of my profession less than three years when the temptations to leave started to become enticing. I remember being tempted to apply for a job as a disability examiner at the Division of Disability Determination Services (DDS). DDS processed and adjudicated Social Security Administration disability benefit claims. I remember reaching out to the state Human Resources office about laterally transferring into a vacant examiner position.

*“Why would you want to do that?” the HR director challenged me. “You know that job is just bureaucratic paper pushing. It is just a never-ending treadmill assembly line of mindless forms and processes. You do know those jobs have a minimum monthly standard of claim clearances and accuracy ratings?”*

He could not understand why a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor would want that kind of job. What he did not know; what he could not have known was the job he just described could have been the job description of the agency’s VRC positions. He did not know this because he only saw the official VRC position descriptions and recruitment announcement language that made the job sound quite different. On paper the agency described the VRC job consistent with VRC as a profession. Reality was very different. I decided not to move that direction because it did not sound like an attractive improvement.

It seemed to me at the time that the deeper our recruitment and retention crisis went the more the bureaucracy struggled to meet its own needs. It became more difficult to meet performance measures, and the loss of knowledgeable, trained, and skilled professionals resulted in audit findings, and regulatory noncompliance. In theory, a knowledgeable, trained, and skilled professional staff can be entrusted and empowered to use their professional judgement. The constant turnover and professional disengagement resulted in a deepening bureaucratic mistrust of all staff. The transactional exchange thinking of bureaucratic management sought to maximize systemic control to enforce performance.

More rules, policies, procedures, and control systems were put in place. More forms, checklists, and managerial monitoring were introduced. Professional autonomy, discretion, and ability to act were further eroded. Feeling threatened from every direction the bureaucratic system became the center of organizational gravity. Like a black hole that pulls all matter and light into it. The machinery of the bureaucracy increasingly consumed everything. When meeting the needs of the bureaucracy becomes the center of organizational gravity, the organizational prime directive, the enculturated existential purpose becomes organizational survival.

In transactional bureaucratic management thinking people are the source of the system's problems. If people cause our problems the only solution is to minimize the influence of people on the efficient operation of the system. Every crisis is perceived as people having too much autonomy. Every solution was implementing a more structured bureaucratic control system that limited the ability of humans to fail the system. The psychosocial organizational culture was obsessed with creating more bureaucracy, more rules, more policies, more hierarchy, more management oversight, more standardized uniform structure, and more accountability. The psychosocial culture valued enforcing obedience, compliance, uniformity, standardization, and the production of measurable performance outcomes. The psychosocial culture prioritized limiting, restraining, constraining, and centralizing decision-making authority. Our organizational psychosocial culture was preoccupied with meeting the agency's needs.

We still used words that sounded like our original real purpose. But the psychosocial cultural lexicon was filled with doublespeak. Our shared language deliberately disguised our intentions because every word became a euphemism with little connection to the words true meaning. We still had plaques in our office lobbies engraved with our mission and vision statements. We still used value laden language and terms consistent with the philosophical foundations of the program and the profession. But everything we thought, said, did, and everything we prioritized was centered on the bureaucracy's

self-preservation. Our existential prime directive was to continue existing. To continue existing, the agency needed to continue being funded by Congress and the state legislature. To continue being funded, the agency needed quantifiable data showing that the program results in jobs, jobs, and jobs. Closing people in jobs was the only justification for the program's continued existence.

I noticed clients frequently referred to me or one of my colleagues as their *"worker"* or *"case worker."* I always had a visceral negative reaction to these labels. I remember subtly correcting them by asking what their concerns were with how their Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor was providing services. These labels became an irritant to me, hearing us referred to as workers or case workers was like hearing fingernails scratching a chalk board. This was not just how program consumers referred to us. I heard it from everyone. I heard it from program partners, service providers, and other professionals. I frequently heard various alternative labels used to refer to VRCs in the state legislature as well. Our professional brand identity, brand recognition, and brand appreciation was so obscure that I developed an elevator speech early in my career to have ready anytime someone asked what I did for a living.

*"What the heck is a Rehabilitation Counselor?"* I always got asked no matter with whom I was speaking. *"Is that like helping people get off drugs? Or do you work at the prison?"*

It really irked me that my profession seemed invisible, marginalized, segregated, ignored, and devalued. I could not help but feel this was somehow a reflection of how people with disabilities have been treated in society. When someone tells me they are a teacher, I may ask what grade or subject, but I know what a teacher is. When someone says they are a psychologist, therapist, or mental health counselor most people know what those professional brands mean. As I entered my profession, I discovered few people in the public know it exists. The few who do usually misunderstand what the profession does. This professional brand identity lack of awareness is so evident that I frequently hear fellow professionals say VRC is the best kept secret. At first this angered me. My profession needed to

elevate our brand recognition and appreciation. But then I realized there was no internal professional consensus on who we were. It seemed no two VRCs could agree on what the profession stands for.

There is no unified sense of our professional brand identity.

Because of the recruitment and retention crisis professionally qualified VRC have never achieved a majority position among practicing professionals. The profession has never controlled entry or use of the professional title. Many of my peers did not consider themselves VRCs. That was just their job title. Professionally they identified as social workers, mental health counselors, special educators, or simply career state employees who happen to be working as VRCs. Many could just as easily be working at the Department of Motor Vehicles. In fact, some had. One VRC who shared the office next to mine had previously worked for the highway patrol as a dispatcher. He had a bachelor's degree in physical education. Another colleague who used the title of my profession as a job title came to the agency after working at the department of transportation. Her college degree was in business management. We all had the same title, the same job duties, the same performance standards, and made the same annual salary. We all had the same level of authority and had to apply the same policies and procedures. My graduate degree in VRC and national certification as a CRC meant nothing in this work environment. All of us were case management technicians. I learned that my own professional identity as a VRC was a rarity not just at my agency, but in other PVR agencies around the country. Excessive turnover and difficulty recruiting into the profession forced PVR programs to hire from outside the profession.

My professional identity started to form in my graduate program. My professional identity matured as I entered practice. It became deeply entrenched through my participation in my profession's membership organizations. Few of my peers had similar identity development experiences. A job title can be easily traded and exchanged for another job title. For me, a professional vocation was much harder to exchange because I became deeply rooted to the profession.

After Dr. Eldridge invited me to lunch and helped me get elected the Utah Rehabilitation Association (URA) President-Elect, I went on to serve out the three-year term concurrently with my first three years as a new employee at the state agency. During my first term I realized URA was not a functioning or thriving organization. I learned there were only 12 paying members statewide. All 12 members had served multiple teams on the organization's board and in officer roles. For years, this core group had tried various strategies to grow membership, but membership continued to decline, and burned-out board members and officers made it difficult to conduct business. During my President-Elect year I was responsible for planning the annual statewide membership conference. I remember my disappointment when only 6 people attended.

The year I became URA President was my first year on my first professional job at the state agency. I remember a long term URA board member informed me that she could no longer serve in a leadership role. She asked if she could drop some URA stuff off at my office. After lunch one day I returned to my office to find six document boxes stacked on my desk. As I opened the boxes one by one and looked at the historical treasure trove, I saw photographic evidence of a one thriving URA where annual conferences were held in large ballrooms filled with 200 to 300 people. I wondered what had happened and why my fellow professionals no longer valued being part of a larger professional community focused on meeting professional needs for support, belonging, competency development, and professional advocacy. Looking through the photographs and documents I also wondered why the agency and URA had become estranged because the evidence I saw indicated the two entities were once very integrated.

As a probationary employee I was nervous when I requested a meeting with the Executive Director. He warmly welcomed me into his large conner office at the State Board of Education building. I noticed things got less warm and friendly when I asked him what had happened that resulted in URA shrinking and the agency no longer being such a big driver of membership. He informed me that in the

1990's URA's parent organization the National Rehabilitation Association (NRA) had grown so large that it was evenly split between public VR professionals and private VR professionals. He explained during Congressional discussions prior to the reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act in 1998 there were calls from stakeholders to privatize the public VR program. He explained that NRA was unable to advocate for the preservation of the public VR program because half the membership worked in private VR and would potentially benefit from privatization. He told me that the state VR agency directors stopped supporting NRA membership and formed the American RehabACTion Network (ARAN). I was told the state chapter of ARAN was the Utah RehabACTion Network (URAN) and that the agency supported staff to be active members of URAN not URA.

I had several take aways from this meeting. First, ARAN/URAN focused exclusively on advocating for the preservation and advancement of the public VR program, not the VRC profession. While ARAN/URAN looked, smelled, and acted like professional membership organizations in truth they functioned primarily as the public VR program's public policy advocacy platform. It was created to meet the program's needs not the needs of the larger profession or of people with disabilities. Second, I perceived that my own membership and involvement in NRA/URA had the potential to negatively affect my career prospects. Third, I became introduced to deep internal divisions within my profession. I became aware that practice setting took precedence in the professional identity of my colleagues. What I had erroneously thought was a unified profession with multiple practice settings was in fact multiple factions of professional identities that were primarily entrenched by practice setting identities. Finally, I came away with the impression that exposure of public practice Rehabilitation Counselors to private practice Rehabilitation Counselors was problematic for the PVR program because it took their focus away from jobs, jobs, and more jobs.



*“The agency wants counselors with a lower-case c. A counselor in name only.”* Kent told me when I sought his insight on my meeting. *“They don’t want upper-case C counselors because they are afraid the number of 26 closures would go down.”*

How could I expect program consumers, partners, and other collaborating professionals to appreciate and value my professional identity if my own profession suffered from identity confusion? How could I expect to be empowered and unleashed to thrive as a professional Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor trapped in an organizational culture that wants case manager job generators?

At new employee orientation the agency’s staff Trainer drilled into our heads that the agency was about jobs, jobs, and jobs. She told us we were not therapists, and that the agency did not hire us to perform a significant amount of counseling. The entire new employee training program was consumed teaching policy, procedures, process, and caseload management. We learned how to comply with federal and state regulations and how to use the case management system. We learned how to process a case progressively efficiently and effectively to each program milestone. We learned how to use the appropriate forms. This training prepared all new employees to complete the transactional exchanges that were the essential functions of the job. Our clear prime directive was meeting the needs of the agency.

Every year the state agency’s only quality assurance activity was called the Case File Review. At the time this was the primary organizational continuous improvement strategy. This activity started each year with administrators revising the multipage Case File Review Instrument. The instrument was designed to measure how case file documentation demonstrated Rehabilitation Counselor compliance with state, federal, and agency level policy, procedures, processes, rules, and justification standards. Typically, each year the instrument was revised in response to audit findings, regulatory changes, or to address emerging issues. For clarity, the instrument did not ask any questions about the quality of the client’s experience or how well their needs were met. It was simply a documentation compliance

document. The instrument was focused on assuring that the bureaucracy's needs were being met and documented accordingly.

Next, all direct supervisors and a select team of reviewers received three days of intensive training on how to use the instrument to review case file documentation. This training primarily focused on teaching reviews where to look and what counts as appropriate documentation of each compliance element. Then, over a weeklong period each summer a large team consisting of selected reviewer and supervisors gathered in to conduct the annual case file review. Two case files were randomly pulled from every caseload in the state. Every case file was reviewed independently by two reviewers. Reviewers then met to achieve a single consensus on each question. Data was compiled, analyzed, and a written report was generated. The report was used to create an annual mandatory Rehabilitation Counselor training. The report was also used to revise or add to existing policy and procedures. And the report was used by supervisors in individual performance management and performance accountability.

I primarily mention this because this entire process is how we defined quality assurance. Yet the quality being assessed was not the quality of services received by the consumer. It did not assess the quality of consumer outcomes. Rather it was the quality of documentation that met the bureaucratic needs of the program. As an organizational culture it seemed that we did not distinguish or appreciate that meeting the needs of the program does not equate with meeting the needs of each client.

Employee position descriptions, annual performance evaluations, and the agency's annual staff awards ceremony all aligned with rewarding employees who consistently met the needs of the bureaucracy. Again, the cultural lexicon used the flowery doublespeak language filled with euphemisms.

I began to realize that the organizational culture never openly acknowledged that sometimes meeting the individualized needs of a client is in direct conflict with meeting the immediate gratification of the system's needs. If employees are compelled to prioritize meeting the systems needs for 26 closures this federal year, how can we be assured we are meeting the needs of a client who requires

multiple services over several years to achieve sustainable vocational success? In hindsight I realize the organizational culture assumed the bureaucratic systems needs were synonymous with client's needs. Intuitively we knew this was not really the case, but our shared delusion helped us sleep at night.

I was tempted many times to leave. The job was not as intrinsically rewarding as I had anticipated, and I found the extrinsic rewards like compensation packages and employer recognition continued to decrease in value as I became further removed from the profession I had fallen in love with. I struggled with motivation, and several times I went through periods of apathy where I found myself accepting what was and going through the motions. Sometimes I found myself doing things my younger self never would have considered. Sometimes I took the path of least resistance because of the potential for an easy, quick, and inexpensive status 26 closure. Sometimes, this easy path was the one my client wanted. Trying to help them explore other options would have been a more difficult course and may have become adversarial. It always helped me feel better about supporting their chosen path when the path they chose met my own needs for a successful closure. But I know there were many times I was doing them a disservice by remaining silent about the reasons I thought their choice was unsustainable or set them up for failure in the long-term. I remember telling myself that they can always reapply, and we would give it another shot. I just needed them to keep this job for 90 days.

I often wonder how I overcame the temptation to leave my beloved profession. My peers who had graduate degrees in mental health counseling, social work, special education, and other disciplines who saw PVR as a job were not attached to the profession. They left and returned to their own disciplines easily disconnecting from VR. My graduate degree and my emotional connections made abandoning my beloved profession unthinkable. I was deeply frustrated and dissatisfied about how incongruent my sense of professional identity was with the reality of professional practice in the PVR program. I have often thought it should be easier to retain employees who come to VR with no

preconceived idealistic expectations. I often thought I would be happier and less frustrated if I could view it as just a job.

Until today, I have always believed that somehow, I found a reason to stay. The central assumption of this doctoral dissertation was based on the premise that I thought the reasons that I was retained in the profession may provide insight that could reduce turnover. But crafting this autoethnography has been disconcerting.

I am only just realizing I did not stay after all. I can't tell you the reasons I was retained in my beloved profession. The truth is I remained married to it, and we continued to live in the same house, but my professional identity shifted without me realizing it. I abandoned my beloved profession by becoming an administrator.

***Habituation: Accommodation, Settlement, Compromise, Or Adapted Arrangement***

I had deluded myself. I convinced myself that I remained faithful to our relationship. At some level I convinced myself that I stayed for the good of people with disabilities and my fellow VRCs. I still believed in what we had the potential of being together. I believed that if I could move up the bureaucratic hierarchy, I could gain the influence needed to effect change, speak truth to power, and try to become the voice Judith Heumann urged me to be.

My thinking had become so bureaucratically transactional that I assumed all our problems and stressors were caused by people. Administrators who were too distanced from the day-to-day work forgot what it takes to be VRCs. I had no illusions of grandeur. I was not seeking to overthrow the bureaucracy. How could I? I had been enculturated to believe that bureaucracy was the answer to all our problems. I so was convinced of the efficacy of bureaucracy that I learned how to use its thinking and deploy its tools. At that time all I wanted to do was use bureaucratic management tools to rebalance the bureaucratic machine. Perceiving people to be the cause of our problems rather the only solution to our problems generated the only solution transactional thinking can identify. Create more

structure to remove problematic people from the system. In this case I thought the people who needed to be restrained by the system were bureaucratic administrators. I was thinking bureaucratic checks and balances on those trying to control everything and everyone.

In October of 2002, I was promoted to the role of Supervising Counselor. At first this new role felt a little more manageable. While I had retained the caseload I had managed as a Rehabilitation Counselor serving 238 clients, the agency expectation was that Supervising Counselors would have smaller caseloads. Theoretically my caseload size would slowly diminish over time. Lower caseload expectations for supervisors also came with lower status 26 closure quotas. With the size of my caseload, I did not have to worry about meeting lower supervisor performance standards. I could see hope. I also enjoyed being exposed to the incredible work of other Rehabilitation Counselors. I realize today that I felt very isolated on the island of my own caseload and my own practice challenges. The Supervising Counselor role provided me with my first exposure to the challenges and successes of other counselors on other caseloads.

The team I was assigned to supervise consisted of five counselors at various stages of their career. At the more experienced end of the spectrum was Kent, the 10 plus year veteran who had welcomed me on my first day in the office three years before. I knew Kent's education, professionalism, and his employment history. What I did not know was that Kent had been labeled by the agency administration as a performance issue. As Josh briefed me on my new team, he explained that Kent was perceived as only doing the bare minimum required. Kent consistently produced the minimum required 26 closure numbers, but never exceeded them. Kent was judged as being a casefile documentation disaster. Josh told me that Kent just did not prioritize casefile documentation. Specifically, Josh was concerned that Kent always had compliance findings during case file reviews. Kent also had the smallest caseload in the office with just 174 clients, yet he constantly asked to be taken off the new referral list citing being overwhelmed. It was clear my charge was to get Kent to produce more status 26 closures

and focus more on case file documentation. I also needed Kent to grow his caseload to be on par with the other caseloads in the office. Josh offered that Kent's clients did not seem dissatisfied because they never complained. It was clear the only complaints Josh was getting about Kent were from the agency.

Heidi was a veteran Rehabilitation Counselor who served on the deaf and hard of hearing specialty caseload. She had been on the job for over eight years. She had a master's degree in Rehabilitation Counseling and had recently earned the CRC credential. Heidi was deeply emersed in the local deaf community. She was considered an expert on providing services to the deaf and hard of hearing population. As a result, her caseload had become excessively high with 285 clients. Josh had shared his concerns that Heidi struggled to meet her performance numbers. He said the last Supervising Counselor had been hesitant to deal with her work performance issues because Joy's clients loved her and constantly bombarded the agency with letters thanking her for what she had done for them. It was clear that as her new supervisor my charge from administration was to help her increase her production of status 26 closures. Heidi, like Kent consistently met the minimum quota of 28 status 26 closures. The concern at the administrative office was based on comparison. The other specialty deaf and hard of hearing caseloads in the agency consistently averaged over 60 successful closures per year. It was made clear to me that the system expected higher numbers from this type of caseload. It was clear what my charge was. I needed to help Heidi produce more 26 closures. A lot more.

At the lower end of the experience spectrum were two newly hired probationary counselors. Tammy had an undergraduate degree in psychology. A large amount of my time was focused on onboarding, intensively training, and helping Tammy develop her ability to do the basic parts of the job. At the time, Tammy was also required to get accepted into a master's degree program that would make her eligible to sit for the CRCC examination. That was required to successfully complete her first year of probationary employment. To keep her job, she had to complete the master's degree and

become eligible to sit for the CRCC examination within five years of hire. She had a lot on her plate because she took over a long vacant caseload that currently had 217 clients.

Jennifer was my other new hire. She already had a master's degree in social work but had never worked in a VR setting. My focus with her was helping her appreciate the difference between social work therapy and Rehabilitation Counseling. Her social worker training convinced her that none of her 241 clients were stable enough to engage in employment. Jennifer was overwhelmed by the number of issues she felt she had to remedy before she could even think about employment. At first, I found myself preaching the agency's gospel of jobs, jobs, and more jobs. That did not feel right to me. Eventually I worked to convince her of the philosophical frameworks of Rehabilitation Counseling viewing engagement in personally meaningful work as therapeutic in and of itself. Personally meaningful work would give her clients a sense of self-control, competency, and social connection that when combined with medications or therapy would more quickly result in the stabilization she sought. I emphasized stabilization was an outcome of meaningful employment rather than a prerequisite of employment. Regardless, she needed to produce status 26 closures.

It only took 19 months in the Supervising Counselor position for me to realize I was on the path to burn out. It was not the supervising that caused me stress. I enjoyed supervision, and at the time, within the context of the organizational culture I was succeeding. Kent's caseload was well over 200 clients, and he was finally using the agency's templates to ensure compliance with casefile documentation. Kent still was averaging about 30 status 26 closures per year, but it was an improvement from the 28 he previously produced. Tammey was producing and developing. Jennifer was also beginning to get her feet under her and was producing successful closures.

I was less successful with Heidi. My pushing her to produce more outcomes turned our relationship adversarial. Her resistance came in the form of continuing to produce 26 closures at a minimal rate. Several times on weekends as I drove past the office, I noticed Heidi was in the office

working. I became concerned because she was not reporting these hours as work time and I was concerned about worker compensation issues and other liabilities should something happen to her in the office on what should have been a day off. I consulted with Josh who consulted with administration and the human resources office. I was instructed to give Heidi a formalized written memorandum directing her to cease and desist from working uncompensated hours on evenings and weekends. She could work evenings and weekends only if they were preapproved hours that were accounted for on her timesheet. She was not allowed to work overtime, so any evening and weekend hours would require adjusting her regular weekday schedule to remain at 40 hours.

I remember Heidi was professional but irate during this conversation. She told me directly that she would never produce the performance measures comparable to other deaf and hard of hearing caseloads. She told me that she believed the things the counselors on those caseloads did to achieve those numbers was unethical, unprofessional, and morally repugnant. She told me her caseload was the size that it was because many of the clients on her caseload had formerly been successfully closed by one of the other counselors in jobs that set them up for failure because their disability had not been addressed. Joy also told me that she worked nights and weekends because that was the only way she could meet the agency's strict casefile documentation standards. Heidi told me that as a professional she needed her 40-hour work week to be prioritized and dedicated to client relationship building working directly with her clients. She believed that was what really helped them achieve long-term sustainable vocational success. She said the complicated and demanding paperwork requirements were not possible if she was not allowed to work evenings and weekends when there were no interruptions. Heidi told me she had put in hundreds of uncompensated hours working late into the night and on both Saturday and Sunday each weekend for years. She said it was the only way she could do the job the way she believed it needed to be done while also meeting the needs of the agency's performance standards.



In short, Heidi told me I was setting her up to fail. At the time this stunned me. It would take me a few more years to discover she was not completely wrong.

*“You and the agency blame and tell me I am accountable for my performance.”* I remember Heidi saying looking past me out the window over my shoulder. *“But I have zero control. I am not empowered to make any decisions. I have no authority to do anything without getting permission first. I am told exactly what to do. I am told exactly how to do it. I am told exactly when to do it. Yet I am the one who is punished when what I am told to do doesn’t work. Why did I get a master’s degree to do this? Can you tell me that?”*

These words stung and hit a nerve. But it was not my adversarial supervisory relationship with Heidi that made me realize I was heading toward complete burnout. It was managing my caseload.

Managing a caseload was increasingly making me feel like a hypocrite. As a supervisor I was pushing my team to produce status 26 closures in bulk while enforcing strict casefile documentation and caseload management standards. I was also parroting the culturally normed euphemistic language of customized, individualized, and client centered services leading to meaningful employment outcomes while simultaneously using the mantra jobs, jobs, and more jobs. As a VRC I was becoming increasingly aware that the job was designed to be completely unmanageable. Heidi had expressed that she was being set up to fail, and I was feeling that way too. I was failing to perform the part of my job that I was responsible for holding my team accountable for failing at. I internalized rather than externalized my failures as a VRC. I was feeling like an incompetent fraud. My professional self-confidence was diminishing. I could not continue having one foot in agency management and one foot in a VRC caseload. One more promotion was all I needed to get off a caseload.

My abandonment of my profession did not show up in agency turnover numbers. In April 2004 I was promoted to replace Josh as the Valley West District Director. Josh had been transferred to another district office that was experiencing chaos, instability, and performance issues. Prior to this, I remember

having always thought that for some reason the Valley West District was an unusual outlier of chaos and disfunction because of what I had experienced over the last three years. I remember being surprised when Josh told me about the same patterns of dysfunction in the other districts. I remember chuckling when Josh informed me that the agency administration had determined that he had successfully stabilized Valley West. Josh said he was glad he was leaving it in my capable hands.

I loved being the District Director. I was no longer managing a caseload and no longer felt the stress and pressure to generate status 26 closures and perfect casefile documentation. Having the stress of hypocrisy removed I found it easier to do my job ensuring the needs of the agency were met by my staff. I felt a stress about being responsible for making sure the district performed. But that stress seemed lighter. Failure to perform would only be blamed on me if it persisted long enough for the blame to migrate from the counselor to the supervisor and then to me. But that was not the only reason I loved this job.

I loved being District Director because I had more autonomy to make decisions. I used my autonomy to make small local changes that had a positive impact on the staff and clients. I did not have the authority or influence to change the agency's oppressively controlling bureaucratic organizational culture. But I was able to create and foster a microclimate or subculture specifically located in my district that was a little more humane, collegial, and psychologically safer. My management team and I worked to create a kind of localized counterculture designed to increase staff autonomy to increase their sense of control. We delegated and empowered the use of professional discretion wherever possible. While we could not control what was imposed from outside the district, we made sure we did not create unnecessary district level barriers to staff success.

Over the 18 months I was in that role I had the opportunity of helping to design a brand-new office and relocate the staff from a worn down unprofessional looking building into fresh new offices more reflective of professionalism. The change in office décor and mood changed how my team viewed

themselves. I was surprised by how much it changed our relationships with our clients. Moving from an office that felt like a stereotypical government welfare office to an office that could have been mistaken for a law office had surprisingly positive effects. The mood of the office changed. Anger, aggression, and hostility declined seemingly overnight. People acted differently. The district's revolving door of frequent staff turnover slowed dramatically.

Looking back on staff rosters from those 18 months I realize it was the first time the staff was relatively stable. As I look at the names from that period, I see people like Aaron who has enjoyed a successful and lengthy professional career. Since 2015 Aaron has been the director of a state PVR agency. I see Tammy who would go on to have a long and successful career. Tammy has served as the deputy administrator of a large state VR agency in the Southwest. I see other names like Faye, Albert, John, Barbara, Maria, Mike, and Beverly. All enjoyed long professional careers. I know the team I inherited from Josh was not the team he had inherited. Josh deserves a great deal of credit for creating the conditions that I was enjoying as a District Director. But I also think the change in office environment and our nurturing of a localized subculture more aligned with professionalism helped staff develop confidence, competency, and restored a little professional autonomy.

I learned that when people have a sense of control over how they do their work, I did not have to hold them accountable because they already held themselves responsible. Over the years, many have shared that they felt a sense of belonging and connection at that time.

***Dehumanization: Objectification, Apathy, Denial of Inherent Humanity.***

In October 2005 I was promoted to the role of Field Service Director. This required me to leave the Valley West District Office. It was the only office I had worked in as a professional. I was apprehensive about leaving the safe familiarity of my professional cocoon. My new job was located at the administrative headquarters. I now directly supervised four District Directors across the state. My

first day in this new role sent me a message about how habituated we had all become in the transactional exchanged focused psychosocial cultural milieu.

*"I am sorry but the only people who can help you are out of town in a meeting."* Elaine said into the telephone at the front desk of the administrative office as I walked in the door to begin moving into my new office. *"I just answer the phones, I can't help you."*

Elaine looked very agitated, and I heard multiple other phone lines ringing. The phone was light up like a Christmas tree with blinking red lights indicating many lines were placed on hold. Elaine looked up and her eyes seemed to plead for me to help her.

*"Can you please hold, someone just walked in who might be able to help you."* She said as she pressed the hold button. *"I have no idea what is going on, but I have been getting calls from the press demanding I give them a comment on some protest taking place today."*

*"Did you refer them to Mark?"* I asked referring to the State Office of Education's official press liaison and public affairs officer. We had been trained never to talk to the press. We had been told to direct all press inquiries to Mark.

*"I tried. Mark is on vacation for two weeks, the person covering for him is not in the office and all these reporters want to talk to someone now. They don't want to leave a message for Mark or his assistant."* Elaine explained. *"Everyone here is out of town. They are all at the Statewide Administrators Meeting in Moab. No one is responding to my emails or cell phone attempts. Help me please!"*

*"Can you start forwarding the calls to me one at a time?"* I asked apprehensively. *"I will go sit at Don's desk so forward them there."* I still had no idea where my new office was. This was the first time I got to sit at the desk of the Director of the Division of Rehabilitation Services. Based on what happened next, I was sure I would never sit at that desk or in that office ever again.

*"This is Kyle, how can I help you?"*

*“Kyle, this is Tonya Papanikolas with KSL news.”* A familiar female voice said. I frequently watched KSL Television Channel 5 News every morning before heading to work. Tonya Papanikolas was an investigative reporter who Linda had often teased me about having a crush on because she noticed I paid more attention to her stories than other reporters. *“Kyle, can you spell your first and last name for the record.”*

I gave her my full name for whatever record was being created. I also answered questions about my job title, how long I had worked for the agency, what my responsibilities were. Eventually she asked the question I was anticipating from what Elaine had said about wanting a comment on a protest of some type.

*“Mr. Walker, I want to give the agency the opportunity to make a comment about the protest scheduled this morning at 10 o'clock at the Valley West District Office in Taylorsville?”*

My heart seemed to stop. What did she just say? Did she say protest at the Valley West District Office? The office I was still technically the District Director of? My mind raced.

*“I am sorry, did you say protest at the Valley West District Office?”*

*“Yes. We were notified by the Disability Rights Action Committee that there will be a protest at 10 o'clock at the state office in Taylorsville.”* Tonya told me.

*“I am sorry, I don't know anything about this.”* I began. Tonya immediately supplied details.

*“The press release claims that state does not care about people with disabilities and puts already vulnerable people at risk.”* She read from a DRAC press release. *“DRAC claims a client by the name of Ed Smith has been waiting for emergency dental care for over eight months even though his caseworker was notified in writing that this situation was urgent because it was causing serious health problems that are life-threatening. What does your agency have to say about this situation?”*

*“I. Um. I cannot comment on any specific case without a written release of information signed by the individual involved due to strict confidentiality requirements.”* I stuttered bureaucratically.

*"I get that. But doesn't your agency exist to meet the needs of people with disabilities?"*

*"Yes. Yes, we do." I confirmed.*

*"In fact, your website says the mission is to assist people with disabilities to achieve employment and independence." Tonya reminded me. "The website also lists several services your agency may be able to assist with. Dental services are specifically listed."*

*"Yes. We can provide any service that is determined to be individually necessary to prepare for, obtain, maintain, and retain gainful employment." I repeated the words of our organizational culture.*

*"So, I know you can't comment on Ed's case. But let me just ask you in general, why would it take your agency nearly eight months to provide a dental service that you knew was life threatening?" Tonya interrogated sternly.*

*"Well, I. Um. The thing is I don't know the specifics of this case and I want to investigate what happened. I can't image these accusations are completely accurate. There is always another side to the story." I babbled. I paused and took a deep breath. I slowed down and found my inner government administrator.*

*"If these assertions are true, this kind of delay in service is unacceptable. We are committed to serving the needs of our clients in a timely and efficient manner. We are deeply concerned with what is being brought to our attention this morning. We are committed to work collaboratively with DRAC and people with disabilities to determine the facts and take appropriate actions to ensure our agency is meeting its purpose in a timely and responsible way."*

*"Why would a service like this take eight months to get approved?" She pressed.*

*"Well. Agency policy and federal regulations requires the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor working in collaboration with the eligible individual to determine the individualized rehabilitation needs that are required, necessary, and essential to achieving the client's vocational goal." I said efficiently reciting the words of my culture verbatim. "We do have processes and procedures that must be*

*completed to do our due diligence to ensure we are providing services that are necessary, appropriate, and at the least possible cost. Sometimes that can take some time. But it should not take eight months."*

*"So, if something is determined to be life-threatening the process and rules still have to be followed exactly?"* Tonya asked.

*"Well, ah. There is a process that must be followed to get approval."* I replied. *"But we should be working to expedite it if there is a life-threatening situation. But keep in mind we must first determine it is necessary for the client to achieve their vocational goal. We are not a health insurance agency, everything we do has to be necessary for getting a job."*

I instantly regretted saying those last two sentences. As they left my mouth, I desperately wished they were attached to a string that I could have reached out and pulled back out of the phone.

*"In your professional opinion, as a CRC, is being alive necessary, required, and essential to prepare for, obtain, or maintain gainful employment?"* Tonya followed up.

After I fumbled my way off the call with KSL, Elaine forwarded the call from the Salt Lake Tribune. I sat at Don's desk taking calls from KUTV Channel 2 News, KTVX Channel 4 News, the Ogden Standard Examiner, the Provo Daily Herald, and Channel 13 Fox News. Having learned a hard lesson with Tonya Papanikolas I came up with a new strategy. All I said to all these other reporters was: *"We are committed to meeting the needs of people with disabilities, we are investigating this situation. If we have failed to live up to our own high standards, we will learn from it and take appropriate action to make sure it does not happen again."*

I looked at the clock on Don's wall. The DRAC protest was scheduled at 10 o'clock. It was now 9:15. I ran past Elaine and told her I was heading to the Valley West District Office. I got in my car and headed to the freeway to make the drive to Taylorsville. My mind was racing. I thought I could get to the office before the protesters and find out what was going on with Ed Smith's case. I thought maybe I

could get the situation resolved before the protest. I naïvely thought that if I could resolve the issue the protest would be unnecessary and DRAC would simply call it off.

When I got to the Valley West District Office, the office I was responsible for and still had personal belongings in, I noticed an unusually substantial number of cars and vans parked in the parking lot. I had to park on the street. As I got out the hair went up on the back of my neck when I noticed every van and car was filled with people sitting and waiting. The protesters were already here waiting for the clock to strike 10.

I ran inside and went right to the office of Ed Smith's assigned Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. I had hired Andy just nine months earlier directly out of his master's degree program at Utah State University. While he was young and inexperienced, I liked the passion Andy expressed during his job interview. He reminded me of my own passionate professional idealism, so I offered him the job. Andy only worked for the agency for six months following this DRAC protest. He ended up deciding that practicing as a VRC was impossible. Instead, he earned his Ph.D. so he could become a professor teaching VR Counseling. Today, he is a tenured full professor at a prominent university in the South. But back then he was a brand new VRC facing his former District Director who was now an administrator wanting answers because hundreds of protesters were waiting in the parking lot.

The answers Andy gave me were troubling. They were troubling because Andy had done the best he could do based on what he was allowed to do. From the perspective of the system, Andy had done nothing wrong. From the perspective of the system, he had followed instructions as efficiently and expeditiously as possible. From the perspective of the system, the program's needs were being prioritized and met. From the perspective of Ed, the client Andy was trying to serve as best he could, Andy was completely useless.

Andy knew, and I knew that in our psychosocial culture the system and its structured processes were never responsible nor accountable. Andy knew, and I knew that our psychosocial cultural



attributional default blamed problems on the VRC. Andy knew, and I knew that there would be demands made to hold Andy accountable. Andy knew, and I knew that he would be blamed for something he had absolutely no control over.

Andy told me that eight months prior Ed had told him that he needed to see a dentist. Ed had a serious infection that was keeping him up at night and preventing from eating anything but liquids. I learned Ed had told Andy that he had lost 35 pounds because he was not getting the nutrition he needed. A medical doctor Ed saw at a free walk-in clinic was worried that Ed was already unhealthily underweight. Andy was only 22 days into his new professional career when Ed told him these things. Andy had consulted immediately with Brenda his Supervising Counselor. Brenda had walked Andy thorough the agency policy and procedures for seeking dental service approvals. At the time, agency dental service approval policy and procedures required the VRC to complete the steps of two complicated sequential processes.

The initial dental service assessment process was designed to ensure that the agency documented doing its due diligence to justify service provision. The first step required the VRC to work with the client to obtain dental examinations from at least three different dentists. This required the client to identify and make appointments with three different dentists and notify the VRC prior to the appointment date to ensure the VRC issued an authorization for all three dental examination fees. The second step required all three dentists to submit what the policy referred to as a "*Cadillac Treatment Plan*" and a "*Yugo Treatment Plan*." All three dentists were required to include all dental x-ray images. Examination fees were not to be paid until the VRC received these required documents. The third step in the process happened when the VRC obtained all three dentist's treatment plans. The VRC was required to write a case service memorandum seeking approval to submit the treatment plans to the agency dental consultant for review and recommendation. When the VRC received approval to submit the treatment plans to the agency dental consultant, the fourth step in the process required the VRC to

create, print, and sign an authorization to the dental consultant to cover the cost of the dental consultation fee. In the fifth step the VRC placed the treatment plans, x-rays, consultation approval memorandum, and consultation fee authorization in a manilla envelope. In the sixth step this envelope was sent through interoffice mail to the attention of the assigned Field Service Director. In the seventh step the assigned Field Service Director reviewed the packet and electronic casefile to ensure agency policy and procedure had been followed. This gatekeeping function consistently resulted in packets being returned because of a missing form or to answer questions. In the eighth step the Field Service Director determined the packet was ready to be bundled and delivered to the dental consultant. Dr. Packer operated a busy private dental practice in Salt Lake City and provided dental consultation to the agency in his spare time. The ninth step of the process required the dental consultant to review all treatment plan proposals and all diagnostic images. This process sometimes required Dr. Packer to call the VRC for clarifications. The tenth step of the process required Dr. Packer to write a dental consultation report expressing his professional opinion on what treatment was necessary, appropriate, and provided at the least possible cost. These reports were added to the packets which were bundled for eventual agency administrator pick up. The eleventh step in the process required the assigned Field Service Director to mail the packets back out to the VRC. The twelfth step required the VRC to review the dental consultation recommendations and decide on a course of action. If in the professional judgement of the VRC the dental service was determined to be necessary and appropriate, if the dental consultant concurs with this determination, and if the VRC decides to advocate for the client by seeking approval of a dental service treatment plan, a secondary process was triggered.

The secondary process triggered at the completion of the initial process was designed to centralize decision making. The first step of the approval request process required the VRC to write a Case Service Request Memorandum detailing the background history of the client, the vocational goal, and details on all other services provided under an Individualized Plan for Employment or IPE. The VRC

was required to narratively tell the story of the evaluation and dental consultation process. The VRC was then required to summarize the specific services and costs that the VRC was recommending based on the dental consultation. The second step of the approval request process required the VRC to bundle this case service request memorandum with all the documents obtained in the initial process and submit it to their Supervising Counselor. The third step required the Supervising Counselor to review the request and all supporting documentation. If the supervisor had questions or concerns, they were appended to the request and returned to the VRC for clarification. If the Supervising Counselor supported the VRC request for approval, this was appended to the request memorandum and the bundle of documents were delivered to the District Director. The fourth step in the approval request process required the District Director to review all the documentation. If questions arose, they were appended to the documentation and returned to the VRC for clarification. If the District Director supported the request, and if the total costs of the procedure were under \$1,500, the District Director had the authority to approve the service. However, a fifth step was necessary if the service cost exceeded \$1,500. In this step the documents were bundled and delivered to the Field Service Director at the administrative office who reviewed the request and documentation. Once clarifications were obtained, the Field Service Director could approve services costing less than \$3,000. Services exceeding \$3,000 required additional similar steps. The next step required passing through the Case Service Director authorized to approve dental services costing less than \$5,000. A last step required Division Director approval for dental services exceeding \$5,001.

When the VRC received formal written approval from the appropriate administrative authority, the service provision process was initiated. First, the VRC called the client to notify them of the approval and schedule an appointment to add the service to the client's IPE. Once the service was added to the IPE, the VRC and client had to sign it. Next, the VRC created, printed, and signed a service authorization promising payment for services performed by a dentist selected by the client. Then, the VRC had the

client fill out and sign three dental service consent and release forms for the casefile. At this point, the client called to schedule an appointment with the dentist.

Andy and I reviewed Ed's casefile. Reviewing it both relieved me and shook me to my core. At every step of these complicated processes, the steps within the control of Andy were acted on immediately, with urgency, and without delay. In fact, as I looked at the chronology of the last eight months, I was relatively relieved to see that Andy, Brenda, and even myself as the District Director had acted on a timely basis when the ball was in our court. The documentation clearly showed that Andy and Brenda had approached Ed's situation with an appropriate sense of urgency. I was relieved by this for selfish reasons. I knew the questions, finger pointing, and demands for accountability that would happen after today's protest hit the evening news. At that moment, my biggest concern was that our office, no, my office had done something wrong. At the time I was not thinking about Ed at all.

Review of the file shook me to my core because the entire process put Ed's life and Andy's professional career in the hands of too many other people consumed by transactional exchange-based thinking that favored being methodical, rational, logical, and objectively impartial. The people Ed and Andy were dependent upon were emotionally detached from a process that rendered Ed a dehumanized bundle of documents.

It took two months to get Ed three separate dental appointments for the initial evaluations. It took Andy over a month to get all three dentists to submit the required treatment plans and x-rays. Andy finally had to send Ed to a fourth dentist because of the first three refused to submit a "Yugo Treatment Plan" citing professional disgust at the term and the implication that he was not an honest professional. It took two months to receive the dental consultant recommendation. The cost of the service required Field Service Director approval. At the time, the organizational psychosocial culture feared administrators turning the approval process into a perfunctory rubber stamp. Field Service Directors had been enculturated to frequently return requests to VRCs seeking clarification or requiring

additional information. The stated purpose of practice was to create a paper trail demonstrating to auditors that those with approval authority took their authority seriously and were not rubber stamp approvers. In Ed's and Andy's case the request had been returned by the Field Service Director three times for minor questions or to correct typos.

I learned that on that morning, as DRAC sat in the parking lot preparing to protest, Ed's and Andy's service request was sitting in a pile of similar requests on the desk of a new Field Service Director scheduled to start his new job that very morning. I made an executive decision, and rubber stamped the approval on the spot. All I had to do now was walk out to the parking lot and have Andy introduce me to Ed. I planned to explain to Ed that the service is in fact approved and if he would just come inside Andy could wrap up the paperwork so Ed could get into the dentist. In my mind, this was all going to be much ado about nothing. I figured DRAC would be so happy that Ed was going to see a dentist, that they would just call off the protest and go home. I had time to get this all cleared up before any press showed up. I believed I may just be able to save my job after all. Surely my efforts to head off the DRAC protest would make the bosses forgive me for what I said to KSL's Tonya Papanikolas.

Andy and I walked out to the parking lot to find ourselves in the middle of chaos. The press had shown up in droves. Television cameras were set up in a row with all four local news channels present. Several newspaper reporters and photographers stood at one side. Andy pointed Ed out to me, and I walked to the van he was sitting in. I knocked on the window hoping to talk to Ed. The window did not roll down and Ed stared straight in front of him impassively ignoring me. I knocked again. Nothing.

*"Can I help you?"* A tall middle-aged man asked as he walked toward me having gotten out of one of the other vans filled with people.

*"No, I don't think so. I was just trying to talk to this gentleman for a moment."* I motioned toward Ed.

*"Oh, I am sure you will get a chance to talk to that gentleman real soon."* The man said with a malevolent grin. *"But that gentleman will not talk to you until after our protest."*

*"Well, I think there has been a misunderstanding and if I can just talk to him, I don't think there is any need for a protest."* I replied.

*"Oh, there is a need for this protest."* The man said stepping closer to me. He reached in his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He retrieved a business card and handed it to me. *"My name is Jerry. I am the Executive Director of the Disability Rights Advocacy Committee. Our entire membership is here today to call attention to the injustice your agency does to people with disabilities because of the state's incompetence."*

I was frozen like a deer in headlights. I became aware that this entire interaction was being recorded by four television cameras. Dozens of hands seemed to be thrust in my face, all contained a small tape recorder. I heard camera shutters clicking and knew my picture was being taken.

At 10 o'clock on that bright crisp October day nearly 100 people with disabilities blocked the entrance to the Valley West District Office. There were people using wheelchairs. There were people using white canes. There were people with service dogs. There were people using American Sign Language. And all of them were holding signs declaring that the lives of people with disabilities mattered. They chanted and gave speeches about how we had failed to live up to our purpose of helping people with disabilities. The press remained. I became aware that Tonya Papanikolas and KSL had gone to a live shot of the protest.

*"We are here this morning to give people with disabilities a voice."* Jerry said into a microphone, his words amplified by two speakers that had been set up for the protest. *"This government bureaucracy set up to help people with disabilities, fails people with disabilities in every way."*

Jerry was looking directly into my eyes as he said these words. It felt very personal and for some reason I was feeling vilified. I was also getting angry. In my mind my beloved profession was being

sullied unfairly. Discrimination, dehumanization, exclusion, segregation, subjugation, inequality, inequity, and mistreatment of people with disabilities, the very things that had attracted me to my profession, were being projected onto me and my beloved profession.

*“Yes, we are here to give voice to the thousands of people with disabilities failed by the state every year who are silenced by state government.”* Jerry continued. He then pointed directly at me. *“And that man tried to silence all of us this morning. He tried to make sure no one knows what goes on inside offices like this one where the needs of people with disabilities are ignored. Well, that man did not silence us.”*

The protesters cheered loudly and broke out into song.

*“...we will overcome, someday.”* Almost a hundred voices sang as every one of them looked directly at me. I wanted to cry but there were too many television news cameras trained on my twitching face. I silently walked back inside the safety of the office as the protest continued.

Eventually the protest ended. Ed came in and met with Andy. He left with an authorization to get his dental work done. Andy had also worked with Ed’s dentist to get an appointment that very day.

Tonya Papanikolas and her camera operator asked me if I was willing to sit down for an interview. This was against agency policy, and I was aware of it. The truth is, I was convinced that I had already lost my job. I knew I was going to be fired over my involvement in this circus. At the time I questioned why I had involved myself at all. This was not my responsibility, I could have wished Elaine good luck with all those press phone calls and just gone to my new office to begin getting settled. This was Mark’s job. This was the job of the Executive Director. Why did I throw away my job like this?

I invited the KSL eyewitness news team to join me in the conference room. Tonya was kind. I remember how odd it felt when she offered me a bottle of water. I was sitting in my conference room next to my office where my mini refrigerator was full of my own supply of bottled water. In this interview Tonya did not ask a single question about Ed, DRAC, or the protest that had just wrapped up.

She asked questions about our program. She asked about my profession. She asked about how people with disabilities are treated in our society. She asked about what employers could do to make employment accessible to people with disabilities. In the end the nature and tone of her questions seemed to put me back on my feet and recentered me in my passion for VRC.

I was nervous during the interview. As they wrapped up and put the camera away, I asked Tonya how bad my interview had gone. She reached over and patted me on my knee.

*"You did great."* She winked as she patted my knee. *"You were cute."*

To this day I remind Linda that Tonya Papanikolas once told me I was cute while patting me on the knee.

*"Yeah, well she does not know you that well."* Linda always responds.

I did not get fired over the DRAC protest. But I was a Field Service Director for less than nine months. During those nine months I learned that the trauma, chaos, and tragedies I had experienced at the Valley West District Office were not isolated incidents. VRC failure to thrive was pervasively systemic. I became more aware of how the overly controlling transactional psychosocial cultural bureaucracy contributed to VRC failure to thrive. I now found myself in a key position of influence. I had the ability to either maintain or challenge that culture. Unfortunately, I had become comfortable with the status quo. I had moved up and succeeded in that culture. But my experience with the DRAC protest made me aware that our psychosocial cultural context was not supporting our staff or our consumers.

One district I was responsible for was located in the southern part of the state. Over my nine months as a Field Service Director, I would personally attend six staff funerals in that district. Some of these losses were the result of auto accidents or natural health related causes. But two were not. Those two losses of colleagues were eerily reminiscent of what I had experienced with Mark, Pete, and Dottie at Valley West. I had similar experiences with the other districts I was responsible for as well. Different, but similar circumstances that made me wonder if this was normal, to be expected in this field.



I remember that in the Field Service Director role I was responsible for helping develop policies, procedures, and generating case service memorandums containing staff directives. At the time I did these job tasks from the same thinking and problem-solving skills I had been enculturated to employ. The tools of externalized control systems and bureaucratic structures that limited professional control, autonomy, discretion, and authority. All our focus was on meeting the needs of the agency for uniformity, standardization, consistency, order, predictability, and risk avoidance. We valued staff who responded with obedience, compliance, and subservience while generating large numbers of 26 closures. My boss had put me in charge of allocating each counselor's caseload budget. In the past this had been done based on a formula that considered the caseload size and historical spending trends. I recall being proud of creating a new formula that allocated funds based only on the size of the caseload and the number of successful 26 closures from the previous year. I remember the administrative team felt we had unintentionally incentivized overspending by allocating budgets based on historical spending trends. I remember getting praise from my boss for creating an allocation formula that made it clear to counselors that if they wanted more money to spend on client services, they needed to keep their caseload sizes high and generate as many 26 closures as possible. In this job I also found myself being the one from administration who called a District Director to apply pressure to act on staff performance issues. I dealt with many performance problems like inappropriate or unethical behavior. But those problems usually came from the bottom up, having first been identified at the district level and then being brought to my attention by the District Director. The only focus of the performance issues that I brought to the attention of a District Director was a failure to produce 26 closures.

In June of 2006, I was promoted again. I was appointed to serve as the Director of Administrative Services. I held this position for just over three years. In this role I was responsible for managing a team that included the physical facilities and leased office coordinator, information

technology coordinator and IT unit, human resource development and training coordinator, and the quality assurance and performance management officer.

Much of my job was writing and getting the annual state plan approved by the U.S. Department of Education, conducting triennial statewide assessments of rehabilitation needs, monitoring the consumer satisfaction survey process, and serving as a liaison with other state and local government agencies. This job also gave me the opportunity to engage in public policy activities supporting the agency. I spent a lot of time at the state capitol building and in Washington D.C. meeting with Utah's congressional delegation. Utah Senator Orrin Hatch appointed me to his advisory council for people with disabilities. My personal profile was elevated in this position. I received committee and taskforce appointments from three Utah Governors; Governor Olene Walker, Governor Jon Huntsman Jr., and Governor Gary Herbert. In this role I learned that state and federal government culture was highly transactional and bureaucratic. Everyone from politicians to taxpayers wanted quantifiable outcome numbers.

I have very fond memories of this job because I became close to my counterpart John who was the Director of Support Services. The first time I met John I thought he looked like a younger version of Gene Wilder. I always wanted to put a top hat on him just to see how much he resembled Willy Wonka. To me, John seemed to share that unmistakable human kindness and acceptance that I always saw in Gene Wilder's eyes. John was responsible for managing the agency's vocational evaluation unit, the Center for Assistive Technology, the Benefits and Work Incentive Consultation Program, and was responsible for providing oversight to the nine regional independent living centers that received their federal and state funds through our agency.

John had a profound impact on my professional, ethical, and moral development. He continues to be a dear friend and mentor. John provided a spark that overtime reignited my passion for my profession. That spark, ironically, came not from his own love for vocational rehabilitation. In fact, I got

the sense that he looked at what the VR program had become and despised it. John's true love seemed to be the independent living movement. John's burning flame of devotion to the independent living movement inspired me. But it made me realize he loved independent living for the same reasons I originally fell in love with VRC. John made me aware that independent living had remained congruently aligned to its existential purpose. My experiences of the PVR program made me jealous.

In July 2013 I was asked to take over the role of Director of Case Services. Traditionally this role had been viewed as a coveted center of influence, power, and control. Over my 9-year career I had known only three Directors of Case Services. The first was Jack, widely perceived as a gruff, no nonsense, and tough Irish American administrator. In our cultural mythology everyone seemed to have a story of what had become widely known as a "Jack Attack." These tales usually involved the victim of the Jack Attack having made some error, mistake, or inadvertent slip of the tongue resulting in a verbal dressing down. I have no doubts these tales grew in the telling. But I also vividly remember my own Jack Attack. The man had a temper and was willing to use it to get your attention.

As I got to know Jack, the public image was only a partially accurate reflection of who he really was. I suspect he fostered the image because he believed it made it easier for him to exert control. I wonder if he feared that showing staff empathy and caring would make people take advantage of him. I remember sensing that a great deal of the stress and tension built into the organizational culture was centered on Jack. I remember the day he retired the air in the office felt less heavy and a little less foreboding. I always wondered how things might have been if he had felt confident to bring his authentic self to work.

Richard served in the role for a brief time. Richard had promoted me to the Field Services Director position and was my boss at the time of the DRAC protest. Richard was the antithesis of Jack. He was more reserved, quiet, thoughtful, and far less authoritatively demanding. I sensed a self-confidence and humility that made him calm, trusting, and curious. I remember how much the tone and

mood changed in agency meetings. Under Jack few braved to vocalize their thoughts. Few dared ask questions. Suddenly under Richard meetings became more conversational. Voices once silent began adding thoughts and offering suggestions.

Karen was the Director of Case Services during the three years I was the Director of Administrative Services. My office sat directly between John's office on one side and Karen's office on the other. Karen was a rational and logical systems thinker. She is one of the most skilled administrative managers I have ever met. I think her significant career success at the agency is attributable to her well-developed bureaucratic management skills. She was highly effective in that environment and organizational culture. I valued her skills. My own strengths have been big picture visions, creative innovative ideation, and inspirational leadership that appeals to the human heart. I struggle when it comes to getting bogged down by details. I hate having to tell people step-by-step how to do their job. I prefer to tell them what we were trying to accomplish then, inspire and trust them to do it. Karen's greatest talent was her innate ability to visualize the details and create step-by-step instructions. Her detailed orientation and organizational ability made her particularly effective in propagating policies, procedures, systems, and processes. I was also impressed that she genuinely wanted to make sure the staff had what they needed to perform. She genuinely believed what staff needed to perform were more policy, procedures, and processes.

As I moved into the role of Director of Case Services I remember feeling out of my depth. I knew that I did not possess the same strengths that Karen possessed, and those are the strengths that the psychosocial organizational culture seemed to value and need. I also knew I was nothing like Jack. I did not have the 28 years of VR experience Richard brought to the job. While I had been with the agency for over 10 years, I had only 3-years of experience managing a caseload. I had left that behind because I knew I was on a path to failure. Now I would be the primary administrator of the state's entire VR program. It was my responsibility to make sure VRCs performed. I was feeling like the personification of

the Peter Principle. In my own mind I kept failing by falling upward. I was worried this time the job was too big. I was scared that my failure in this job could be epic.

I asked John for advice. Should I try to do the job like Jack? Should I adopt Richard's approach? Do I need to work on getting more competence in the skills Karen used so effectively?

*"I say you should try doing the job as Kyle."* Is all John said as he walked by me in the hall.

I followed him to his office. I was not going to let him off the hook that easy. He had become my professional guru, and I needed his wise and sage advice. I was feeling the weight of the PVR program on my shoulders. This seemed like such a big job. My failure would affect more people than just me. I would be administering the appropriate use of a large annual budget of federal and state taxpayer dollars. I was responsible for the support and performance of over 300 employees statewide. I was responsible for creating and enforcing policy, procedures, and internal control systems. I would be able to influence the tone of the psychosocial cultural climate. I knew Kyle was not capable of doing that job.

*"John, I seriously need your advice."* I said as I entered his office. *"How do you think I should approach this job?"*

*"I told you. Do it the way only Kyle can do it."* John repeated. *"Only the authentic you can do what that job needs done. It is not about what you are doing or how you are doing it. I think the most important thing about that job is who you are being. None of our staff are there to see the tasks you are doing. But every day the staff are watching the kind of human you are being. Those are the cues that inform how the humans they are being with clients."* He paused letting that marinate in my consciousness.

Every damn time I walked in John's office I felt like a Buddhist monk who made a treacherous and arduous climb up a mountain to sit at the feet of a wise sage in search of clarity and wisdom. And every damn time guru John spoke in riddles or parables. Every time it would take me weeks or months of intense thinking before I became enlightened by his words. I did not have the luxury of time. I was

starting the job the following Monday. I needed to achieve clarity, wisdom, and enlightenment by Monday.

*"You look confused."* John said putting down the legal pad he had been writing on.

*"Not confused."* I said pointing at my face with a circling index finger. *"This is panic."*

*"My mother always had these little sayings she repeated to me growing up."* John tripped verbally over the word mother, she had passed away a few months before and he was clearly still struggling with his emotions. He paused. *"My mom always said, John, remember who you are and what you stand for."*

*"That was my mom's favorite thing to tell me too."* I said with a smile.

*"I think that is the best advice I can give you about doing that job. Kyle, remember who you are and what you stand for."* John paused again for effect. *"You and I have talked enough that I know why you chose to become a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. When you talk about VR it is clear you found your passion. Your passion is palpable and contagious. I also know you believe in people. You trust them and you want to see them succeed. You know success requires them to feel empowered and capable. You don't assume they are all lazy, incompetent, or stupid. And you know there is no way to truly control anyone else but yourself."*

As John said these words, I worried that I had shared too much with him over the years.

*"It is your humble humanity and optimism that can be your greatest strength in that job. I say remember who you are, what you stand for, why you care so much, and hold on to those values that assumes the best in people and tries to create the conditions that brings out their best, because that is who you are and what you stand for."* John finished.

*"Thanks John, that helps. I just hope I am ready for this."*

*"You will never be ready for anything in life. You just have to trust and go."* John said. *"When I decided to move away from home and take a job in this faraway place called Utah, I told my mom how*

*scared I was. I spent my entire life in the upper Midwest surrounded by family. Here I was a fresh college graduate from Wisconsin taking a job in Salt Lake City where I would be alone. Man, I really wanted mom to tell me to stay close to home. I wanted her to give me permission to stay in my comfort zone."*

*"What did she say?" I asked.*

*"Bloom where you are planted." John's eyes twinkled and moistened.*

*"Bloom where you are planted?"*

John smiled.

*"She was telling me to be brave and embrace the discomfort necessary to find the place where I could bloom. She knew my career options were limited at home. She also knew that my greatest potential could only be realized somewhere else." John took a breath. "She was giving me permission to go out into the world and find out who I was. She was telling me to be brave and trust that there was something inside me that would blossom in the right environment. Wherever I ended up being planted, mom was assuring me that I had it in me to bloom. It gave me the courage to take a risk. I can't imagine what my life would have been like had I stayed on the farm. My career has given me a sense of purpose. I met Shell and my two boys here. I ski, hike, bike, and mountain climb. I have met incredible people who have changed my life."*

*"Wow, I like that. Bloom where you are planted."*

*"Kyle, you are hereby being planted in the Director of Case Services pot." John said using his radio announcer voice while gesturing that he was transferring me from one pot to another. "Give yourself time and grace. Everything will work out if you be your authentic self." John told me he had to run to a meeting across town. I went back to my office.*

I had come a long way in my relationship with my beloved profession. In hindsight, I had failed to recognize how estranged I had become from the real you and the real me. John had advised me to bring my authentic self to my new job. At the time I thought I knew who I was. I thought I knew who you

were. The DRAC protest and my professional experiences collided with my new job as Case Service Director. In that collision, I remembered who I wanted to be and who you were always supposed to be. I remembered why we exist in the first place.

***Incongruence: State Of Being Incompatible, Contradictory, Antithetical, Or Misaligned***

It only took a couple of months in my new role before my hidden unconscious thoughts burst into my conscious awareness. Several things all seemed to happen at once filling me with a sense of incongruence. These things pointed me in a new direction that would transform my thinking, allow me to reclaim myself, and reignited my passion for you.

At the time I was supervised by the Director of the Division of Rehabilitation Services, Russ. Russ had been the Field Service Director who had first hired me as a VRC. He had been responsible for managing the Valley West District Office. Russ had actively mentored and groomed me over the course of my career advancement. Back in 2001, Russ asked me to serve on a multistate agency taskforce designed to help improve interagency cooperation, collaboration, and ensure quality state government services were accessible to people with disabilities. Working with Russ on this taskforce afforded me multiple opportunities that would prove invaluable. None were as valuable as traveling the state listening to Russ. I absorbed his thinking and his emotional connection to our profession. Immediately I knew Russ was different from many of the other administrators. It was clear his own passion for our profession came from a place that Judith Heumann would have called our real purpose.

My career path shadowed his career path in many ways. We had both served as the Valley West District Director. We both served in the same Field Service Director position. I succeeded Russ as the Administrative Services Director. I replaced Russ when I became the Director of the Division of Rehabilitation Services when Russ was appointed Executive Director.

I knew Russ had already been wrestling with the disconnect between what the agency was created to do and what we had become. He and I had frequently talked about the disconnect in the



culture. I knew Russ had been thinking about this incongruence far longer than I had. When Russ was the Administrative Services Director he created the first internal leadership development program. This bimonthly training series had been his passion project for several years and had grown out of his own feelings of organizational incongruence.

To fully understand the eventual impact of this leadership training program, I need to explain the agency approach prior to Russ' initiative. I had been a beneficiary of this former development process, and my career trajectory was a product of this approach. The process was congruent with the organizational psychosocial culture of putting the needs of the bureaucratic system first. It is important to understand that in the lexicon of the existing psychosocial organizational culture the words management, administration, supervision, and leadership were interchangeable undifferentiated synonyms. All these words ultimately equated to management command and control. All these words described job titles positioned on the organizational hierarchy with the authority for controlling, governing, directing, administering, monitoring, correcting, deciding, and supervising employees enforcing job performance by holding staff accountable for results. Leadership was only management, and management was the default center of everything.

The previous management leadership development process started with the identification of people the administrators believed had the potential to become management leaders. Everything started with performance in the form of 26 closure productivity and casefile documentation compliance. While other characteristics were important, these were paramount. It gave new people like me an advantage. The job of a VRC had become unmanageable over a sustained period. VRCs simply could not consistently meet the performance standards year after year. The longer a VRC managed a caseload, the more likely it was that they developed cyclical patterns of satisfactory performance years followed by mediocre or even unacceptable performance years. The administrative psychosocial culture had a long memory when it came to perceived performance inconsistencies. The longer a VRC managed a caseload

the more historical performance baggage had to be overcome to be viewed as a viable candidate for promotion. The agency only invested in management leader preparation and development for VRC judged by administration to be viable candidates for promotion.

I was identified as a future leader before I had finished my first probationary year of employment. Josh and Russ both advocated for my potential. In my second year I was informed the agency was paying for me to attend a 3-semester long Certified Public Manager (CPM) training program provided by the state. I learned in this program how to manage governmental bureaucratic organizations competently and efficiently. My peers primarily identified as a sort of professional government bureaucrat. They worked in state agencies as diverse as corrections, transportation, education, health, human services, and in social welfare programs. The curriculum was centered on scientific management principles. Just like the cultural lexicon of my agency, the CPM program used the words management, administration, supervision, and leadership synonymously. Management was leadership, and management control was the center of the universe. The transactional bureaucratic management skills I learned to apply were ideally suited to the transactional bureaucratically managed psychosocial culture. I learned how to solve the problems caused by people by creating command and control structures such as policies, rules, processes, procedures, systems, and decisional authority hierarchies. I learned how to monitor and enforce staff obedience, compliance, conformity, uniformity, standardization, and consistency. I also learned the crucial importance of holding people accountable for producing quantitative outcomes efficiently and effectively. I remember at the time feeling that the curriculum gave me the skills to manage the bureaucratic system. Nothing in the curriculum provided tools to manage the human beings who operated the system. In fact, the human beings were just part of the bureaucratic machine I was responsible for operating.

The next step in the previous process was attending Emerging Leaders training at the University of Washington. Over the course of the next year, I traveled three times to spend a week in Seattle

Washington learning VR leadership skills. I remember this course was quite different than the CPM course. I was learning skills for building teams and facilitating teamwork and collaboration. We learned critical thinking skills that forced us to learn how to look at problems differently to identify opportunities for solutions we had never thought about before. I went through this program with peers from VR agencies in Montana, Colorado, Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming. It was a new set of skills and an exhilarating experience that made me realize all the state VR agencies seemed to have organizational cultures that were remarkably similar. I was surprised to learn so many PVR agencies cultures were only slight variations on a common theme. I learned that the things I was becoming uncomfortable with at my own agency were common in others. The leadership skills I was learning gave me hope because they were human-centered rather than system-centered. Unfortunately, these leadership skills were not as applicable as CPM management skills within the organizational psychosocial culture.

Once a viable management candidate completed these two training programs, applying for promotional opportunities was highly encouraged. This was the extent of the former manager-leader development process. Once promotions began to stack on promotions there was no further refinement or enhancement of these skills. And as the organizational psychosocial culture gravitationally pulled every thought and action toward system-centered transactional bureaucratic management masquerading as leadership. True human-centered transformational leadership relationships and skills were unused and atrophied.

Russ changed all that when he implemented his bi-monthly leadership development training. First, everyone in a management role was required to participate. Senior level career managers participated sitting next to first time direct supervisors. This fostered developing a culture of continuous personal growth and skill development at all levels of the hierarchy. Second, the focus of the trainings were intentionally human-centered leadership relationship skills rather than program management

skills. The organizational psychosocial cultural change this program ended up creating did not happen overnight. It took a long time. It required Russ to be persistently patient for several years as he consistently fought to keep this training in front of the organization's management team. It also required several changes in senior leadership before the things Russ was attempting to do took root. It took even longer for it to begin growing. Eventually it flourished and was difficult to contain.

Originally, I was only a participant observer. I still did not know what Russ was trying to accomplish. I did not see his broader vision. Looking back now I am not completely convinced that Russ knew exactly what he was trying to accomplish. I may be wrong on this. He had a vague concept of what he wanted to do. I just don't think it was fully envisioned to have the impact it eventually had.

In hindsight I see these years of Russ' leadership development training as a concurrent pair of didactic dialogues. I perceive one dialogue was Russ engaging in an internalized private debate in a public setting. In some ways it was like watching someone debate themselves as they talk with other people. The second didactic dialogue that occurred in these leadership development training sessions was a conversation Russ stimulated between the team members. The agency's human beings began deliberating with the organization's default psychosocial culture.

This leadership development training was the catalyst that surfaced so many of the incongruencies and antithetical cultural practices that I had repressed in my unconscious to successfully assimilate to the default paradigm. It began to shift my own thinking. I began asking questions that had always been cultural taboos. I also noticed it began to shift other's thinking. I also remember how this process seemed to align with all those philosophical conversations about developing higher-level counselor skills I had with Josh. It was in this leadership training that many of us realized just how far we had drifted away from the program's real purpose. How we had abandoned our foundational philosophies and values.

Momentum was gradually gaining, but again it did not happen overnight. I can't help but acknowledge that it took several retirements before the organization was able to launch into a new direction. The leaders who retired had long been the center of organizational thinking for so long. They had established themselves as unquestionable authorities. The force of their personalities subordinated all others in the organization. They were the ones who created and maintained the default organizational psychosocial cultural milieu. If they remained as the keepers of cultural dogma no major change was possible. Russ had been anticipating and preparing for these eventual retirements. Unlike what others may have done by waiting until the coast was clear post retirements, Russ began preparing to take advantage of the eventual ideological vacuum.

At the time these key retirements occurred, Russ had started training on the concepts found in Kouzes and Posner's (2006) *The Leadership Challenge*. This book presented leadership as a set of relationship behaviors conceptualized as a five-pointed star. I vividly remember the looks on other faces in the room when Russ began training on modeling the way. I remember the room was quiet and people sat politely and listened. I noticed eye contact being made with subtle smirks or eye rolls. Russ started talking about our shared values we use as behavioral benchmarks to inform our actions.

*"Does our agency have values?"* A timid voice asked. *"Is that in the policy manual?"*

*"Values would have been in a case service memorandum not policy."* Another opined.

*"What do you mean by values?"* A voice called out.

*"Like ethical values? Moral values? What are we talking about here?"*

*"Everyone has their own values. We can't expect people to agree on values."*

*"Is there an official list?"*

*"Why do we need a shared set of values?"* Another voice challenged. *"What does that have to do with making sure people are doing their job right and getting their numbers?"*

*“Yeah, we can’t be all touchy feely and trying to find out what values we all share. Honestly, I don’t think we share any.”*

I remember Russ stood at the front of the room and remained silent letting this dialogue continue. I also remember thinking that the comments being made were problematic and emblematic of the organizational culture. But I also failed to understand why this conversation was troubling.

Russ walked to a white board at the front of the room and took a dry erase marker in his hand. He turned to the group and listened.

*“Every organization has a common shared set of values.”* Russ said when the group became quiet. *“Our values can be unintentional and operating at an unconscious level. They get enculturated without our awareness and are taken for granted as the way things are done. These kinds of values are like an organizational autopilot. Our shared unexamined and unconscious assumptions and values control our behavior, but we never stop to ask if they are serving us well.”*

*“What do you mean our values control our behavior?”*

*“I value getting a paycheck, I behave by doing my job”* A voice interjected.

*“I think values are important, they are like the things we hold most dear.”* A female voice called out. *“For example, I value people over process. That deeply held value helps me decide how to act when I am forced to choose between focusing on the person in front of me or focusing on the process I am supposed to be doing. The person comes first for me. Always.”*

*“That is exactly why Kouzes and Posner argue that every organization needs to really examine the unconscious default values to find out if they serve the mission. If they don’t help us achieve the mission, we need to have an open and inclusive discussion about what shared set of values or principles should be the touchstones informing our thinking and actions.”*

Russ walked closer to the white board. He wrote down the words employment and independence. These two words were on the agency’s official logo and seal. They were words every

single one of us had used and said for years. Employment and independence were deeply enculturated memes.

*“Are those our shared values?”* Russ asked.

Some voices confirmed these were indeed our shared values.

Russ waited.

*“No, I don’t think those are values.”* A new Supervising Counselor finally offered after a long silence. *“I think those are our goals. We exist to help people achieve employment and independence. Values should be guiding principles that say how we act to achieve those goals.”*

*“Please elaborate.”*

*“Well, I don’t know. Isn’t a value more like respect?”*

*“Or trust.”* Another voice added.

*“Trust and respect are not values”* A veteran administrator interrupted. *“Trust and respect are things that must be earned. They are not values because you said values inform how we think and act. I think and act very differently with people who have earned my trust.”*

*“I disagree.”* Another Supervising Counselor said from the back of the room. *“Trust and respect should be a given, not something that must be earned. A human being should always be treated with respect no matter what. And trust should be our default setting.”*

On the white board Russ wrote the words individualized, customized, informed choice, and unique primary employment factors. He then wrote the words vocational, rehabilitation, counseling, and guidance.

*“Are those our shared values?”* he asked.

People were quiet. There was a long uncomfortable silence.

*“Let’s do this instead.”* Russ shifted strategy. *“What do you think our real values are right now? What are our default autopilot settings we use to prioritize our thoughts and actions?”*

*"Jobs, Jobs, Jobs!" A nervous voice offered.*

*"Numbers, all we value is numbers."*

*"We assign numbers to everything. Our clients are numbered. Our counselors are numbers. Our districts are numbered. And all we ever focus on is outcome numbers."*

*"It really is dehumanized."*

*"We value obedience to authority. We want clients to obey counselors, counselors to obey supervisors, supervisors to obey administrators. And our administrators obey the feds."*

*"Yeah, don't forget compliance! We really value compliance."*

*"We also seem to value uniformity and standardization."*

*"Our biggest value is control. We feel like we must control everything."*

*"We always say the only person who knows the client better than the client is the VR Counselor. But we certainly don't value trusting our professionals. They must ask for permission to do almost anything."*

*"The agency values the agency, period."* A brave voice called out. Everyone in the room went silent.

I remember this moment very clearly years later. When these words were said my mind flashed to the DRAC protest I had experienced in 2005. In 2005, all my actions during the DRAC protest betrayed the values that I had prioritized without conscious awareness. They were not my values. They were not my personal values I brought with me into my profession. My actions during the DRAC protest had become aligned with the values of a psychosocial culture. I had become enculturated so much that I replaced my own values with those of the organization.

During the DRAC protest, my habituated values made my instinctual priority protecting the agency. The agency valued the agency, period. I had come to value the agency, period. I knew the agency did not value me or my coworkers. This value system was not reciprocal. In fact, many of my



actions on the day of the DRAC protest were informed by my understanding of what the agency truly valued.

When I realized the DRAC protest was occurring at my former district office my habituated values shifted my behaviors towards self-preservation and self-protection. I knew that the agency psychosocial culture valued attributing blame for problems and holding people accountable for mistakes. I felt personally vulnerable, and my actions were self-interested.

Unconsciously, I was relieved Andy, a probationary employee, was the VRC on Ed's case. I was relieved because I assumed Andy made a mistake that could be reasonably attributed to a training issue. If it had been a veteran VRC causing this kind of protest it would cost them their job. I figured a probationary employee would receive additional training and closer supervision. When I realized Andy had done what he was empowered to do, my habituated values shifted back to protecting the agency. Jerry's finger pointing speech that felt personal, made me angry because my values had shifted to the agency, me, my staff, and my profession being unfairly victimized by people who assumed we were incompetent.

Do you remember how I mentioned that at the time of the DRAC protest, I was not thinking about Ed at all? My enculturated values system was informing my actions and my thinking. Not one of those values prioritized Ed. Not one of my actions were informed by Ed's needs. Not once did I look at the system as the problem. Earlier I described the cumbersome process to get approval for dental services. Not once did I ask myself how well that system was designed to meet Ed's needs. Not once did I ask if that cumbersome process met the needs of our professional staff. I knew the system had failed both people in this relationship, but the protecting that system was all I valued.

*"This government bureaucracy set up to help people with disabilities, fails people with disabilities in every way."* Jerry had said that day in 2005.

Jerry was right. But during this leadership training meeting where someone had the courage to yell out that the agency valued the agency, period; I realized the government bureaucracy born to empower human beings who are professionally trained to be Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors so they can serve the needs of human beings with disabilities had become a dehumanized mechanical system with the potential to fail every human being.

*“He tried to make sure no one knows what goes on inside offices like this one where the needs of people with disabilities are ignored.”* Jerry had said in 2005 while pointing directly at me.

That comment had made me angry at the time. But Jerry was right. Ed’s needs were ignored in that office. My office. The system had been designed to prioritize meeting its own needs. The psychosocial culture valued bureaucratic control, systems, policies, processes, procedures, and rules. It valued obedience to authority, compliance, conformity, and standardization. It valued these things more than it valued meeting the needs of people. Even when we all knew Ed’s needs were life-threatening, we valued our processes over Ed life.

As my mind was churning with these thoughts, I realized something I had never considered since the 2005 DRAC protest. Ed’s urgent life-threatening dental needs came with a price tag of just under \$2,900. Our bureaucratic processes that took eight months and required hundreds of hours of worktime. Our procedures required us to pay for three dental examinations including x-rays. Our procedures required us to pay the dental consultant for a review and recommendation. And our procedures required the VRC with a master’s degree and professional certification, supported by a Supervising Counselor with a master’s degree and professional certification, and a District Director with a master’s degree and professional certification, to ask Field Service Director permission to provide a \$2,900 service. Every day our VRCs had the authority and autonomy to issue authorizations at this same expenditure level without having to get permission. One example was tuition, books, and fees to support a client in college. We did that all the time without blinking an eye. But we had an entire policy

chapter that listed approval authority levels by service category with little justifiable rhyme or reason. If Ed had needed a college tuition bill of \$2,900 paid, Andy could have done it on the spot. But the same expense for dental services required a process. The process took eight months. I could have cost Ed his life. The process clearly communicated that Ed and Andy did not matter. And I realized during this meeting that it had been over two years since the DRAC protest, and that same dental approval policy was still in place.

Russ had clearly been thinking about this subject for a long time. From his perspective this was not our organization's departure point. From his perspective the beginning of the journey started years before. But from my perspective and the perspective of many of my colleagues, this conversation was the point of departure. It was an ah-ha moment of awakening. I left this meeting with a different view of myself, the organization, our mission, and the vision I had once attracted me to my profession.

For many of us this was the moment our spark was reignited.

This conversation inspired an organization wide period of psychosocial cultural self-reflection. Over the next year Russ enlisted me in what he called our "values road show." He and I traveled the state visiting every office on multiple occasions to engage every cultural member in a conversation about our existential purpose and the values that need to inform our actions. This interactive participatory process was exhausting and emotionally challenging as I heard the stories of other who had experienced similar events in their professional careers. The values road show resulted in the agency settling on a set of shared unifying organizational values. We committed to implement these values to inform all our daily actions. We also committed to live these values in everything we did. If a policy or process was misaligned with our shared values, it had to be eliminated, altered, or adjusted to align with our shared values. This may seem like a slight change. It only one small drop, but it created a ripple effect that exponentially increased in terms of impact.

If I had been enculturated to prioritize these shared values, I think Ed would have been my first thought during the DRAC protest of 2005.

As Russ and I grew more comfortable traveling the state together and talking about our values we realized just how much the agency had disassociated Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors from the essential functions and professional identity of the discipline. Intentionally, Russ and I started emphasizing the importance of professional competencies like counseling and guidance. Our intentional emphasis on these words was designed to counterbalance and shift the lexicon of the psychosocial culture to reconnect to professionalism. The existing organizational environment had been mired in the lexicon of technician level bureaucratic functionaries rather than professionals who were counselors.

Historically, when counseling and guidance was discussed at all it was usually within the context of reminding people, they were not therapists. Every attempt by VRC to reclaim their professional ability to prioritize counseling relationships was usurped by cultural messages that rendered them nothing more than case managers, service brokers, and office clerks. In the past every tricky question about how to handle a client issue, resulted in the bureaucratic management mindset filling the void with policy, rules, processes, and procedures. Instead of helping professional staff develop skills to thrive in the grey areas to meet individualized client needs, the organizational psychosocial culture eliminated the grey areas providing black and white clarity. In the default culture this was welcomed because they believed it made their jobs safer because there was less room for making mistakes. The unintended and unrecognized consequences was that our VRC staff had no professional autonomy and had little opportunity to use their own professional discretion to meet the unique individualized needs of their clients. Their professional hands were tied which gave them a sense of being devalued and incompetent. Ironically, their desire for more black and white instructions limited their ability to achieve results. They were held accountable for the results of a process they had little control over. At the same time, the culture constantly preached that VR services were customized, individualized, and individually tailored

based on the clinical judgement of the VRC serving the client. The psychosocial organizational culture felt hypocritical, disingenuous, and inauthentic.

Russ and I started by intentionally pruning existing policy. If it was not required by federal or state law, it was eliminated. If it was antithetical or contradictory to our purpose and values, it was eliminated. We delegated more decision-making authority to VRCs and streamlined required approval processes to facilitate faster turnaround times. Our administrative team resisted calls for more black and white rules where it was unnecessary. We began coaching staff on building confidence in using their own clinical judgement informed by their relationship informed understanding of their client's unique needs. We started seeing our people as the solution to our systemic problems rather than the cause of our problems.

We also started using the words counseling and guidance as problem solving skills.

Once a month the 10 District Directors and three Field Service Directors met in administrative office for District Director Caucus. This meeting was a historical remnant of a time when the Case Service Director was an autocratic personality who barked orders. After one too many "Jack Attacks" the District Directors were hesitant to talk or ask questions in meetings for fear of being publicly dressed down. They wanted a meeting where the District Directors could surface shared concerns safely and get support from their Field Service Directors on the best way to seek clarification or ask for a change. District Director Caucus continued as a remnant more out of institutional inertia than need.

I was in my office working on some written report when Gordon one of the Field Service Directors stepped in my door.

*"Hey Kyle, do you have a few minutes to join the District Director Caucus in the conference room?"* Gordon asked. *"A question has come up and I don't think the Field Service Directors can answer it."*

As I entered the conference room the air felt heavy. I got the sense that a tense conversation had occurred before I entered the room. I could tell there was tension in the air anticipating how I would react to their question. My mind was racing trying to think of any recent policy directives that were potentially controversial. The room contained the most senior program leaders, most of whom had far more professional experience and career tenure than I had. What could I know that this group did not know?

*“Kyle, we have a question for you.”* Darren had pulled the short straw to be the designated interrogator. *“Can you tell us how you define the word counseling?”*

I remember being stunned. Here were the most senior levels of leadership of a VRC agency. These people directly managed the performance of hundreds of counselors. The combined number of years of experience in counseling represented in the room had to be in the triple digits. Was I really being asked to define counseling by tenured professional counselors who administered a counseling agency? Counseling was the core of our professional identity. Counseling was the primary service we provided. It was right there in our job titles for goodness sakes!

I proceeded to find myself verbalizing a word salad definition of counseling that even to my own ears sounded like a mysterious magical element that had not yet made its way to the periodic table. The more I struggled to define counseling the more I talked. The more I talked the more I felt less clear about what counseling was. I had been so deeply enculturated that even the words Dr. Eldridge told me in graduate school failed to surface. I was flailing when Darren saved me by asking a follow up question.

*“What is your definition of guidance?”*

I did not even try to answer this one. I countered by asking why they were asking.

*“When you and Russ get asked a tough question by one of us or by one of our staff and we ask for a policy to clarify something.”* Darren began. *“You and Russ always say we need to use our counseling*

*and guidance skills and use our professional discretion. How do you and Russ define counseling and guidance skills because we feel like you say this to avoid answering hard questions.”*

I sat there stunned. The staff and leadership team thought I used a word central to my own professional identity as a euphemism to avoid answering challenging questions. My use of words describing out essential professional functions was viewed as a way I avoided the responsibility for making decisions that they believed were my decisions to make. They felt my use of these words came with potential implications. They were afraid that if they made the decisions that I was refusing to make, and things went wrong, they would be the ones I blamed and punished.

I realized the preexisting default organizational psychosocial culture was still firmly ensconced. Our staff were yearning for change but resisted change because of deeply held fears that nothing had really changed. I remember telling the group that I wanted to take some time to think about what they were asking and what they were telling me. I committed to get them a response by the end of the following week. I told them my response would not be a definitive edict, rather I wanted to engage in an ongoing conversation about how we as an organizational culture view, value, and honor counseling.

I went back to my office and shut the door to think. In our culture the most revered holy book containing the organization’s official gospel, and source of all answers was the Case Service Manual (CSM). The CSM was the agency’s policy, procedures, rules, regulations, and process guidance. As I sat thinking about how to define counseling, I spotted the CSM on my office bookshelf. The four inch thick three ring binder contained every single detail that a VRC needed to navigate any eventuality. I would certainly find my answer there.

I pulled the CSM from the shelf and set it down with a thud on my desk. I remember thumbing through the tabs of each chapter. The eligibility chapter was 52 pages long. The chapter on conducting a comprehensive assessment of individualized rehabilitation needs was 61 pages. The chapter on writing an Individualized Plan for Employment was 62 pages long. The chapter on purchasing and procurement

of paid services was 88 pages if you excluded the appendices detailing the numerical list of service codes. I found the tab I was looking for. The tab said, "Chapter 6 Counseling and Guidance." I opened the book chapter 6. The answer would be right here in black and white. I remember wondering why my leadership team had not thought to look here first. Why call me in to ask that question when the answer is right here? Counseling and guidance had its own chapter.

For some reason I was dumbfounded. In the counseling and guidance chapter I found only a single page. The page contained three paragraphs. The first paragraph reminded us that we were not therapists and that our priority was getting the client into a job they could do. The second paragraph mentioned helping clients to select a realistic job goal. It also described the negotiation skills needed to provide only services that are necessary, appropriate, and at the least possible cost. There was a sentence that mentioned using active listening skills. And a sentence about gaining an understanding of the client's unique strengths, abilities, capabilities, skills, concerns, and vocational interests. The third paragraph discussed providing information to the client so they can make informed decisions and choices. Counseling and counseling skills were not defined or clarified.

I remember sitting there wondering how a counseling agency could have hundreds of pages of incredibly detailed step by step process and procedure instructions and yet a single three paragraph page on counseling and guidance that did not even explain what counseling and guidance was. As I thumbed through the CSM I realized every single chapter, hundreds of pages of detailed policy directed staff on how to meet the needs of the agency. Only a single chapter implied we were also supposed to meet the needs of the client. Meeting the client's needs required a single page with three paragraphs.

I think my greatest embarrassment that day was realizing that in over 10 years of service as a professional counselor in a counseling agency this was the first time I opened and read the chapter on counseling and guidance. I had worked as a proud Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor for over 10 years without once reading what the agency said about being a counselor.



I went into the weekend mentally wrestling with all this. I had become so enculturated in the organizational psychosocial culture that I had forgotten what counseling was. I was unable to explain what a counselor does. I realized I had, like all my peers, completely disassociated and disowned counseling and being a counselor. I still used those words all the time. I still identified myself as a counselor. I never realized the word had become meaningless prattle. Just a word I used without any attachment or meaning. I realized why the District Directors asked me that question. Russ and I had been using these words more than previous administrators. Russ and I had unknowingly been using these words as if they had a common shared meaning. Yet I was not even sure I understood what I meant by these words. He and I were using the lexicon of VRC as if they were culturally relevant concepts or terms. In our psychosocial cultural lexicon these words had no real meaning and were not relevant. If we were going to be using these words, we needed these words defined. I needed to define them for myself.

As I struggled with this dilemma that weekend, I walked into my neighborhood Starbucks Coffee to provide my thinking brain much needed caffeine. I thought I could find definitional clarity of counseling at the bottom of a cup of French Roast. I happened to notice a display of books next to the register. The book was entitled *Onward: How Starbucks Fought for Its Life without Losing Its Soul* (2011). I did not recognize the author Howard Schultz, but I asked Linda for permission to buy the book.

To be honest, I wanted a distraction to take my mind off work for the weekend.

I was wrong. I have always been a slower reader. This book is the only book I have ever read cover to cover in a single day. As I sat on my back yard patio highlighting passages and dog-earing pages my heart felt like it would beat right out of my chest. This was not the effect of too much coffee, this book was putting into words what I had intuitively been experiencing over my entire career. I realized it was telling our story by sharing the Starbucks story. I realized everyone in my agency knew something

was not right but none of us knew how to say it to each other. Instead, we all convinced ourselves we were alone.

Schultz and Gordon (2012) described why Starbucks was established originally. In Onward he explained the core purpose behind the founding of Starbucks was creating a consumer experience that connected human beings to other human beings through a sensory experience facilitated by coffee. He explained he wanted to create community living rooms where people gathered and connected. The prime directive was creating an experience that made people want to be there. The prime directive was not profit. At the outset making money or turning a profit was a secondary concern to achieving the grander mission. He wanted to improve society by giving people a place they felt a sense of human connection and belonging. As I read his words, I remembered Judith Huemann and Dr. Petersen talking about the VR program's real purpose. The words of the Preamble to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Pub. L. 93-112) rang in my ears.

I then read about how Starbucks slowly became more corporate. How the principles of scientific bureaucratic management pulled the center of organizational gravity. Creating a customer experience became secondary. A new core purpose pulled every thought, every decision, and every action toward maximizing profitability and driving sales growth. Scientific managers descended on the company creating ridged policy, procedures, rules, and control systems to standardize and structure the company to maximize profitability. Qualitative customer experience centered performance measures were replaced by quantitative numerical performance measures focused on sales and profitability. Data informed decisions were used to streamline processes. Inefficient, expensive, and time-wasting practices were replaced by a laser like focus on creating efficiencies, cutting costs, and increasing employee time to task management.

Schultz and Gordon (2012) told the story of how the original company shipped coffee beans in large burlap bags that were stored in the front of the store. This practice filled stores with the smell of

fresh roasted coffee and provided a visceral sensory experience. But coffee in burlap bags spoiled quickly. This wasteful practice was targeted by the scientific managers because waste cut into profits. The company began shipping coffee in hermetically sealed packaging that was stored in a back room away from sunlight. Profits soared as product waste declined. I remember reading a single sentence as Schultz was describing this example of scientific management. He wrote that this move saved millions of dollars and increased the length of times beans could be used. But he asked at what cost?

Starbucks stores no longer had the visceral sensory experience the aromatic roasted coffee once provided. Sales began to decline. But the scientific bureaucratic managers had a strategy to address this too. They began venturing into selling other product lines. Since sales were the only measure that mattered, they also focused less on existing stores and more on massive expansion because opening new stores could drive sales growth masking the drop in sales at existing stores. With a new center of gravity every decision from store design, store location, product lines, and interpersonal behavior was driven by more, faster, and cheaper. In the book Schultz and Gordon (2012) described how this new center of gravity quickly created an organizational culture focused on a vastly different core purpose than the one the company was founded on.

At this point I remember taking pictures with my iPhone and texting them to Russ. He texted back wanting to know what I was reading. I texted him a picture of the book cover and simply said: *"This is about Us."*

I did not know it, but that weekend Russ too was preoccupied thinking about remarkably similar issues brought to him from a different source. He and I were spending the weekend thinking about similar issues. I did not know it, but many on our leadership team were spending that weekend in self-reflection and organizational self-reflection. All of us felt unsettled about who we had allowed ourselves to become. My colleagues spent that weekend trying to find their way back to you, their own beloved profession.

***Transformation: Change in Composition, Structure, Form, Appearance, or Character.***

Today it is August 1, 2024. Once again, I am sitting at my desk in my office at the University of Wisconsin-Stout Vocational Rehabilitation Institute (SVRI). I am engaging in the practice of memory mining trying to recall and relive the experiences from a time in my career that would become the most difficult, challenging, exhilarating, and energizing learning experience of my professional life. These memories are at the core of what I want to share with you about why I believe the PVR program does not recruit and retain qualified VRC. These lived experiences offer insights into our best hope for addressing this crisis by creating the psychosocial cultural conditions that support VRC thriving.

I have a cardboard banker's box that I packed and taped shut in February of 2015. This box has never been opened since I taped it shut on a cold February day in Salt Lake City, Utah. Since that day this box has followed me like a shadow, I have been afraid to look at.

In April of 2015, I loaded this box into a moving truck that held the rest of my family possessions. Linda and I were moving to Columbia, South Carolina. I was moving to begin a new job as the Director of the Division of Consumer Services at another state VR agency. This box was unloaded from that moving truck and placed on a shelf in my garage. It sat there untouched until January of 2019 when I loaded this box onto another moving truck bound for Menomonie, Wisconsin. I had been hired to be the new Executive Director of the University of Wisconsin-Stout Vocational Rehabilitation Institute (SVRI). Since January 2019, this box has remained unopened on a shelf in my Wisconsin garage.

Today I took a deep breath and loaded this box in my truck. I brought it into my office so I can finally open it. I am hoping what is in this box helps me mine the memories of one of the best professional experiences I have ever had. This box holds the memorabilia of my 15-years of professional service in the state of Utah. I have avoided this box because these are bittersweet memories. They are sweet because these are memories of tremendous gains. They are also bitter because they are memories of significant loss.

After cutting the tape and pulling off the lid the first thing my eyes see is exactly what I hoped to find. The document does not look important. But to me this document has emotional resonance and brings tears to my eyes. The document contains insights into why qualified VRC experience professional failure to thrive and provides a roadmap to significantly address this crisis. The document became known as our “Transformational Agenda.” The story of how this document came into being and the impact these simple ideas had on one public VR program can help us understand creating a psychosocial cultural context more conducive to VRC thriving.

As Russ and I finished reading *Onward*, he and I engaged in deeply philosophical conversations about what our agency had become. He and I started having very transparent conversations about the total lived experience of the psychosocial cultural environment from our own perspectives. We also began trying to understand the total lived experience of the agency from the perspectives of our staff, our clients, our community partners, and our major stakeholders. Russ’s leadership development training program had already created the conditions and set the foundations needed for building something new. We both felt the organizational culture had shifted. More voices were being heard. More ideas and frustrations were being shared. More questions were being asked. Increasingly the questions being asked had previously been taboo because they called into question unquestionable organizational dogma.

Based on our discussions and following the District Director’s request that we define counseling and guidance; Russ and I planned a leadership retreat held in September 2011 on the campus of Salt Lake Community College. Russ and I did not know how this meeting would go, but we knew we wanted it to feel like a different kind of meeting. We asked our leaders to come dressed casually and ready to engage in an organizational self-reflection. Russ and I wanted to make this very personal. We wanted to make it emotional. We wanted people to be able to frankly speak from the heart and say all the things they may have wanted to say but never felt free to express.

I remember the large ballroom type space had been set up with tables and chairs arranged in a classroom configurate with a lectern at the front of the room. Russ and I quickly folded up the tables and placed them against one wall. We then stacked the chairs against another wall. As our leadership team arrived, a few people sat on the remaining chairs. Others milled about in pairs talking to each other. When it was time, Russ asked us all to form a large circle. We had never done this before.

*“If you are comfortable doing this, and if the person next to you is comfortable, can we just join hands for a moment?”* I noticed nervous faces and uncomfortable eye contact being made, but everyone joined hands. *“I don’t think I have ever told any of you about my sister, Lorrie.”*

I remember you could hear a pin drop, everyone stood holding hands and listening intently as Russ told us the story of his childhood and growing up with a sister who had a significant developmental disability. He told us about the lifelong institutionalization of his sister at the state-run developmental hospital. I saw people begin to cry as he told us why he was attracted to Rehabilitation Counseling and why he passionately cares about what our agency was intended to accomplish. Russ then turned the time to me.

I told much of the story covered earlier about my childhood and my experiences with feeling excluded, rejected, unseen, unheard, and unimportant. I talked about my childhood experiences with friends and family who had disabilities. I also shared that I was attracted to Rehabilitation Counseling and the public VR program based on how it was portrayed by Judith Huemann, Dr. Eldridge, and Dr. Peterson’s admonishment to know and understand the Preamble to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. I also shared that I was genuinely concerned about how far we had drifted from that purpose, our values, and our vision of social equality for people with disabilities.

Russ asked if anyone else was willing to share their own why, the reason they decided to work in this field. When Russ and I had planned this activity, I worried no one would share their own stories. I also worried some of them would not have a story like ours to share. Frankly, I assumed many in the

room found their way into this job because it was just a job that was available when they needed one. But once again I was wrong. Every one of the 24 leaders present shared their own story of falling in love with the profession and the potential of the public VR program to change lives and society.

What I learned that day, for the first time in my career, was that all our senior leaders had very personal and very emotional reasons why they were attracted to the profession. Every single person told a story of how the profession and public VR program appealed to them at an existential and emotional level. Everyone also told a similar version of becoming disenchanted and apathetic. I remember wondering why we had worked together all these years, sat in hundreds of hours of meetings talking about policy, rules, procedures, and performance numbers, but not once had we really told each other why we cared about any of it. People I assumed were bureaucratic management personalities by nature I learned started their professional careers as idealistic empathetic human beings who loved other people and wanted desperately to help them thrive. It was clear to everyone in that room that we had all been forced to sacrifice what had attracted us to the profession because the organizational culture was so incongruent and misaligned with that ideal.

I had created a music playlist intentionally for the next activity. We explained that there were poster boards on the room's outer walls. Each poster board had a single primer question at the top. Everyone was handed a marker. We asked them to take the next hour and wander the room reading the primer questions and jotting down any thoughts that occur to them. We told them we would be playing a music playlist to help them focus. And we asked them to not talk to each other during the activity. We told them we wanted them to just be in their own mind and feel their own feelings as they thought about the primer questions and jotted down whatever came to their mind. We explained that this event was a safe space. No comment was going to be judged harshly, and nothing said in this space would leave this space. We told them we wanted blunt and honest reactions. We asked everyone to avoid self-

censoring. We told them there was nothing that was off limits and even the agency's most sacred cows could be challenged and tipped over during this exercise.

"If your son or daughter had a disability and was being served in your office, what Rehabilitation Counselor would you want them served by and WHY?" was the primer question on one poster board.

"If your significant other acquired a disability tomorrow, what Rehabilitation Counselor in your office would you not want to serve them and WHY?" asked another.

"I wish I saw more \_\_\_\_\_ and less \_\_\_\_\_ in my office." Another primer question asked.

"The most discouraging thing about working in this agency is \_\_\_\_\_."

"The one thing that keeps me coming to work is \_\_\_\_\_."

"Our organizational culture is \_\_\_\_\_."

"The biggest priority here is meeting \_\_\_\_\_ needs."

"If I could change one thing here, I would \_\_\_\_\_."

I vividly remember this activity. Everyone genuinely seemed fully engaged. Russ and I had not expected the level of engagement because we quickly ran out of poster board paper and had to scramble to pilfer more from the colleges front desk. Pretty soon the walls were completely covered with poster paper filled with handwritten thoughts, feelings, questions, or heartfelt pleas. In past meetings there were always a few people who would leave the room for extended periods. You could usually find the same people sitting on couches responding to emails on their phone escaping the meeting by pretending there was an issue that needed their urgent attention. But during this activity, I noticed the only people who stepped out of the room only did so to compose themselves and get tissues to dry their eyes. I remember at one point one of these people obtained two boxes of Kleenex tissues from the college and brought them into the room for others.



When the activity was done the group processed and debriefed what was on the poster boards. Simply processing and asking for clarification stimulated very meaningful elaborations and I saw people realizing others in the room had felt the same way. I remember thinking it was a good thing that Russ had planned to have lunch catered because there was so much energy in the room, I doubt anyone would have been willing to break for lunch.

In fact, Russ and I shelved an activity we had planned for that afternoon as the leadership team continued this conversation into the early afternoon. I can't remember the catalyst precisely, but at some point, someone asked a simple question that moved the conversation into a new direction.

*"Alright, we have all felt this. None of us were alone feeling this way. We just thought we were alone. Now that we know this really is a problem, what are we as agency leaders going to do now?"* Josh asked.

*"My mom always reminded me to accept where I am, but to always have a plan for getting back home."* John said. *"We need a clear plan to get back home. A plan we all agree with. A plan that keeps us from drifting off track again."*

*"I like that."* Clair quietly added. *"But not the kind of plan we are used to in this agency. Not the kind of planning and thinking that got us here. This is not a strategic plan with S.M.A.R.T. goals and measurable outcomes. I think we need an aspirational plan that reminds us all of what we want to become."*

*"I like that,"* said John. *"The 2002 Salt Lake Winter Olympics had that logo that said, 'Light the Fire Within', that is what we need. A plan for reigniting our passion and reclaiming our purpose."*

Russ told everyone we would reconvene as a group the next morning. He asked people to enjoy their evening, have dinner together, and continue to think about what this plan should communicate. I remember people continued to talk in small groups for some time after. It seemed like no one was in a hurry to adjourn.

The next day the group asked for a laptop to be connected to a projector so that someone could take notes on the ideas people had for our aspirational plan. I remember 22 people were in the room that second morning. We sat there debating and word smithing until one o'clock that afternoon. In the end the agency's transformational agenda emerged.

This document had been the end goal Russ, and I had hoped for in planning this retreat, but the wording reflected our entire leadership teams aspirations. I was incredibly pleased and excited to see how these ideas would be transformed into action.

*"I know this is kind of hokey, but I feel like this is our own Declaration of Independence from the culture and practices of our past,"* said Mark. *"I want to sign it. I want to put my signature on it as my commitment to our clients, to our staff, and to all of you that I intend to do everything in my power to make this a reality."*

Russ worked with the front desk of the college to print the document. He returned and put it on the table at the front of the room. Mark was the first to sign it. I remember signing it next. Below my name are the signatures of Richard, Karl, Denim, Dan, Jon, Aaron, Tammy, Clair, Jennifer, John, Nicole, Gordon, Josh, Mark, Daren, Devin, Kim, Melanie, Russ, and Tom. This was a leadership team commitment to:

1. Reignite our passion, professionalism, and emotional investment in our clientele by emphasizing meaningful VR counselor-Client relationships.
2. Build staff confidence, competencies, and self-directed desire to engage in career development and on-going learning for the success of each client.
3. Prioritize staff activities and tasks to create meaningful VR Counselor-client relationships resulting in client success.
4. Connect staff to resources and tools... which facilitate effective client record management while focusing on VR Counselor-client relationships.

5. Balance staff work demands to enhance and improve both VR Counselor-client relationships and telling the story of that relationship in the client record.

On November 1, 2011, Russ wrote an open letter to the entire staff of the Division of Rehabilitation Services explaining the genesis of this transformational agenda. We then followed this letter up with another series of open staff meetings as we engaged in another set of road trips.

Many unexpected and significant changes to the organizational culture occurred over the following years as the leadership team remained true to their word using the transformational agenda as a guidepost for every thought, behavior, and action. There are too many details to share for the purposes of this study, but I will share some examples.

The organizational culture began to evolve, and we found our historic common language no longer fit. My job title changed from Director of Case Services to Director of Client Services. This small shift had profound impacts because it reminded all of us that we served clients who were people, not case files full of paper. Processes we used to call Case Service Approval Requests were changed to Client Service Recommendations reminding all of us that we employed professionals who knew what their client needed most. We change the Case File Review to the Client Experience Review and added questions that assessed the quality of counselor-client engagement and relationship. Our language changes served to rebalance our culture from being entirely system centric to being more client centric.

Suddenly our policy and procedure manual, our performance review criteria, and other cultural practices had to be altered or adjusted to rebalance the bureaucratic with the human. Where we could we delegated even more authority to VR Counselors because they knew the needs of each client best. We trained on counseling and guidance skills and clearly defined what those words meant. We also started talking more about vocations, sustainable careers, and personally meaningful employment and stopped using the mantra jobs, jobs, jobs.

We also stopped focusing on the number of 26 closures. Instead, we focused our attention on supporting staff in the activities we knew created quality sustainable vocational outcomes. We told them that if they were able to focus on doing the right things, the number of 26 closures would take care of itself. We maintained a closure goal, but we made sure everyone knew this was a goal that would fluctuate from year to year and that all our 26 closures would be quality vocational closures not just jobs retained for 90 days.

Our former performance evaluations containing only qualitative outcome measures designed to meet the needs of the agency were designed. For the first time in agency history counselor performance standards included an assessment of the performance of counseling and guidance activities. The quality of counselor-client relationships became a primary focus for staff continuous development and learning.

In October of 2013, I was appointed by the State Board of Education to replace Russ as the new Director of the Division of Rehabilitation Services. Russ had recently been appointed as the Executive Director of the State Office of Rehabilitation. These positions allowed us to continue building on transformational changes our staff was accomplishing. Sometimes we felt like we were holding a tiger by the tail as our staff continued to accelerate the changes to make our transformational vision a reality.

Russ and I realized we had a kind of milestone during an agency meeting in early 2014. A member of the team asked us to change how we talked about our agency's transformation. Prior to this day we had all just gotten used to using the word transformation and using language that implied we were continuously transforming into some future state.

*"I think we need a way to say what we are still working to become as an agency." One voice said. "But as someone who has worked here for almost 20 years, I feel like we have already been transformed. We are a completely different agency today than we were 5-years ago. We need a way to acknowledge that we have already successfully transformed."*

In a State Rehabilitation Council meeting one of the members who worked for Union Pacific Railroad spoke about the railroad's corporate culture. As she was describing that culture, she used the term "The U.P. Way." She then stated how that moniker was the internalized meme used to refer to their common shared sense of organizational purpose, vision, and values. She described how that moniker had become enculturated as a communication and thinking tool used to inform all behavior, actions, and decisions. She said it reflected who they were supposed to be as employees.

*"When I forget and start doing things that are not aligned with our culture, there is always someone there to ask: Sharon is that the U.P. way?" She told us and snapped her fingers. "Just like that it recenters me on who I am supposed to be at U.P."*

I remember Russ brought this idea to the agency staff. I started hearing people throughout the agency talking about doing things "The Rehab Way." The Rehab Way replaced the word transformation. I liked the pride I heard in people's voices when they talked about making sure we were doing things The Rehab Way. On occasions a colleague would challenge agency administrative actions by asking if they were done The Rehab Way. When we heard these words, we paused to see if we were drifting again into transactional bureaucratic micromanagement thinking. Prioritizing meeting the systems needs was not The Rehab Way. Valuing human beings based on the quantity of outcomes was not The Rehab Way. Sticking a client in an unsustainable transactional job just to get a status 26 closure was not The Rehab Way. The Rehab Way became a series of light houses helping to keep us from running the organizational ship aground. It was a label that defined our new psychosocial cultural milieu. It improved morale, behavior, and performance.

Our trust and faith in our professional staff were rewarded at every turn. In the years that followed the agency far exceeded the number of successful outcomes each year. I am convinced we demonstrated that focusing on the actions we know lead to quality outcomes and empowering your staff to focus on meeting the needs of each client results in improved program performance outcomes

that meet the needs of the system. We saw a decrease in the number of successful closures that reapplied for services again the following year indicating the outcomes were sustainable. We saw a decrease in the number of unsuccessful closures. Consumer satisfaction rates increased. Staff morale improved. And during those years our turnover rate within our professional staff was cut by two thirds. We also began attracting former staff who had abandoned the profession return.

We lost some staff who were more comfortable with our old environment. We lost others who felt more comfortable letting others tell them what to do and how to do it applying black and white rules. But most professionals I spoke to shared that they finally felt able to do the job they were initially attracted to do. They talked about the intrinsic rewards they most longed for had returned.

*"I feel empowered to really get to know each client and use my skills to help them find their place in the world."* One counselor told me. *"I don't feel like I work in a trauma center only being able to hand out band aids."*

*"The way we did things before I felt like I was giving a hungry man a bite of fish."* One veteran counselor told me in 2014. *"Not a whole fish, only a bite. Then everyone celebrated the total number of cases I saved from starvation. The Rehab Way lets me give a starving man a fish, while we train him to fish, and find him his own fishing spot."*

*"I used to always complain about our pay."* Another counselor told me. *"I look back on that now and realize there was never going to be enough money. You could never pay me enough money to keep me happy doing that job. Now I think I could win the lottery tomorrow and I would still come in to work because I love what I can do here."*

*"For the first time in 20 years I feel like I am treated like a real professional. I never felt that way before. I don't have to ask permission for everything, I get to make decisions, I can control my time and focus on the priorities I think are most important for my clients."* Another shared, *"And I don't feel like I am always being told that I am incompetent or useless."*

*“The Rehab Way is more of a social movement. It is not just a job anymore; it just means so much more to me now.”*

Nothing is ever perfect. There were still flaws and challenges. We still worked in a government agency nestled inside a bigger micromanaged state bureaucracy with 80% of our funding coming from yet another micromanaged bureaucracy nestled in a larger federal bureaucracy. We still worked in a psychosocial culture that continued to overvalue rational scientific management worshipping at the altar of quantifiable outcome measures without understanding how those measures are achieved. There were still things imposed on the system, we still had to generate performance numbers and produce paperwork that justified our existence.

Our transformation was seeking rebalancing and recalibration not idealistic perfection. Our staff wanted a context that reminded them of who we wanted to be when they fell in love with their vocational calling. They wanted an environment that allowed them to live their values. Staff wanted to feel like empowered and valued professionals trusted to act to meet the individualized needs of client's they were allowed to know personally.

As I continue thumbing through this box of memories from that time I find two photographs. These photographs remind me of how much we accomplished. In one, I am standing with the entire agency leadership team in the hallway of the State Board of Education building. I am holding a glass trophy. This picture was taken in the spring of 2014.

Over my right shoulder stands my professional mentors Russ, John, and Josh, Other faces in this photograph warm my heart today. The trophy I am holding in front of this incredible team was the 2014 Daniels Foundation Award for Ethics in Government. Someone had nominated our agency for this award. I remember the nomination write up talked about how the agency was working to ethically achieve its mission providing values informed services to citizens with disabilities. I remember we were all proud and surprised by this agency recognition.

The second photograph brings back a flood of memories. It was taken just a few months later. I am standing on a stage wearing a suit. I am proudly holding another glass trophy. To my immediate left is Utah Governor Gary R. Herbert. To my right is Dr. Martell Menlove, Utah's Superintendent of Public Education. Behind us are state and federal flags. Not visible in this photograph is the large audience of state officials filling the auditorium in front of us. Governor Herbert had just presented me with the 2014 Utah Governor's Award for Leadership Excellence.

While it was my name that had been nominated for this award, I have always felt this award reflected the achievements of the entire agency. As Governor Herbert read the nomination submitted for this award, I could not help feeling both pride and embarrassment. The pride was in realizing that someone in our agency had nominated me for this award based on how they were feeling about the impact our transformation. Someone nominated me for this award because they felt our organizational psychosocial cultural transformation had turned them into an empowered and valued professional. My embarrassment came from knowing I was only a small part in our profound cultural shift. So many other leaders throughout the agency had influenced the profound changes celebrated by this award. I had followed much more than I had led.

***Regression: Relapse, Remission, Deterioration, or Return to a Lesser State***

As we all headed into 2015 things appeared to be going well. I was enjoying seeing our staff and our clients thriving. Even our performance measures were thriving. But state level legislative fiscal decisions and the consequences of unrecognized long-term trends in the finance office of the State Board of Education proved to be our Achilles heel. The center of gravity shifted to political posturing and the furthering of political agendas that had nothing to do with us but used us to meet their needs. Our small agency found itself a pawn in a larger chess match. The details don't matter, and they are disputed anyway. I will only share how my 15-year career this state VR agency ended.



In February 2015, I learned the State Board of Education had removed Russ from the Executive Director position. At the same time, the Director of Finance at the State Office of Education and the accountant assigned to manage our agency's finances were removed from these positions. A month later the Superintendent of Public Education resigned. Reading the newspapers, I knew the fallout and scapegoating would need to continue if the State Board of Education hoped to reclaim its public credibility. Damaging the public image of the State Board of Education had always been the primary goal of this manufactured crisis.

In this banker's box left unopened since 2015, I find another career memento. This is a letter I received on March 18, 2015. I received this letter just four months after Governor Gary Herbert presented my award for excellence in leadership. Six months after the agency had received the Daniels Award for Ethics in Government. Six months after my division achieved an historical record number of successful client vocational outcomes. Just 30 days since I had received my most recent performance evaluation telling me I had done an exceptional job as a Division Director. In this letter I was informed that after 15 years of service I no longer had any value to the state.

As I look at this letter again today, I am reminded of the flood of emotions I felt at the time this letter was handed to me. I was in my office that morning wrapping up a meeting with my team. The designated interim Executive Director was a Certified Public Accountant with no knowledge of vocational rehabilitation or working with people with disabilities. He entered my office and asked me to follow him to the human resources office. I entered the small conference room to find the Director of HR waiting sheepishly. The Interim Executive Director handed me this letter and asked me to read it. I sat silently and read the words that told me I no longer had any value.

Today, as I remember these events and look at this letter, I notice a few details I have never fully appreciated. I notice them today because ironically, they represent the regression to the old organizational culture. The needs of the system were again the center of gravity. Until today, I failed to

notice my termination letter was printed on my own letterhead. This letterhead is my Division Director letterhead with my name in the upper righthand corner. They could have used the Executive Director letterhead. They used mine. They were so focused on the bureaucratic process of this transactional exchange that they failed to attend to this detail. My name could have easily been removed from the masthead. Even the signature line contained my name and my own credentials. Luckily, it was left unsigned. Today this letter reads as if I wrote myself the letter that notified myself that I was firing myself. The mindless dehumanized bureaucracy that sees human beings as disposable interchangeable parts of little importance had returned.

Reliving this moment has been emotionally challenging for me. I think it would have been easier if I were simply remembering being fired from a job. Somehow if I had considered my 15-year investment as just a job, all of this would have been easier to accept. Human beings who have transactional exchanges called jobs expect this kind of transactional exchange. What made this particularly painful was the fact that this had been my vocational calling. I had poured my heart and soul into this calling. I had never spent 15-years in any one place. This agency had been the only home I had ever known.

I felt like my romantic relationship with my beloved profession had ended.

***Similitude: State Of Similarity, Likeness, Sameness, or Duplication***

Almost immediately I was hired to be the Director of the Division of Consumer Services at the South Carolina Commission for the Blind. Linda and I packed everything we owned and moved to Columbia, South Carolina. I was happy to be leaving Utah after living in the state for over 20 years. I was also happy to become part of a small, and completely independent PVR agency that on the surface appeared to be consumer centered.

When I arrived, I felt like Sisyphus. At my former agency I had been a key part of a synergized team that had labored for over 15 years to realign our organizational cultural boulder pushing it to the

top of a mountain where we enjoyed an all too brief golden age. Now I found myself at the bottom of that same mountain facing what seemed like the exact same cultural boulder.

I was disheartened to learn that the psychosocial organizational culture was only a slight variation of the one I had experienced in Utah. I learned a common underlying psychosocial culture permeates the PVR program regardless of the state. My experiences were identical to those experienced in Utah. There are too many to share in this narrative. I also feel they would only duplicate stories I have already detailed. The point I want to emphasize is that the psychosocial cultural milieu was identical. The mood of the organization was also palpable. Office doors remained closed, people did not talk to each other, and there seemed to be no laughter or joy expressed by anyone.

*“The best way to survive here is to hide.”* One coworker told me. *“Just stay in your office and do your job. Keep your head down and don’t get friendly with anyone.”*

*“The Big Man only cares about appearances.”* Another told me. *“As long as you can make things look good from the outside, nothing else matters. Just focus on polishing those turds.”*

I spent three years and nine months trying to effect a similar transformation to the one I was a part of in Utah with a mix of successes and failures. In Utah, our success had come from a bottom-up and top-down systemwide collective effort that I was unable to replicate. I was also missing the decade of soil preparation that Russ had done long before our transformation began to bear fruit. I found myself again becoming institutionalized in the bureaucratic scientific management transactional exchange paradigm. I was losing hope that the PVR program would ever become an environmental setting where my profession would be empowered to succeed.

At the end of 2018, I was recruited to apply for the vacant Executive Director position at the University of Wisconsin-Stout Vocational Rehabilitation Institute (SVRI). SVRI appealed to me for several reasons. First, my guru John was a UW-Stout graduate. In fact, I had grown up professionally with Mike, Carol, Pam, and several other UW-Stout graduates who had all found their way to Utah. It also appealed

to me because early in my career I attended a National Rehabilitation Association conference in Biloxi, Mississippi. At this conference Dr. Julie Smart introduced me to Dr. John Lui who was the SVRI Executive Director at that time.

*“Kyle, if you ever grow up you want to be John Lui.”* Dr. Smart had said to me at the time.

I applied for the position and got the job in December of 2018. This was a difficult transition for me. I had mentally connected my beloved profession to the PVR practice setting. In a way leaving the PVR program felt like I was abandoning my profession. The reasons I left were the same reasons I had lost so many other passionate professionals over the years. I left because the PVR program is not a psychosocial cultural environment that supports professional thriving. It is not an environmental context that values professionalism. It is an occupational setting where my beloved profession has been turned into a job title. A transactional exchange job title. A bureaucratic occupation focused on meeting the needs of the bureaucracy.

At SVRI I have experienced the organizational psychosocial culture of over 50 PVR agencies. I have been exposed to these cultural environments while providing consultation, technical assistance, program improvement, program implementation, and a great deal of VR staff training. What I have learned from these experiences is that there is a dominant PVR program psychosocial cultural theme. Each state agency is a subcultural variation of that theme that includes cultural elements unique to that state’s government.

The organizational psychosocial culture I experienced early in my career permeates the PVR program. The psychosocial culture shares the same assumptions, beliefs, rituals, language, rites of passage, and other cultural characteristics. I have come to believe that this psychosocial culture is antithetical to the original existential purpose of the PVR program. It is incongruent and misaligned in terms of priorities, values, and outcome objectives. It is a workplace environment that usurps, devalues, and discourages professionalism. I make these assertions based on my own lived experiences. The only

evidence I can provide is the pervasive professional abandonment at the heart of the PVR programs inability to recruit and retain qualified VRCs.

Even promising efforts to re-humanize and re-professionalize the program become mired in the transactional bureaucratic psychosocial cultural mindsets. For example, in 2020 I was contracted by a state VR agency to help train VRCs to focus on improving counselor-client relationships and improving client engagement in the program. I was excited because this initiative was consumer-centered and designed to empower professionalism giving VRC permission to prioritize building transformational counseling relationships. It promised to be a humanistic counterbalance in a highly bureaucratic system. Research in the field consistently demonstrates the number one predictor of consumer success is their perception of the quality of their relationship with their VRC. I also knew the inability to professionally invest in the counselor-client relationship was driving many to abandon the profession. I had hope.

I worked with the agency administrators to design and deliver three training modules on counselor-client relationship skills, customer service skills, and client engagement counseling intervention strategies. Professional staff were initially skeptical and seemed resistant during these trainings. As I talked to individuals, I got the sense they were all intrinsically motivated to focus on better counselor-client relationships. The hesitancy came from a consensus that this initiative was doomed to failure if professional staff were not fully trusted and empowered to prioritize client relationships over meeting the bureaucratic demands of the agency.

*“I want to focus on counselor-client relationships. That is why I am here in the first place. But there are only 40 hours in my work week.”* One VRC told me. *“I have 182 clients on my caseload. Theoretically, for me to do what they require of me right now I would have to work 60-hour weeks to keep up with my caseload. That is just to do the administrative stuff they require now. Where is the time for client engagement? I am all for it, but something must go.”*

*“This is the new hot button priority around here.” Another VRC told me. “They always add new demands but in 20 years I have never once had them take something back. There is just no more room on my plate, but they just keep shoveling more on top. I am the one they blame when food falls on the floor.”*

*“I am just going to be very blunt with you, Kyle,” A VRC said. “They designed my job to spend 98% of my work time doing things the system needs that have nothing to do with the client. The client is more of a distraction at this point. I mean, think about it. I can do 98% of my job more effectively without ever interacting with a client. The client is secondary to my job, not the center of my job.”*

Because of my involvement in the training, I was invited to a meeting where program management discussed next steps in supporting the implementation of this initiative. I was surprised that there was no priming discussion on the purpose or importance of the initiative. No member of the organization’s administrative team spoke to the why of this initiative. The spirit of the law behind this organizational initiative was left unstated.

The focus of this meeting was hammering out the letter of the law. All assumed that management’s job was to force staff compliance by holding them accountable for client engagement and relationship work tasks. Bureaucratic scientific management control required bureaucratic scientific management tools. The managers felt client-engagement and counselor-client relationships needed to be clearly defined, operationalized, structured, and uniformly standardized. It was necessary to create quantifiable performance standards and compliance metrics for managers to surveil and hold staff accountable for performance.

To address this need management worked for several months to create a highly detailed 24-page policy directive that defined and structured counselor-client relationships and client engagement performance standards. The document detailed expectations for mandatory monthly face to face client-counselor contacts, what kinds of contacts counted and what contacts did not count, and most

importantly how these contacts were expected to be thoroughly documented in the casefile. Casefile narrative templates and examples were included in the appendices. A data dashboard was created to monitor compliance and give management a tool to enforce accountability.

As I sat listening to these discussions, I realized professionals were not being empowered they were being disempowered. Their professional discretion and autonomy were being restricted not expanded. The assumptions that informed the document communicated clearly that the management did not trust staff and assumed staff incompetence. The psychosocial culture dominated by bureaucratic management assumptions and beliefs pulled the center of gravity away from fostering human centered relationships resulting in the creation of a bureaucratic assembly line of rule following robots. An initiative with transformational intent that could have significantly improved VRC, and consumer thriving was turned into a transactional exchange system that only served to set VRC and consumers up for failure.

For me, the worst part of this experience was realizing it set everyone up for failure. Ironically, the only way to comply with the standards required staff to compromise. Either they prioritize work time to comply with the demands for administrative and documentation tasks by divesting from counselor-client relationship tasks and get reprimanded for not performing to the initiative's defined standards. Or they divest work time from complying with the administrative and documentation tasks to invest in counselor-client relationship and engagement activities choosing to be reprimanded for failure to comply with administrative and documentation performance. It was like a choose your own adventure book where the only choice is in what way you will fail. The transactional exchange management approach to standardize human relationship engagement hurt the quality of counselor-client relationships and resulted in client disengagement from the program.

Another example can be found in my most requested training that I have provided in dozens of PVR agencies. In 2013, I worked with a couple of VRC to create a client services documentation model

called DRIVE Notes. The impetus for the creation of DRIVE Notes was the former PVR psychosocial culture. VRC were constantly being told that they were incompetently documenting client services. Agency administration created preformatted fill-in-the-blank templates VRC were required to use. These templates were designed to meet the agency's bureaucratic administrative management needs and reflected the old cultural values. In 2013, as the agency was transforming, and Russ and I were emphasizing professionalism, counseling, guidance, and client-centered services these templates became a problem. DRIVE Notes were specifically designed to be a conceptual tool and a documentation format counselors could use to improve counselor-client relationships while also documenting the essential elements required for regulatory compliance. It was a counselor-client relationship recentering tool that happened to be designed to also meet the needs of the agency's bureaucracy. DRIVE Notes was one of our rebalancing efforts during the transformation.

Since arriving at SVRI, DRIVE Notes has been my most requested training in state PVR program agencies. Unfortunately, a tool designed to restore a feeling of counseling professionalism and client focus consistently becomes usurped in the predominant transactional exchange bureaucratic management psychosocial culture. DRIVE Notes are more of a model for professional use and intentionally designed to allow for the use of professional discretion. One agency demanded VRC to use the model with strict uniformity defeating the purpose of the model. Another agency created data metrics on DRIVE Note model compliance. Yet another agency adapted the DRIVE Notes model into fill-in-the-blank preformatted templates like the ones DRIVE Notes were designed to eliminate. It is as if the psychosocial culture assumes that VRC are incapable of doing anything with autonomy, competence, and using their own judgement.

In 2020, I partnered with the CRCC and the University of Massachusetts-Boston to create the CRL training program operated by the National Training Center for Transformational Rehabilitation Leadership housed at SVRI. The 6-month training program culminates in the completion of an agency



specific capstone project to effect transformational change in their VR agency. To date we have graduated over 90 CRLs who work in more than 22 public VR agencies. Capstone projects are not proscribed and are selected by participants in consultation with their sponsoring agency. I had anticipated a wide variety and diversity of capstone projects. However, every capstone project has wrestled with similar psychosocial cultural misalignments and incongruencies to those I had experienced in two other state VR agencies. Every CRL participant recognizes the same issues and attempts to stimulate a similar transformational rebalancing in their own organization. In the greatest irony of all, many capstones with truly transformational potential end up being applied organizationally in transactional exchange management centric ways that fail to optimize long-term potential impacts.

A prominent feature of the PVR psychosocial cultural environment impacting the recruitment and retention of qualified VRC is the reluctance to allow professionals to fully apply their education and training with autonomy, authority, professionalism, and a trust in the competency of their skills. VRC with graduate degrees in the profession have told me that they believe their expertise was only valued on paper, in theory, and only at the time of hire. They have shared their feelings that the job is designed in ways that prevents them from applying their skills on the job. The PVR program historically has significantly invested in graduate level training. But the professional skills are not valued enough to ensure qualified VRCs are empowered to practice professionally. Many have found these skills marketable in other employment settings where they are more empowered professionally. This has become a cultural pattern not exclusive to VRCs.

For example, from 2016 to 2020 SVRI was the home of the Program evaluation and quality assurance technical assistance center. This center was funded through a Rehabilitation Services Administration grant for the purpose of assisting state PVR agencies to improve performance management by providing state agency staff with training on best practices for program evaluation and quality assurance. Many program graduates are no longer employed in the PVR program. They

expressed appreciation for the Program evaluation and quality assurance technical assistance center skills citing them as the primary reason they were recruited by their new employers. Many shared that their PVR state agency had supported their completion of the Program evaluation and quality assurance technical assistance center training. However, many cited their disillusionment as they were unable to fully apply these skills in a change averse psychosocial cultural environment.

Another example involves a similar recent trend in the CRL program. To date, six CRL graduates have informed SVRI that they no longer are employed in the PVR program. All these CRLs reported that their new career opportunities came because of the transformational leadership skills learned in the CRL program. PVR agencies had paid for the program tuition for all six of these CRLs. Again, the CRL knowledge, skills, abilities, and core competencies appear to have only been valued on paper and in theory. All six CRLs who have since left the PVR program reported disillusionment with an organizational psychosocial culture that resisted the use of these competencies to effect change.

Of what value are knowledge, skills, abilities, competencies, and expertise in a context that does not empower their application?

***Heresy: Beliefs Or Opinions At Odds With Generally Accepted Cultural Dogma***

It was a spring day in 2023, and I was in Washington D.C. attending a national conference of PVR administrators. I found myself sitting next to a state governor appointee recently named the Executive Director of a large PVR state agency.

*“How long have you worked in VR?”* I asked after we had introduced ourselves.

*“Two weeks.”* He said with a chuckle.

*“Oh.”* I replied. *“Where did you join us from?”*

*“I spent the last two years as the Director of the state Department of Revenue.”* He told me. *“I am kind of the Governor’s fixer though; he moves me around to state agencies in crisis. You name the government function, and I have administered it. From highways to corrections, I have done it all.”*

He told me about his background in business and finance. I shared a little of my own background. Our small talk was interrupted by a conference presentation by federal partners on PVR program performance metric trends. During the break, our conversation continued.

*“Our biggest challenge is staffing.” He stated. “We just can’t keep counselors, and we can’t hire counselors who have experience. Half of our caseloads are currently vacant, and we really struggle to get anyone to apply for these jobs. If we do hire someone, they usually only last a year and then they leave us for more money.”*

I mentioned the VRC recruitment and retention issue was not isolated to his state. I mentioned my concerns that the number of VRC master’s degree programs were on the decline and the number of CRCs was declining while the number of VRC jobs in PVR were on the rise.

*“Well, I removed the old specific qualifications for counselors in my agency so I hope that will expand the applicant pool.” He said confidently. “I would rather hire people with bachelor’s degrees in business because they are more effective anyway.”*

As a CRC with years of experience in PVR practice, and as the current CRCC Board President this comment concerned me. I asked why he believed bachelor’s degrees in business made counselors more effective helping people with disabilities to obtain vocational outcomes.

*“The first thing I did was pull 10 years of performance data. I asked my data analysts to look at three key performance metrics.” He told me. “CRCs and people with master’s degrees in Rehabilitation Counseling were dead last on every single one of those performance metrics. Counselors with undergraduate degrees in business or even accounting outperformed all counselors with graduate degrees on all three measures.”*

*“What are the performance metrics you analyzed?” I inquired.*

*“Number of cases closed in jobs.”* He said holding up his index finger. *“Average efficiency rating which is a measure of case turnaround time.”* He said holding up two fingers. Then he raised his little finger and said: *“Lowest cost per case closed.”*

I was stunned. The PVR agency in this state was being administered by a person who assumed the purpose of the program was to place people with disability in vacant jobs as fast as possible as cheaply as possible. He did not know the history of people with disabilities. He did not appreciate the difference between a jobs program and a social justice program ensuring equal access to maximize individualized vocational opportunity and social inclusion. He did not understand that the federal law required his agency to prioritize serving people with the most significant disabilities who require multiple expensive services over an extended period of time to achieve a vocational outcome. All three-performance metrics were incongruent, antithetical, and contradictory to the purpose of the PVR program. All three metrics encouraged behavior that was directly opposed to the requirements of federal regulations. My beloved profession was being devalued and judged as being unnecessary by a person who simply did not understand why the PVR program exists in the first place and why those skills are necessary and essential.

I wish this PVR program administrator was an outlier. But in truth I have experienced more political appointees who come to PVR program management with no understanding of the program or how to support optimizing conditions for professional thriving.

*“I spent two soul crushing years as a VR Counselor in a state agency.”* One former VR Counselor told me over the phone. *“I had to leave if I wanted to avoid becoming a burned-out apathetic bureaucrat. That is what it turns you into.”*

Over the years I have had thousands of conversations with current and former PVR program VRCs. Many of these conversations mention low pay and unreasonable workloads as primary factors influencing their abandonment of the practice setting. Getting deeper into these conversations reveals

these were not the primary reason they initially began to mentally experience cognitive dissonance resulting in the eventual disassociation from the practice setting. Many started looking for other options because they felt that they were set up to fail as a VRC professional in the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu.

*“The system broke my heart and broke my spirit,” another VRC told me. “The job they wanted me to do had nothing to do with my master’s degree or my profession. I was just a technician. I was reduced to being treated like an auto mechanic and my client was treated like a broke down car. My job was to just get it running again as fast as possible. It did not matter if it was just going to break down again. I was not a professional or a counselor. I was a job mechanic.”*

Conversations like these resonated with my own experiences as a qualified VRC working in the PVR program psychosocial cultural environment. They also resonated with me as a PVR program administrator.

*“I started my VR journey as a client not as a counselor,” a colleague told me. “I had a terrible counselor who did nothing to help me at all. I chose this profession because I knew I could do better than that for people. I knew what it felt like to be failed by the VR system, and I thought I could fix it from the inside. I was on that job for a little less than three years when I felt compelled to contact my former counselor and apologize for misjudging them. I could not fix it from the inside because it made me just like them. I was failing people the same way she had failed me. I went over to mental health counseling and never looked back.”*

These are the words shared with me by countless former VRCs. These are people who were once committed and dedicated enough to choose a profession they knew offered noncompetitive salaries. These are driven, intrinsically motivated, and hard-working people. They are mentally tough and resilient people who worked their way through an undergraduate degree program and a graduate degree program. They are people who invested their blood, sweat, tears, and energy to obtain the

highest qualification standard in the profession passing a rigorous examination to become a CRC. These are people who have demonstrated their mastery of the professional competencies empirical research has validated as being essential to effectively help people with disabilities access vocational employment and maximize independence. These are the people who were once attracted to my beloved profession. For these people it was always more than just a transactional job. For them it was a vocation of transformational relationships.

These are the people that should be easy to retain. These people should be easy to retain because they were once intrinsically motivated to join the profession. They have deeper roots and emotional attachment to the profession. Yet these are the people the PVR program is losing in large numbers. The PVR program struggles to attract and retain these people for a variety of reasons. Clearly a professional practice setting is unattractive if the primary employment setting is known for failing to support professional thriving. Clearly a professional practice setting that cannot retain its most dedicated and committed professionals will develop a reputation that makes attracting and recruiting new converts difficult. These are the people who fail to thrive in the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu.

I find I have become a heretic. I do not believe the accepted dogma of bureaucratic scientific management that views the world from a transactional exchange thinking. We fail to achieve optimal organizational balance when all we focus on is transactional exchanges efficiently executed by an overly managed mechanized bureaucratic system.

I do believe that dedicated, committed, and passionate professionals can be trusted and empowered to use their knowledge, skills, abilities, and professional competencies to build the transformational counselor-client relationships necessary to maximize vocational success.

I believe our professionals should be emancipated to practice with autonomy, competence, and confidence.

I no longer believe people are the cause of our problems.

I believe people are the only possible solution to our problems.

Systems and psychosocial cultures should be aligned to bring out the best version of people. They should not be designed based on the assumption that we must exert systemic control, or we will only get the very worst version of our people.

As I began this research project, I spoke with several professional colleagues. I shared the approach I was taking to study the VRC recruitment and retention crisis. Many were intrigued by my approach to writing love letters to my profession. I began receiving hundreds of emails from VRCs across the country sharing their own love letters to you, my beloved VRC profession. In Appendix C, I have included a compilation of selected heartbreaking anonymous quotes from VRCs sharing their experiences as professionals working in the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu.

### **Summary**

As I wrote this chapter, I found myself becoming discouraged and disenchanted. I did not want to finish this chapter on a pessimistic note. I love my profession deeply and wanted to find a way to end this chapter in a way that honors its uniquely hope filled and optimistic world view.

I have received letters and emails from my fellow VRCs. But intriguingly, I have also received emails from people with disabilities who wanted to express their appreciation for the VRCs who helped them transform their lives. I conclude this autoethnography by amplifying these, the most important voices. I believe they show the transformational potential of my profession within the PVR program. Can you imagine what you could become my love, if the PVR program was optimized for you to reach your fullest potential and thrive?

*“Not one person in my life really saw me or listened to me until she did. She did, and that changed everything.”*

*“In her office I never doubted myself once. It was so refreshing.”*

*"It was the first time I became something more than a cripple in a wheelchair. He saw me as a talented human being. I think that helped me remember that I was."*

*"I was lost. I had no clue about what I might be able to do work wise. Somehow, he helped me see my own talents and then helped me find the right job where I can use those talents. I love my job. I love my life!"*

*"I did not know that I was good at anything until I met him."*

*"My daughter is a completely different person now. I can't thank her enough. My baby girl is a self-confident successful engineer working for the federal government. How did that happen? That counselor was a gift from God. My baby went from a reclusive nonverbal shy girl to a successful professional who just bought her first house. I can't thank that incredible counselor enough. She never rushed things, she let my baby take her time and look what happened."*

*"I'm going to tell you what made him different. Everyone else kept telling me to get a job. What made him different was he never told me go find a job. Not one time did he tell me to go get a job. He told me we had to go find me. He said our goal was to find the best version of myself. The me I never knew was in here. We found me, but he still never said go find a job. He told me to go find a place I could have the greatest impact using my strengths. When we found that place, he did not say go get a job. He said let's make sure you have what you need to succeed there. When I got hired, he never said there I got you a job. He told me how grateful he was that I let him come along for the ride. To me, that is why he is different. It was never about him. It was always about me."*

And that my beloved profession, is why I love who you are when you are allowed to be the best version of yourself. These comments remind me of why I fell in love with you at first sight. They are the reason I still love my profession deeply.



## Chapter V: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This study presents a highly personalized autoethnographic narrative of the total lived experience of one CRC over the course of nearly 30 years as an embedded member of the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu. The purpose of this study was to examine, analyze, and critique the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu to gain insight into how this practice environment mediates, moderates, and contributes to VRC failure to thrive. I believe VRC failure to thrive in this practice setting is creates barriers to the effective recruitment and retention of qualified professionals.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the qualitative data set represented by the autoethnographic narrative presented in Chapter IV. The discussion will include a description of the data. I will provide details on how the RTA process was used to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Next, the chapter summarizes the conclusions providing a critical analysis of the PVR program psychosocial cultural milieu based on two primary themes extrapolated from the data set using RTA. The conclusions offer insight into the study's research questions. The study provides insights into the ways the transactional psychosocial cultural milieu is incongruent, antithetical, and misaligned with the transformational profession of VRC.

The chapter concludes with the submission of recommendations for the PVR program and the profession's scholars. Recommendations for the PVR program include specific psychosocial cultural transformation recommendations designed to enhance VRC recruitment, retention, and professional thriving. These recommendations are intended to optimize organizational cultural balance and restore professional autonomy, competency, confidence, and sense of belonging. The goal is achieving an optimal a balance between the transactional exchanges inherent to government bureaucracy and the empowered human relationships inherent to the transformational profession. Recommendations for future empirical research is offered in the hope that people with disabilities can have access to the most qualified VRCs.

## **Discussion**

The qualitative data collected and analyzed in this study exist in the form of words. Data in the form of words is more difficult to analyze than quantitative numbers conducive to advanced analytical statistical techniques. Numbers can be counted, but words count too. Words matter. In human contexts, words sometimes have more significance because our words inform our thinking, emotions, perceptions, and behavior. The qualitative data collected in this autoethnography represent the words that make up the lexicon of the PVR program psychosocial cultural milieu. Analysis of this data will help provide insights into how this cultural context mediates, moderates, and contributes to VRC failure to thrive.

## ***Data Analysis***

The qualitative data set contained in the autoethnographic storytelling narrative presented in Chapter IV was analyzed applying the process of RTA (Braun & Clarke; 2022). The RTA process started with my becoming deeply immersed in the data set to achieve a level of familiarization facilitating an initial emergence of common topics, subjects, issues, ideas, or experiences. This data familiarization coalesced around 10 initial data groupings labeled for key elements common to organizational cultures (Schein, 2010). These 10 initial data groupings were labeled and defined as follows:

1. **Language & Lexicon:** Shared culturally defined written, verbal, and nonverbal communication conventions. The collection of commonly used words and their implicit and explicit cultural meanings.
2. **Values & Ethics:** Shared culturally defined principles, standards, and aspirational morals establishing priorities, importance, and judgement informing thinking, perceiving, and behavior.

3. **Beliefs & Dogma:** Shared culturally defined belief systems, mental mindsets, worldviews, cognitive paradigms, thinking patterns, perceptual frameworks, attributional opinions, and authoritative unquestionable truths.
4. **Emotions & Affect:** Shared culturally defined moods, feelings, sentiments, reactions, responses, instincts, informed by commonly shared emotionality such as anxiety, confidence, optimism, pessimism, courage, fear, joy, or sadness.
5. **Norms & Customs:** Shared culturally defined standards of behavior defined by cultural roles and normative expectations.
6. **Artifacts & Tools:** Shared culturally defined objects, symbols, implements, instruments, paraphernalia, and devices commonly used and imbued with cultural meaning.
7. **Rituals & Traditions:** Shared culturally defined ceremonies, rites, observances, acts of faith, practices, conventions, protocol, formality, customs, habits, and routines.
8. **Folklore & Mythology:** Shared culturally defined narratives of myth, lore, oral traditions, legends, fables, parables, wives' tales, sayings, memes, or stories used to transmit and enculturate cultural ideals.
9. **Social Order:** Shared culturally defined structural arrangement of roles, functions, authority, and fealty. Can be hierarchical, collective, individualistic, adhocracy, democracy, communalistic, etc.
10. **Archetypes & Legends:** Shared culturally defined heroes, role models, prototypes, representations, personifications, exemplars, paragons, and embodiments of the cultural ideal.

Next, I continued to work through the autoethnographic storytelling transcript to generate an initial set of codes used to combine elements of similarity. This process distilled the broad cultural data groupings into 20 individual code categories. Continued reflexive assessment of these individual codes

facilitated the recognition that the codes were dualistic continuums. This recognition allowed the emergence of 10 semantic codes representing bipolar continuums. The 10 continuum codes were defined as:

1. **Humanistic versus Bureaucratic:** Cultural elements fall on a spectrum from human-centrism to administrative-centrism.
2. **People versus Process:** Cultural elements fall on the spectrum from people-empowered or process-empowered.
3. **Leadership versus Management:** Cultural elements fall on the spectrum from impassioned-leadership to management-controls.
4. **Faith & Trust versus Fear & Mistrust:** Cultural elements fall on the spectrum from trust to mistrust.
5. **Autonomy versus Power & Control:** Cultural elements fall on the spectrum from authorized autonomy to hierarchical authority control.
6. **Relationships versus Systems:** Cultural elements fall on the spectrum from prioritizing human relationships or automated systems.
7. **Belonging versus Alienation:** Cultural elements fall on the spectrum from building a sense of connected belonging and inclusion or seclusion and alienation.
8. **Optimism versus Pessimism:** Cultural elements fall on the spectrum from optimistic hopefulness to pessimistic hopelessness.
9. **Adhocracy versus Hierarchy:** Cultural elements fall on the spectrum from individual self-governance and autonomy to administrative governance by rank and authority.
10. **Competence versus Incompetence:** Cultural elements fall on the spectrum from supporting people's sense of skill, competency, and confidence to elements creating guilt, shame, and self-doubt.

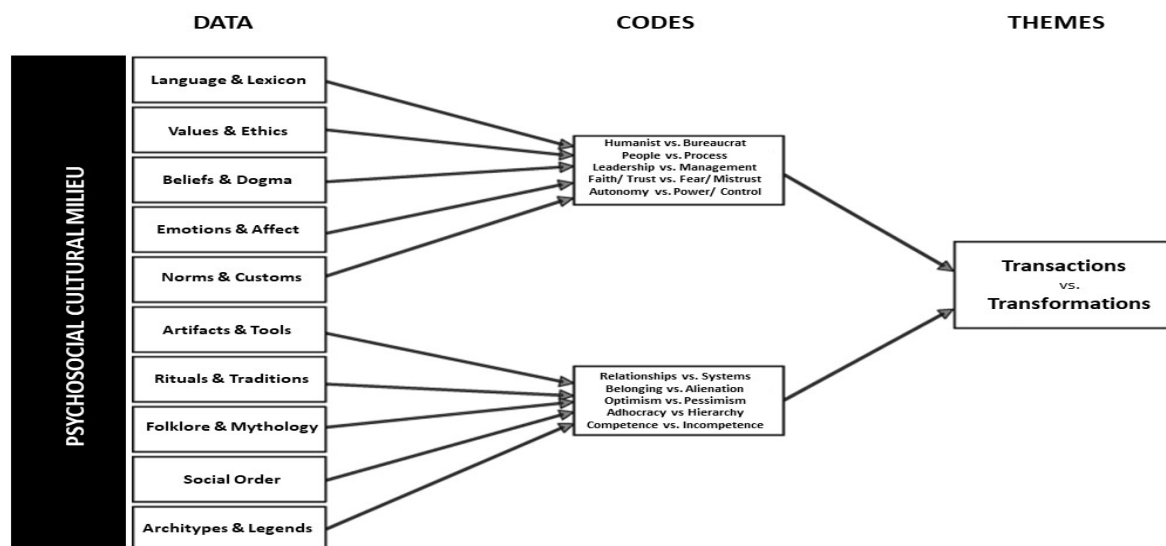
These codes analyzed for thematic commonalities. Combining codes into broader categories initially generated six general thematic categories. Continued refinement allowed the emergence two thematic categories. These thematic categories were already familiar to the data contained in the autoethnographic storytelling narrative transcript. Organizations create and foster psychosocial cultures for the purpose of motivating desired human behavior. The two thematic categories represent the two primary methods that a culture uses to motivate human behavior (Bass & Riggio, 2005). These two themes are:

1. **Transactions:** Externalized behavior moderators, mediators, and motivators designed to exchange extrinsic rewards for the performance of desired behavior and the exchange of punishment for undesirable behavior. Transactions are externalized behavioral control systems imposed through an authority.
2. **Transformations:** Internalized behavior moderators, mediators, and motivators providing intrinsic rewards for personally desirable behavior and the intrinsic punishment for personally undesirable behavior. Transformations are internalized behavioral control systems imposed through autonomy.

As with the initial codes, the themes are a single dualistic bipolar continuum. Arriving at a thematic continuum was gratifying because human cultural variation is rarely defined by absolute extremes. A thematic continuum allows for specific cultural elements to fall somewhere along the spectrum from one polar extreme to the other.

A visual representation of the RTA process described above is found in Figure 3.

Figure 3

*Data Coding & Reflexive Thematic Analysis*

*Note.* Data Coding & Reflexive Thematic Analysis Model. Data was coded by primary cultural elements. These elements were coded on ten coding continuums. The thematic continuum from transactions to transformations emerged.

**Data Interpretation**

The purpose of this study was to critically analyze the PVR program psychosocial cultural milieu to investigate the factors mediating, moderating, and influencing VRC failure to thrive. VRC failure to thrive is hypothesized to be at the heart of the VRC recruitment and retention crisis.

Interpretation of the data provides insights into the following research questions:

1. What can be learned about CRC failure to thrive through an autobiographical exploration of the lived experience of a CRC with nearly 30 years in PVR practice?
2. What can be learned about CRC failure to thrive through a critical ethnographic analysis of the total lived experience of the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu?

**Transactional Culture.** The PVR program has been operated for more than 100 years as a state-federal government partnership. State and federal government agencies are inherently bureaucratic organizational hierarchies. Bureaucracy works well in many governmental functions that require standardized processes and uniform control systems to achieve equity of services delivered efficiently avoiding fraud, waste, and abuse through the implementation of rigid control structures. Bureaucracy works best when the government function consists of transactional exchanges of one-size-fits-all services delivered uniformly to all recipients. Transactional exchange bureaucracies are dependent on effective bureaucratic technicians who obey authority, follow instructions, execute directions, comply with policies and procedures, and conform to conventionality. Rationality, logic, and objective detachment are essential qualities when the goal is providing the exact same service to every citizen regardless of unique circumstances. Bureaucracy and transactional exchange thinking is an effective tool in some contexts. In other contexts, inappropriate overuse of this tool prevents the organization from achieving its existential purpose.

The PVR program's existential purpose, and the laws and regulations governing it are unique in state and federal government. The program was born to be a transformational social justice program providing people with disabilities equity and equality of access to maximize vocational opportunity and achieve full social inclusion (Pub. L. 93-112). This requires that VR services be provided with flexibility rather than uniformity (34 Code of Federal Regulations Part 361). This requires the PVR program to provide services that are uniquely responsive, individualized, customized, and tailored to fit the needs of each program consumer. Bureaucracy's tools of standardized processes and uniform control systems are incongruent with the letter and spirit of the law. Bureaucracy's usefulness in executing transactional exchanges of one-size-fits-all services uniformly delivered with efficiency and accuracy is completely counterintuitive to the PVR program. Transformational human-centered relationship-based organizations providing uniquely individualized services are dependent upon a highly skilled pool of

professionals (Knight et al., 2012a). Bureaucracy and transactional exchange thinking is not only counterproductive in an individualized transformational professional-relationship dependent program, but it also directly prevents achievement of the program's purpose.

Bureaucratic technicians that obey authority, follow instructions, execute directions, comply with policies and procedures, and conform to conventionality are wholly inappropriate in the PVR context. Rationality, logic, and objective detachment are impediments to building effective interpersonal human relationships needed to provide holistically comprehensive and customized services. Bureaucracy and transactional exchange thinking may be effective tools in some contexts, but not in the professionally delivered transformational relationship context of the PVR program.

The analysis of the data collected in this study indicates that the PVR program psychosocial cultural milieu is bureaucratically transactional in nature. This psychosocial cultural environment is incongruent with the program's existential purpose and is antithetical to the laws and regulations that inform the program. The culture is directly in conflict with the concept of professionalism. Rather than a transformational program designed to be delivered by qualified professionals empowered to use their professional competencies, judgement, and clinical discretion to provide individually responsive services; the PVR program is a bureaucratic transactional exchange program designed to be executed by bureaucratic technicians in uniform, standardized, and rules-based ways resulting in one-size-fits-few solutions. With little control over the transactional exchange system driving their work, professionals have little discretion, authority, or autonomy to act as professionals. They feel set up to fail. And the transactional exchange mindset of management then holds them solely accountable for program performance results. This psychosocial cultural milieu facilitates bureaucratic technician performance but creates impediments to VRC professional thriving.

Sinek (2009) argued that human organizations must consciously and intentionally avoid losing sight of and drifting away from their existential purpose. Sinek called this existential purpose the why.



Sinek argued that organizations are born, expand, and thrive only when they are obsessively focused on why they exist in the first place. An organization obsessively centered on its why turns its mission into a great and noble quest the enlists people into a cause. Second only to the importance of the existential why, is the aspirational how. The how represents the character and values of the organizational community. Human beings have a basic human need to feel connected as members of a community that shares their values. The combination of being obsessively focused on the existential why and living true to the aspirational how creates a sense of tribe, trust, and dedicated loyalty. The why and the how wins people's hearts and minds.

Sinek argued that overtime organizations drift away from the why. When they drift away from the why, they also tend to drift away from the how. Organizational gravity tends to shift attention to obsessively focusing on what, the product they produce. Sinek argued that organizations obsessively focused on what they produce fail to succeed because they are unable to adapt to changing circumstances and they cling to optimizing the status quo of their increasingly obsolete what. He argued that organizations unable to remain focused on their why and how lose their most essential existential advantage. These organizations lose the hearts and minds of people once attracted to the organization's clear why and aspirational how. Sinek argued human beings are attracted and become loyal to organizations not because of what they do, but because of why and how they do it.

Figure 4 provides a visual representation of key aspects of the PVR transactional culture adapting Sinek's why, how, and what concepts. I have adapted this conceptual model by including the who and the where. If the why tells us the purpose of the organization, and the how tells us its applied values, the who is the prioritized customer or customers. The who tells us whose needs are met first by the organization based on its why and how. The element of where tells us where the "what" is produced. This visualization is designed to demonstrate how misaligned and incongruent the psychosocial cultural context of the PVR program is.

Figure 4

*Transactional Psychosocial Cultural Milieu of the PVR Program*

*Note.* Figure 4 summarizes the Why, How, Who, What, and Where of the transactional public VR psychosocial cultural milieu. These elements are incongruent, misaligned, and antithetical to the original purpose of the public VR program and the VRC profession.

The why of the PVR program psychosocial culture has become workforce development. Prior to 1998 all iterations of the Rehabilitation Act were standalone acts containing Congressional intent language indicating the existential purpose of the PVR program was social justice and ensuring the civil rights of people with disabilities. In 1998 Congress merged the Rehabilitation Act into the Workforce Investment Act amalgamating the PVR program into federally funded bureaucratically transactional exchange-based job training and labor force development programs.

The aspirational how of the PVR program psychosocial culture reflects bureaucratically transactional exchange-based values. Who is prioritized as the customer by the psychosocial culture is also incongruent with the program's original purpose. Rather than prioritizing meeting the individualized needs of people with disabilities, the needs of the bureaucracy come first, followed by meeting the

needs of employers for a skilled inexpensive talent pool, meeting the needs for growing the economy. The what that is the end-product of the bureaucratic transactional exchange-based psychosocial culture is bureaucratic bloat, transactional exchanges, and transactional jobs. In this psychosocial culture there is a general belief that quantifiable transactional jobs are produced by fidelity to executing the bureaucratic process. The system operated competently produces quantifiable outcomes. Failure to achieve quantifiable transactional outcomes is attributed to incompetent flawed human beings who have failed to meet the needs of the system.

This organizational psychosocial culture is the antithesis of the why, how, who, what, and where of my beloved transformational profession of VRC. The why, how, who, what, and where that won my heart and mind attracting me to my profession with passion, commitment, and loyalty do not find a great deal of psychosocial cultural support in this practice environment.

Many VRC professionals have told me they felt a sense of bait-and-switch. During recruitment they were attracted to the profession because of its unique purpose, values, philosophies, and distinct clinical interventions. Upon entering PVR practice they learned the cultural environment required a shift to an alternative purpose, a set of professionally incongruent values, incongruent philosophies, and replaced the distinct clinical interventions with transactional counterfeits of the transformational originals. VRC failure to thrive in this psychosocial cultural environment is inevitable. The VRC turnover and retention crisis demonstrates that the PVR program has lost the hearts and minds of the profession specifically designed to help it achieve its transformational purpose. It did this by turning everything into transactional exchanges.

**Transformational Profession.** As evidenced by the historical evolution of the VRC profession, the discipline is transformational. The profession's distinctive knowledge, skills, abilities, and core competencies are human centered leveraging the transformational power of a counseling relationship between two human beings. It is a transformational profession born to meet the needs of people with

disabilities in order to achieve transformational social justice change. Unfortunately the transformational profession has existed for decades in a transactional exchange-based bureaucratic psychosocial cultural milieu. Figure 5 compares the transformational nature of the VRC profession with the transactional psychosocial cultural milieu of the PVR program to highlight key misalignments and contradictions.

**Figure 5**

*Transformational VRC Profession*



*Note.* Figure 5 is a visual representation of the transformational why, how, who, what, and where congruent with the VRC profession.

First, the why is incongruent and incompatible. The why of workforce development objectifies human beings with disabilities as resources, commodities, or tools to be used by the workforce to meet the needs of business, industry, and the economy. The transformational why of social justice working toward equity, equality, and assuring the civil rights of people with disabilities lies in the heart of the VRC profession because it was the original existential purpose of the PVR program (Aliff & Sprong, 2020). This attracts many new recruits to the profession. Losing sight of this why in the psychosocial cultural context of the PVR program contributes to VRC professional failure to thrive resulting in high turnover.

Second, the transformational how reflected in the values of the profession lives in the hearts and minds of VRCs because these were the original existential values of the PVR program. These values prioritize meeting the needs of people with disabilities. The VRC values reflect that the profession's allegiance, fealty, loyalty, and commitment is primarily devoted to the client. These values are consistent with the concept of professionalism where a skilled helper creates a transformative relationship with each client to customize services and goals to meet their individualized needs applying professional autonomy, discretion, competency, confidence, and expertise. These values also respect the rights of people with disabilities to autonomy, discretion, and making informed independent decisions. The transformational how of the VRC profession is in direct conflict with the transactional how of bureaucracy. This conflict lies at the heart of VRC failure to thrive resulting in barriers to recruitment and retention.

Third, the transformational who of the VRC profession is also reflective of the original who of the PVR program. Primary loyalty is centered on meeting the needs of the client. This fealty is reflected in the transformational how of the VRC profession's values. VRCs primary allegiance and loyalty is centered on people with disabilities. When faced with a dilemma where meeting the needs of the client conflict with meeting the needs of the bureaucracy or the needs of employers, the transformational values of the profession center on meeting the needs of the client. The transactional who of the bureaucracy centers allegiance on meeting the needs of the system first. Secondary loyalty is focused on meeting the workforce needs of employers. When faced with a dilemma where a client's needs conflict with the needs of the bureaucracy or employers, VRCs working in the PVR program psychosocial culture face challenges to their primary allegiance. This conflict lies at the heart of VRC failure to thrive resulting in barriers to recruitment and retention.

Fourth, the transformational what of the VRC profession is reflective of the original transformational what of the PVR program. The end-product is maximizing the individual's

transformational vocational opportunities facilitating independence, economic equality, and full social inclusion. This what is holistically centered on the individualized needs of each client and puts their best interests at the heart of the profession. This what requires VRC professionals to engage in a counseling relationship that allows them to become intimately familiar with each client, so services and vocational goals are tailored based on the strengths, abilities, capabilities, interests, concerns, and unique potential of the individual. The end-product is not a transactional job. The end-product is a transformational vocation within an environmental context where the individual can thrive. This conflict lies at the heart of VRC failure to thrive resulting in barriers to recruitment and retention.

Fifth, the transformational where of the VRC profession is congruent with the original where of the PVR program. The language used in federal law recognizes that providing customized, tailored, and individualized services to people with disabilities requires a transformative human relationship. Only a well-trained qualified professional engaging in a collaborative counseling relationship with a client can effectively orchestrate the complex services necessary to ensure people with disabilities have access to vocational workplaces and society. The heart of the VRC profession is a transformational counselor-client relationship of exploration, discovery, and action. Appropriate transactional exchanges of the system are an important and necessary element to facilitate services. But client vocational success is not an outcome of the transactional exchanges or the system's processes. People transform lives in relationships with other people. Counselor-client transformational relationships are the heart of the VRC profession. This conflict lies at the heart of VRC failure to thrive resulting in barriers to recruitment and retention.

## **Conclusions**

I am certainly not the first to make these observations about the conflicts between the PVR program culture and the VRC profession. As I finished working on this research project, I came across an article from 1979 that makes the same arguments. Smits and Ledbetter (1979) clearly articulated similar

observations. Their conclusions called attention to the inherent conflict between the PVR program administrative structure and the concept of professionalism. Smits and Ledbetter argued that the PVR program needed to achieve attitudinal, structural, and behavioral organizational change as preconditions to fully leverage the knowledge, skills, and abilities of VRCs. Reading this article from 1979 in the context of 2024, I perceive that nothing has changed. In fact, I perceive the administrative bureaucracy has only become more deeply entrenched and professionalism has been all but abandoned by the PVR program.

The conclusions drawn from this study call attention once again to the conflict between the PVR program psychosocial cultural milieu and the VRC profession that was born to serve the needs of people with disabilities. These conflicts are incongruent, misaligned, and irreconcilable with the concept of professionalism and the original existential purpose of the PVR program. The PVR program's transactional psychosocial culture fails to support the transformational VRC profession resulting in VRC failure to thrive in public practice. VRC failure to thrive in PVR practice creates barriers and impediments to recruitment efforts by making the profession unattractive. VRC failure to thrive in PVR practice is evidenced by professional abandonment and turnover. To effectively address the recruitment and retention of VRCs in the PVR program macro-level psychosocial cultural transformational change is necessary.

### **Recommendations**

Balance is the core message behind the following recommendations. Transactional bureaucratic exchanges are a necessary part of government administration. I am not arguing for the complete eradication of the necessary administrative bureaucracy. I am however arguing that these necessary tools have been overused, overapplied, and have taken over control of the PVR program. The bureaucratic administrative psychosocial culture has replaced the original existential *why, how, who, what, and where* of the PVR program. Too much process and too many control systems have

dehumanized people with disabilities and de-professionalized VRCs. I am arguing for a transformational rebalancing of the PVR program psychosocial cultural environment to reduce the inherent conflicts, misalignments, incongruencies, and irreconcilable differences between transactional exchange thinking and transformational human relationships at the heart of my beloved profession.

To achieve this rebalancing I believe the PVR program needs to engage in a fearless psychosocial cultural self-reflection. Consistent with the ideas of Simon Sinek (2009), I believe this cultural transformation should focus our collective attention on:

1. **Remembering our Why:** We must remember, reclaim, reemphasize, and restore our transformational existential purpose. We need to remember we were never intended to be a transactional jobs program. We were supposed to be a social justice program designed to help people with disabilities maximize their access to vocational opportunities, independence, and full social inclusion. We are not alone in our having forgotten our existential purpose. In 1998 Congress forgot too. The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 effectively assumed that the PVR program was a jobs program designed to meet the labor market needs of employers and the economy. We were born to help people with disabilities who had been left behind by employers and society. We were born to transform the discrimination, prejudice, segregation, isolation, and marginalization people with disabilities face when interacting with employers and society.
2. **Remembering our How:** We must remember, reclaim, reemphasize, and restore our transformational values, philosophies, and ethical principles. We must rebalance our organizational cultures to be human-centered, client-centered, and professionally empowered. Autonomy, independence, discretion, competency, confidence, and psychological safety are essential in helping people with disabilities to restore a sense of



- control over their lives. The same values and principles apply to VRC professionals. They are essential in helping professionals thrive.
3. **Remembering our Who:** We must remember, reclaim, reemphasize, and restore our transformational existential *who*. Our primary allegiance, loyalty, fealty, and dedicated commitment should be centered on putting the needs of people with disabilities first. In ideal situation there may be no conflict between the client's needs and the needs of the bureaucratic system, employers, or workforce development. But when there is a conflict between these competing needs, we need to remember we were not born to prioritize the needs of the bureaucratic system. We were not born to make people with disabilities capable of meeting the labor force needs of employers.
  4. **Remembering our What:** We must remember, reclaim, reemphasize, and restore our transformational existential *what*. Becoming clear on what we do is vitally important. We don't produce workforce ready widgets and plug them into vacant jobs. The words Congress used in 1920 are important (Smith Fess Act of 1920). They did not establish the state-federal jobs rehabilitation program. They created the state-federal vocational rehabilitation program. The words job and vocation are not synonyms. These words have quite different definitions and come from dissimilar sources of meaning. We need to remember our end-product is transformational vocations not transactional jobs. Achieving quality transformational vocational outcomes takes patience, skill, and intentional focus. Achieving mass quantities of transactional job outcomes is as easy as connecting a job seeker to a vacant job. We need to remember what we are intended to produce.
  5. **Remembering our Where:** We must remember, reclaim, reemphasize, and restore our transformational existential modus operandi. We need to remember where our end-product of transformational vocational outcomes is produced. Transactional job connecting

can come from a process or system. Transformational vocational outcomes require a psychologically safe, trusting, engaged, genuine, and authentic human relationship that allows the client to engage in fearless self-discovery, self-reflection, self-awareness, to develop a sense of self-worth and self-confidence.

This qualitative autoethnography studied VRC failure to thrive in the PVR psychosocial cultural milieu to provide insight into macrolevel factors preventing VRC recruitment and retention. For scholars interested in VRC recruitment and retention I recommend further research applying quantitative, mixed-methods, and other qualitative methodologies taking a macrolevel approach to understanding the psychosocial cultural context. The inherent limitations of this study are based on my own experiences, perceptions, and assumptions. My approach renders generalization spurious and inappropriate. Further study of this issue taking a macrolevel psychosocial cultural frame of reference will help expand our understanding of this complex and pervasive crisis.

Finally, I urge PVR program stakeholders, people with disabilities, and public policy decision makers to reconsider the bureaucratic transactional demands placed on the PVR program that dehumanizes and devalues the human beings receiving services from the program, and the professionals best suited to ensure their individualized needs are met. If the goal is equal access to vocational opportunity, social inclusion, and civil rights justice the program's psychosocial cultural milieu must be realigned.

## References

- Adams, D. R., Williams, N. J., Becker-Haimes, E. M., Skriner, L., Shaffer, L., DeWitt, K., Neimark, G., Jones, D. T., & Beidas, R. S. (2019). Therapist financial strain and turnover: Interactions with the system-level implementation of evidence-based practices. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 46*(6), 713–723. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-019-00949-8>
- Adams, T. E., & Herrmann, A. F. (2023). Good autoethnography. *Journal of Autoethnography, 4*(1), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1525/joae.2023.4.1.1>
- Adams, T. E., Jones, S. H., & Ellis, C. (2022). *Handbook of autoethnography* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429431760>
- Adams, T. E., Jones, S. H., & Ellis, C. (2017). *Autoethnography: Understanding qualitative research*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12111>
- Adler, A. (1998). *Understanding life*. Hazelden. <https://archive.org/details/understandinglif0000adle>
- Adler, A. (1931). *What life should mean to you* (A. Porter, Ed.). Little, Brown, and company. <https://adler.institute/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/what-life-should-mean-to-you-Adler.pdf>
- Ahmad, M. R., & Raja, R. (2021). Employee job satisfaction and business performance: The mediating role of organizational commitment. *Vision: The Journal of Business Perspective, 25*(2), 168-179. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972262920985949>
- Aiken, W. J., Smits, S. J., & Lollar, D. J. (1972). Leadership behavior and job satisfaction: In state rehabilitation agencies. *Personnel Psychology, 25*, 64-73. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.1972.tb01091.x>
- Akdere, M., & Egan, T. (2020). Transformational leadership and human resource development: Linking employee learning, job satisfaction, and organizational performance. *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 31*(4), 393-421. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.21404>

- Alexander, J. A., Bloom, J. R., & Nuchols, B. A. (1994). Nursing turnover and hospital efficiency: An organization-level analysis. *Industrial relations: a journal of economy and society*, 33(4), 505-520. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-232X.1994.tb00355.x>
- Aliff, M., & Sprong, M. E. (2020). Qualifications for rehabilitation counselors: A social justice issue. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling*, 51(4), 277-281. <https://doi.org/10.1891/jarc-d-20-00030>
- Allan, B. A., Dexter, C., Kinsey, R., & Parker, S. (2018). Meaningful work and mental health: Job satisfaction as a moderator. *Journal of mental health*, 27(1), 38-44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2016.1244718>
- Alston, R. J., Harley, D. A., & Middleton, R. A. (2006). The role of rehabilitation in achieving social justice for minorities with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 24(3), 129–136. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-2006-00327>
- Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub.L. No. 101-336, 104 Stat. 328 (1990). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/933/text>
- Andrew, J. D., Faubion, C. W., & Palmer, C. D. (2002). The relationship between counselor satisfaction and extrinsic job factors in state rehabilitation agencies. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 45(4), 223–232. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00343552020450040501>
- Armstrong, A. J., Hawley, C., Blankenship, C., Lewis, A. N., & Hurley, J. (2008a). Certified rehabilitation counseling personnel: Job satisfaction and intention to quit. *Journal of Rehabilitation Administration*, 32(1), 15-32. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235328860\\_Certified\\_Rehabilitation\\_Counseling\\_Personnel\\_Job\\_Satisfaction\\_and\\_Intent\\_to\\_Quit](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235328860_Certified_Rehabilitation_Counseling_Personnel_Job_Satisfaction_and_Intent_to_Quit)
- Armstrong, A. J., Hawley, CE., Lewis, A. N., Blankenship, C., & Pugsley, R. A. (2008b). Relationship between employment setting and job satisfaction among CRC personnel. *Journal of Vocational*

- Rehabilitation*, 28, 41-51. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Allen-Lewis/publication/242113496\\_Relationship\\_between\\_employment\\_setting\\_and\\_job\\_satisfaction\\_among\\_CRC\\_personnel/links/59382c64aca272bcd180ade1/Relationship-between-employment-setting-and-job-satisfaction-among-CRC-personnel.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Allen-Lewis/publication/242113496_Relationship_between_employment_setting_and_job_satisfaction_among_CRC_personnel/links/59382c64aca272bcd180ade1/Relationship-between-employment-setting-and-job-satisfaction-among-CRC-personnel.pdf)
- Armstrong, P. B. (2018). Neuroscience and the social powers of narrative: How stories configure our brains. *English Language and Literature*, 64(1), 3-24.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327401979\\_Neuroscience\\_and\\_the\\_Social\\_Powers\\_of\\_Narrative\\_English\\_Language\\_and\\_Literature\\_Vol\\_64\\_No\\_1\\_2018\\_3-24](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327401979_Neuroscience_and_the_Social_Powers_of_Narrative_English_Language_and_Literature_Vol_64_No_1_2018_3-24)
- Armstrong, P. B. (2020). *Stories and the brain: The neuroscience of narrative*. JHU Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/book.74953>.
- Arslan, U. (2018). The historical development of professional counseling and an overview of vocational standards in the United States. *International Journal of Eurasia Social Sciences*, 9(34), 2524–2533. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED604104.pdf>
- Babbar, S., Adams, D. R., Becker-Haimes, E. M., Skinner, L. C., Kratz, H. E., Cliggitt, L., Inacker, P., & Beidas, R. S. (2018). Therapist turnover and client non-attendance. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 93, 12–16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.06.026>
- Bass, B.M., & Riggio, R.E. (2005). *Transformational leadership* (2nd ed.). Psychology Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410617095>
- Barkhuizen, G. (2019). Core dimensions of narrative inquiry. In J. McKinley, & H. Rose (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of research methods in applied linguistics* (pp. 188-198). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367824471>
- Barkhuizen, G., & Consoli, S. (2021). Pushing the edge in narrative inquiry. *System*, 102, 102656.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102656>

- Barnes, E. F., Rak, E., Austin, B., & Louw, J. (2012). Rehabilitation counselor professional identity development in master's-level training programs: An exploratory study of potential influencing factors. *Rehabilitation Research Policy, and Education*, 26, 185–197.  
<https://doi.org/10.1891/2168-6653.26.2.185>
- Bayer, S., & Hettinger, A. (2019). Storytelling: A natural tool to weave the threads of science and community together. *Bulletin of the Ecological Society of America*, 100(2), 1-6.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/bes2.1542>
- Beale, L. M. (2023). *An examination of counselor turnover and its impact on quality behavioral health* [Doctoral dissertation, Walden University]. ScholarWorks.  
<https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=13173&context=dissertations>
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (2023). The social construction of reality. In W. Longhofer & D. Winchester (Eds.), *Social theory re-wired: New connections to classical and contemporary perspectives* (3rd ed., pp. 92-101). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003320609>
- Berger, R. J., & Wilbers, L. E. (2021). *Introducing disability studies* (2nd Ed.). Lynne Rienner Publishers.  
<https://www.rienner.com/uploads/5f84d9fd8cabd.pdf>
- Bernstein, P. (1997). *American work values: Their origin and development*. SUNY Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.34-5772>
- Berry, K. (2015). Spinning autoethnographic reflexivity, cultural critique and negotiating selves. In T. E. Adams, S. H. Jones, & C. Ellis (Eds.), *The handbook of autoethnography* (pp. 209–227). Left Coast Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315427812>
- Bixby, L., Bevan, S., & Boen, C. (2022). The links between disability, incarceration, and social exclusion: Study examines the links between disability, incarceration, and social exclusion. *Health Affairs*, 41(10), 1460-1469. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2022.00495>

- Bluett, C. G. (1945). Vocational interests of rehabilitation of officers. *Occupations, 24(1)*, 25-32.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2164-5892.1945.tb00714.x>
- Bobby, C. L. (2013). The evolution of specialties in the CACREP standards: CACREP's role in unifying the profession. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 91(1)*, 35–43.  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2013.00068.x>
- Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. (2016). *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories*. New York, New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315545417>
- Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. (Eds.). (2001). *Ethnographically speaking: Autoethnography, literature, and aesthetics*. AltaMira Press. [https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/spe\\_facpub/19/](https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/spe_facpub/19/)
- Bochner, A. P., & Herrmann, A. F. (2020). Practicing narrative inquiry II: Making meanings move. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Oxford Academic.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190847388.013.19>
- Bonaccio, S., Connelly, C. E., Gellatly, I. R., Jetha, A., & Martin Ginis, K. A. (2020). The participation of people with disabilities in the workplace across the employment cycle: Employer concerns and research evidence. *Journal of business and psychology, 35(2)*, 135-158.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-018-9602-5>
- Boushey, H., & Glynn, S. J. (2012). *There are significant business costs to replacing employees*. Center for American Progress.  
[https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2012/11/16/44464/there-are-significant-businesscosts-to-replacing-employees /](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2012/11/16/44464/there-are-significant-businesscosts-to-replacing-employees/)
- Brabson, L. A., Harris, J. L., Lindhiem, O., & Herschell, A. D. (2020). Workforce turnover in community behavioral health agencies in the USA: A Systematic review with recommendations. *Clinical child and family psychology review, 23*, 297-315. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-020-00313-5>

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology, 9*(1), 3-26. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18*(3), 328-352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brown, D. J., Arnold, R., Fletcher, D., & Standage, M. (2017). Human Thriving: A Conceptual Debate and Literature Review. *European Psychologist, 22*(3), 167-179. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000294>
- Brubaker, D. R. (1977). Professionalization and Rehabilitation Counseling. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, 8*(4), 208-217. <https://doi.org/10.1891/0047-2220.8.4.208>
- Brubaker, D. R. (1981). Identity and organizational problems in professional rehabilitation. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 47*(1), 54-58. <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=3362ae41-7334-443f-bcb5-fc90f25b05aa%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZSZyY29wZT1zaXRl#AN=5016142&db=aph>
- Camacho, S. (2020). From theory to practice: Operationalizing transformative mixed methods with and for the studied population. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 14*(3), 305-335. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689819872614>
- Cameron, K. (2009). *An introduction to the competing values framework*. Haworth. [https://www.thercfgroup.com/files/resources/an\\_introduction\\_to\\_the\\_competing\\_values\\_framework\\_white\\_paper-pdf-28512.pdf](https://www.thercfgroup.com/files/resources/an_introduction_to_the_competing_values_framework_white_paper-pdf-28512.pdf)



- Capella, M. E., & Andrew, J. D. (2004). The Relationship Between Counselor Job Satisfaction and Consumer Satisfaction in Vocational Rehabilitation. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 47(4), 205–214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00343552040470040201>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *Disability and Health Data System (DHDS)*. <http://dhds.cdc.gov>
- Chan, F., Bishop, M., Chronister, J., Lee, E. J., & Chiu, C. Y. (2021). *Certified rehabilitation counselor examination preparation* (3rd ed.). Springer Publishing Company. <https://connect.springerpub.com/content/book/978-0-8261-5825-3>
- Chan, F., Chronister, J., Allen, C. A., Catalano, D. E., & Lee, E. J. (2004). Foundations of rehabilitation counseling. *Directions of Rehabilitation Counseling*, 15, 1-11. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Eun-Jeong-Lee-4/publication/268400089\\_Foundations\\_of\\_Rehabilitation\\_Counseling\\_1\\_Foundations\\_of\\_Rehabilitation\\_Counseling/links/5630dc3008ae3de9381cbc3e/Foundations-of-Rehabilitation-Counseling-1-Foundations-of-Rehabilitation-Counseling.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Eun-Jeong-Lee-4/publication/268400089_Foundations_of_Rehabilitation_Counseling_1_Foundations_of_Rehabilitation_Counseling/links/5630dc3008ae3de9381cbc3e/Foundations-of-Rehabilitation-Counseling-1-Foundations-of-Rehabilitation-Counseling.pdf)
- Chan, F., Keegan, J., Muller, V., Kaya, C., Flowers, S., & Iwanaga, K. (2016). Evidence-based practice and research in VR Counseling. In I. Marini & M. A. Stebnicki (Eds.), *The professional counselor's desk reference* (2nd ed., pp. 605-610). <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2015-45834-090>
- Chan, F., Leahy, M. J., Saunders, J. L., Tarvydas, V. M., Ferrin, J. M., & Lee, G. (2003). Training needs of CRCs for contemporary practice. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 46(2), 82–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00343552030460020201>
- Chan, F., Tansey, T. N., Chronister, J., McMahon, B. T., Iwanaga, K., Wu, J. R., ... & Moser, E. (2017). Rehabilitation counseling practice in state vocational rehabilitation and the effect of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling*, 48(3), 20-28. <https://doi.org/10.1891/0047-2220.48.3.20>

Chan, T. (2003). *Recruiting and retaining professional staff in state VR agencies: Some preliminary findings from the RSA Evaluation Study, a special report prepared at the request of the Department of Education*. Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and the American Institutes for Research (AIR), Washington, DC.

[https://scholar.google.com/scholar\\_lookup?&title=Recruiting%20and%20retaining%20professional%20staff%20in%20state%20VR%20agencies%3A%20Some%20preliminary%20findings%20from%20the%20RSA%20evaluation%20study&publication\\_year=2003&author=Chan%2CT](https://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?&title=Recruiting%20and%20retaining%20professional%20staff%20in%20state%20VR%20agencies%3A%20Some%20preliminary%20findings%20from%20the%20RSA%20evaluation%20study&publication_year=2003&author=Chan%2CT)

Chan, T. (2004). *Qualified personnel recruitment and retention: Challenges and opportunities* [Paper presentation]. National Conference on Rehabilitation Education, Washington, D.C.

[https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as\\_sdt=0%2C50&q=Chan%2C+T.+%282004%29.+Qualified+personnel+recruitment+and+retention%3A+Challenges+and+opportunities.+Paper+presented+at+the+National+Conference+on+Rehabilitation+Education%2C+Washington%2C+D.C.&btnG=](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C50&q=Chan%2C+T.+%282004%29.+Qualified+personnel+recruitment+and+retention%3A+Challenges+and+opportunities.+Paper+presented+at+the+National+Conference+on+Rehabilitation+Education%2C+Washington%2C+D.C.&btnG=)

Chapin, M. H., & Goodwin Jr, L. R. (2006). Rehabilitation Counselor Education Students' Career Goals: A Partial Replication Study. *College Student Journal*, 40(4), 832-846.

<https://eric.ed.gov/?q=source%3A%22College+Student+Journal%22+ISSN-0146-3934&ff1=souCollege+Student+Journal&pg=77&id=EJ765385>

Charni, H., Brun, I., & Ricard, L. (2020). Impact of employee job satisfaction and commitment on customer perceived value: An original perspective. *International Journal of Bank Marketing*, 38(3), 737–755. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJBM-03-2019-0097>

Chiesa, R., Petruzzello, G., Mariani, M. G., & Guglielmi, D. (2020). Expectations of Career Counseling and their Effect on Client Satisfaction. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 68(3), 254-267.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12235>

Clandinin, D. J. (2022). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Routledge.

<https://api.taylorfrancis.com/content/books/mono/download?identifierName=doi&identifierValue=10.4324/9781003240143&type=googlepdf>

Clandinin, D. J. (Ed.). (2006). *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology*. Sage.

<https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=EgimAwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Handbook+of+narrative+inquiry:+Mapping+a+methodology&ots=yU1VXnvjSy&sig=xQyy2X-xfBtgS6bgOi43Mdy1224>

Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification. (2023). *Code of professional ethics for certified*

*Rehabilitation Counselors*. <https://crccertification.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2023-Code-of-Ethics.pdf>

Connelly, J., & Wooderson, S. (2020). Preparing for the future: Vocational rehabilitation and research partnerships for innovation. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 53(3), 335-340.

<https://content.iospress.com/download/journal-of-vocational-rehabilitation/jvr201109?id=journal-of-vocational-rehabilitation%2Fjvr201109>

Conrad, J. A. (2020). On intellectual and developmental disabilities in the United States: A historical perspective. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 24(1), 85-101.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1744629518767001>

Cooper, R., & Lilyea, B. (2022). I'm interested in autoethnography, but how do I do it. *The Qualitative Report*, 27(1), 197-208.

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/dd4c/354dc93a5f501aa65173d48a6f4a59536042.pdf>

Copson, A. (2015). What is humanism? In A. Copson & A. C. Grayling (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell handbook of humanism* (pp. 1–33). John Wiley & Sons.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118793305.ch1>

- Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs. (2022). *CACREP accreditation decisions*. <https://www.cacrep.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/January-2022-Accreditation-Decision-Announcement.pdf>
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2016). *2016 CACREP standards*. <http://www.cacrep.org/for-programs/2016-cacrepstandards/>
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs. (2015). *CORE-CACREP merger frequently asked questions*. <http://www.cacrep.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/CACREP-CORE-FAQs-July-2015.pdf>
- Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation. (2022). *CSAVR strategic priorities: How we got here and where we need to go now* [Conference presentation].  
<https://www.csavr.org/conference-presentations>
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.  
[https://books.google.com/books/about/Qualitative\\_Inquiry\\_and\\_Research\\_Design.html?id=DLbBDQAAQBAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/Qualitative_Inquiry_and_Research_Design.html?id=DLbBDQAAQBAJ)
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *A concise introduction to mixed methods research*. Sage.  
[https://books.google.com/books/about/A\\_Concise\\_Introduction\\_to\\_Mixed\\_Methods.html?id=51UXBAAAQBAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/A_Concise_Introduction_to_Mixed_Methods.html?id=51UXBAAAQBAJ)
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.  
[https://spada.uns.ac.id/pluginfile.php/510378/mod\\_resource/content/1/creswell.pdf](https://spada.uns.ac.id/pluginfile.php/510378/mod_resource/content/1/creswell.pdf)
- Cull, J. G., & Hardy, R. E. (1972). *Vocational rehabilitation: Profession and process*. Thomas.  
[https://archive.org/details/vocationalrehabi00john\\_0](https://archive.org/details/vocationalrehabi00john_0)
- Davies, T. (2008). *Humanism* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203932568>

De Beauvoir, S. (2020). *What is existentialism?* Penguin UK.

<https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=0vjmDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT4&dq=de+beauvoir+what+is+existentialism&ots=f9KGqm39hW&sig=hliTY4-SJEJXuKvfmBQRFgAREPA>

Dean, E.E., Shogren, K.A., Hagiwara, & A M., Wehmeyer, M.L. (2018). How does employment influence health outcomes? A systematic review of the intellectual disability literature. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 49*(1), 1-13. <https://content.iospress.com/articles/journal-of-vocational-rehabilitation/jvr950>

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 1–32). Sage Publications Ltd. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2005-07735-001>

Dew, D. W., Alan, G.M., & Tomlinson, P. (2008). *Recruitment and retention of vocational rehabilitation counselors* (Institute on Rehabilitation Issues Monograph No. 33). Washington, DC: The George Washington University, Center for Rehabilitation Counseling Research and Education: U.S. Department of Education Rehabilitation Services Administration. [https://ncrtm.ed.gov/sites/default/files/library/459/33rdIRI-recruitment\\_and\\_Retention\\_of\\_Voc\\_Rehab\\_Counselors.pdf](https://ncrtm.ed.gov/sites/default/files/library/459/33rdIRI-recruitment_and_Retention_of_Voc_Rehab_Counselors.pdf)

DiMichael, S. G. (1949). Work satisfaction and work efficiency of vocational counselors as related to measured interests. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 33*(4), 319–329. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0058971>

Dirth, T. P., & Adams, G. A. (2019). Decolonial theory and disability studies: On the modernity/coloniality of ability. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 7*(1), 260-289. <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v7i1.762>

- Eby, L. T., & Rothrauff-Laschober, T. C. (2012). The relationship between perceptions of organizational functioning and voluntary counselor turnover: A four-wave longitudinal study. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment, 42*(2), 151–158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsat.2011.10.008>
- Eby, L. T., Burk, H., & Maher, C. P. (2010). How serious of a problem is staff turnover in substance abuse treatment? A longitudinal study of actual turnover. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment, 39*(3), 264–271. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsat.2010.06.009>
- Edwards, J. (2021). Ethical Autoethnography: Is it Possible? *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 20*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406921995306>
- Elliott, T. R., & Leung, P. (2005). Vocational rehabilitation: History and practice. In *Handbook of vocational psychology* (pp. 330-354). Routledge.  
<https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:15753409>
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. AltaMira Press.  
<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2004-21819-000>
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2010). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 12*(1). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589>
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research, 36*(4), 273-290. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589>
- Emener, W. G. (1987). Ethical standards for rehabilitation counseling: A brief review of critical historical developments. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, 18*(4), 5-8.  
<https://connect.springerpub.com/content/sgrjarc/18/4/5>
- Eriksen, T. H., & Nielsen, F. S. (2013). *A history of anthropology*. Pluto Press.  
[https://doi.org/10.26530/oopen\\_625231](https://doi.org/10.26530/oopen_625231)

- Feldman, A. (2003). Validity and quality in self-study. *Educational Researcher*, 32(3), 26–28.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X032003026>
- Fisher, W. R. (1985). The narrative paradigm: In the beginning. *Journal of communication*, 35(4), 74-89.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1985.tb02974.x>
- Fleming, A. R. (2018). Human resources issues: Recruiting and retaining rehabilitation counselors and human service professionals in rural, frontier, and territory communities. In D. A. Harley, N. A. Ysasi, M. L. Bishop, & A. R. Fleming (Eds.), *Disability and vocational rehabilitation in rural settings: Challenges to service delivery* (pp. 649-664). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64786-9\\_35](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64786-9_35)
- Fleming, A., Phillips, B., Manninen-Luse, M., Irizarry, L. O., & Hylton, T. (2011). Professional identity, professional associations, and recruitment: Perspectives of current doctoral students and recent graduates of rehabilitation programs. *Rehabilitation Research, Policy, and Education*, 25(2), 63-72. <https://connect.springerpub.com/content/sgrrrpe/25/2/63.abstract?implicit-login=true>
- Fleming, A. R., McKnight, M., Sherman, S., & Nerlich, A. P. (2022). Beyond *Total Rehabilitation*: Voices of mid-career scholars regarding the past, present, and future of rehabilitation counseling and education. *Rehabilitation Counselors and Educators Journal*, 11(3).  
<https://doi.org/10.52017/001c.33649>
- Fortin, D. (2022). *How to calculate employee turnover cost*. The Predictive Index.  
<https://www.predictiveindex.com/blog/how-to-calculate-employee-turnover-cost/>
- Frain, M., Bishop, M., Tansey, T., Sanchez, J. & Wijngaarde, F. (2013). Current knowledge and training needs of certified VR Counselors to work effectively with veterans with disabilities. *Rehabilitation Research, Policy, and Education*, 27(1), 2-17. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1891/2168-6653.27.1.2>

- Frain, M.P, Ferrin, J.M., Rosenthal, D.A., & Wampold, B.E. (2006). A meta-analysis of rehabilitation outcomes based on education level of the counselor. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 72(1), 10-18.  
<https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=d9b6eecf-167e-4298-84dc-aba69a5b925b%40redis>
- Frankl, V. E. (2014). *The will to meaning: Foundations and applications of logotherapy*. Penguin.  
[https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=xo1PEAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=victor+frankl+the+will+to+meaning&ots=e6unVvVbk3&sig=hhITXtEY35KhjCJGeWLuc\\_\\_Zvek#v=onepage&q=victor%20frankl%20the%20will%20to%20meaning&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=xo1PEAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=victor+frankl+the+will+to+meaning&ots=e6unVvVbk3&sig=hhITXtEY35KhjCJGeWLuc__Zvek#v=onepage&q=victor%20frankl%20the%20will%20to%20meaning&f=false)
- Freidson, E. (2013). *Professionalism* (1st ed.). Polity Press.  
<https://www.perlego.com/book/1535649/professionalism-the-third-logic-pdf>
- Fuster Guillen, D. E. (2019). Qualitative research: Hermeneutical phenomenological method. *Journal of Educational Psychology-Propositos y Representaciones*, 7(1), 217-229.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1212514.pdf>
- Garcia-Pelegrin, E., Wilkins, C., & Clayton, N. S. (2021). The ape that lived to tell the tale. The evolution of the art of storytelling and its relationship to mental time travel and theory of mind. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 4623. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.755783>
- Garner, B. R., Hunter, B. D., Modisette, K. C., Ihnes, P. I., & Godley, S. H. (2012). Treatment staff turnover in organizations implementing evidence-based practices: Turnover rates and their association with client outcomes. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 42(2), 134–142.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsat.2011.10.015>
- Geertz, C. (2008). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In *The cultural geography reader* (pp. 41-51). Routledge. <https://philpapers.org/archive/GEETTD.pdf>
- Glenn, M. K., & Lee, R. W. (2022). History and Evolution of Counseling and Rehabilitation Counseling. In *The Professional Practice of Rehabilitation Counseling*. Springer.



- Glenn, M.K. (2006). A rehabilitation educators' perspective on merging accreditation resources. *Rehabilitation Education, 20*(2), 71-78. <https://connect.springerpub.com/content/sgrre/20/2/71>
- Glisson, C. (2009). Organizational climate and culture and performance in the human services. In R. Patti (Ed.), *The Handbook of human services management* (pp. 119–141). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03643100903237365>
- Glisson, C., Schoenwald, S. K., Kelleher, K., Landsverk, J., Hoagwood, K. E., & Mayberg, S. (2008). Therapist turnover and new program sustainability in mental health clinics as a function of organizational culture, climate, and service structure. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 35*, 124-133. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-007-0152-9>
- Goldbloom, R. B. (1982). Failure to thrive. *Pediatric Clinics of North America, 29*(1), 151-166. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0031-3955\(16\)34114-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0031-3955(16)34114-1)
- Goodman, N., Morris, Z., Morris, M., & McGarity, S. (2020). *The extra costs of living with a disability in the U.S.—Resetting the policy table*. National Disability Institute. <https://www.nationaldisabilityinstitute.org/reports/extra-costs-living-with-disability>
- Goodwin Jr, L. R. (1986). Marketing rehabilitation counselor education programs. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, 17*(4), 42-47. <https://connect.springerpub.com/content/sgrjarc/17/4/42>
- Greene, R. R. (2008). Psychosocial theory. In K. M. Sowers, C. N. Dulmus, & B. A. Thyer (Eds.), *Comprehensive handbook of social work and social welfare*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470373705.chsw002011>
- Guevara, A. (2021). The need to reimagine disability rights law because the medical model of disability fails us all. *Wis. L. Rev., 269*. <https://wlr.law.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1263/2021/06/17-Guevara-Final-1.pdf>

- Hammersley, M. (2006). Ethnography: Problems and prospects. *Ethnography and Education*, 1(1), 3–14.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17457820500512697>
- Hartley, M. T., & Tarvydas, V. M. (Eds.). (2022). *The professional practice of rehabilitation counseling*. Springer. <https://www.springerpub.com/the-professional-practice-of-rehabilitation-counseling-9780826139030.html>
- Hatch-Maillette, M. A., Harwick, R., Baer, J. S., Masters, T., Cloud, K., Peavy, M., Wiest, K., Wright, L., Beadnell, B., & Wells, E. A. (2019). Counselor turnover in substance use disorder treatment research: Observations from one multisite trial. *Substance Abuse*, 40(2), 214–220.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08897077.2019.1572051>
- Haydon, G., & der Riet, P. van. (2017). Narrative inquiry: A relational research methodology suitable to explore narratives of health and illness. *Nordic Journal of Nursing Research*, 37(2), 85–89.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2057158516675217>
- Heider, K. G. (1975). What do people do? Dani auto-ethnography. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 31(1), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1086/jar.31.1.3629504>
- Herbert, J. T., Yoon, H. J., O’Shea, A., & Balushi, I. A. (2023). Recruitment and retention of state vocational rehabilitation counselors: A mixed methods analysis. *The Journal of Rehabilitation*, 89(1), 61–71. [Recruitment-and-Retention-of-State-Vocational-Rehabilitation-Counselors-A-Mixed-Methods-Analysis.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343892405_Jr_of_Rehab_Final_Paper_Intent_to_Leave)
- Herbert, J.T., Coduti, W.A., & Zhai, Y. (2020). Predictors of intent to leave current employment among rehabilitation counselors. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 86(1), 32-40.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343892405\\_Jr\\_of\\_Rehab\\_Final\\_Paper\\_Intent\\_to\\_Leave](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343892405_Jr_of_Rehab_Final_Paper_Intent_to_Leave)

- Hernandez, K. A. C., Chang, H., & Bilgen, W. A. (2022). *Transformative autoethnography for practitioners: Change processes and practices for individuals and groups*. Myers Education Press.  
<http://digital.casalini.it/9781975504885>
- Hershenson, D. B. (1998). Systemic, ecological model for rehabilitation counseling. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 42, 40–50. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1999-00020-003>
- Hoff, K. A., Song, Q. C., Wee, C. J. M., Phan, W. M. J., & Rounds, J. (2020). Interest fit and job satisfaction: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 123, 103503.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2020.103503>
- Hoffman, D. (2019). *The case against reality: Why evolution hid the truth from our eyes*. WW Norton & Company. <https://wnorton.com/books/9780393254693>
- Horner-Johnson, W. (2021). Disability, intersectionality, and inequity: Life at the margins. In D. J. Lollar, W. Horner-Johnson, & K. Froehlich-Grobe (Eds.), *Public health perspectives on disability* (pp. 91-105). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-0716-0888-3\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-0716-0888-3_4)
- Huber, M. J., & Oswald, G. (2017). Rehabilitation counseling: Current status and strategies for improving the profession's effectiveness and longevity. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling*, 48(3), 4-5. <https://doi.org/10.1891/0047-2220.48.3.4>
- Huber, M. J., Walker, Q. D., Dunlap, P. N., Russell, V. E., & Richardson, T. V. (2019). A revisited inquiry: A survey of members of the American Rehabilitation Counseling Association (ARCA). *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 62(2), 121–127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355218755509>
- Hurwitz, S., Perry, B., Cohen, E. D., & Skiba, R. (2020). Special education and individualized academic growth: A longitudinal assessment of outcomes for students with disabilities. *American Educational Research Journal*, 57(2), 576-611. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831219857054>

- Hylton, T. E. (2013). *The relationship between job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intent among certified rehabilitation counselors* [Doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.25335/7gj9-3533>
- Irons, T. R. (1989). Professional fragmentation in rehabilitation counseling. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 55*, 41–45. [https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Professional fragmentation in rehabilitation counseling.-a07932797](https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Professional+fragmentation+in+rehabilitation+counseling.-a07932797)
- Jajtner, K. M. (2020). Work-limiting disability and intergenerational economic mobility. *Social science quarterly, 101*(5), 2001-2016. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12836>
- Jajtner, K. M., Mitra, S., Fountain, C., & Nichols, A. (2020). Rising income inequality through a disability lens: Trends in the United States 1981–2018. *Social indicators research, 151*(1), 81-114. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48731696>
- Jellinek, H., & Lynch, R. (1983). Rehabilitation counseling: A case of mistaken identity. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, 14*(1), 40-43. <https://connect.springerpub.com/content/sgrjarc/14/1/40>
- Jenkins, W. M., Patterson, J. B., & Szymanski, E. M. (1998). Philosophical, historical, and legislative aspects of the rehabilitation counseling profession. In R. M. Parker & E. M. Szymanski (Eds.), *Rehabilitation counseling: Basics and beyond*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp. 1-40). Pro-Ed. <https://lccn.loc.gov/91029220>
- Johnson-Kwochka, A., Wu, W., Luther, L., Fischer, M. W., Salyers, M. P., & Rollins, A. L. (2020). The relationship between clinician turnover and client outcomes in community behavioral health settings. *Psychiatric Services, 71*(1), 28-34. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201900169>
- Judge, T. A., & Church, A. H. (2000). Job satisfaction: Research and practice. In C. L. Cooper & E. A. Locke (Eds.), *Industrial and organizational psychology: Linking theory with practice* (pp. 166-198). Wiley-Blackwell

- Judge, T. A., Zhang, S. C., & Glerum, D. R. (2020). Job satisfaction. In V. I. Sessa & N. A. Bowling (Eds.), *Essentials of job attitudes and other workplace psychological constructs* (1st ed., pp. 207–241). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429325755>
- Keith, A. C., Warshawsky, N., Neff, D., Loerzel, V., & Parchment, J. (2021). Factors that influence nurse manager job satisfaction: An integrated literature review. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 29(3), 373–384. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jonm.13165>
- Kelsey, D., & Smart, J. F. (2012). Social justice, disability, and rehabilitation education. *Rehabilitation Research, Policy, and Education*, 26(3), 229-240. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Julie-Smart-3/publication/343752352\\_Social\\_Justice\\_Disability\\_and\\_Rehabilitation\\_Education/links/65af0bee7fe0d83cb55f4669/Social-Justice-Disability-and-Rehabilitation-Education.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Julie-Smart-3/publication/343752352_Social_Justice_Disability_and_Rehabilitation_Education/links/65af0bee7fe0d83cb55f4669/Social-Justice-Disability-and-Rehabilitation-Education.pdf)
- Kim, J. H. (2016). *Understanding narrative inquiry: The crafting and analysis of stories as research*. Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071802861>
- Kim, J. H., Townsend, C., Lee, D. H., Yu, H. J., Ntinda, K., Thomas, K., & Ortega, C. (2023). Multicultural and social justice counseling within the scope of rehabilitation counseling. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 89(2), 30-40. [https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=rhc\\_fac](https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=rhc_fac)
- Knight, D. K., Becan, J. E., & Flynn, P. M. (2013). The impact of staff turnover on workplace demands and coworker relationships. *Counselor* (Deerfield Beach, Fla.), 14(3), 20-23. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4986917/>
- Knight, D. K., Becan, J. E., & Flynn, P. M. (2012a). Organizational consequences of staff turnover in outpatient substance abuse treatment programs. *Journal of substance abuse treatment*, 42(2), 143-150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsat.2011.10.009>

- Knight, D. K., Landrum, B., Becan, J. E., & Flynn, P. M. (2012b). Program needs and change orientation: Implications for counselor turnover. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment, 42*(2), 159-168.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsat.2011.10.019>
- Knight, D. K., Becan, J. E., & Flynn, P. M. (2013). The impact of staff turnover on workplace demands and coworker relationships. *Counselor (Deerfield Beach, Fla.), 14*(3), 20.  
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4986917/pdf/nihms-808474.pdf>
- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2006). *The leadership challenge: How to make extraordinary things happen in organizations* (6th ed.). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Kurdi, B., Alshurideh, M., & Alnaser, A. (2020). The impact of employee satisfaction on customer satisfaction: Theoretical and empirical underpinning. *Management Science Letters, 10*(15), 3561-3570. [https://m.growingscience.com/msl/Vol10/msl\\_2020\\_216.pdf](https://m.growingscience.com/msl/Vol10/msl_2020_216.pdf)
- Landon, T. J., & Schultz, J. C. (2018). Exploring rehabilitation counseling supervisors' role in promoting counselor development of ethical fluency. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 62*(1), 18–29.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355217728912>
- Landon, T. J., Phillips, B. N., McKnight, M., Sabella, S. A., & Kline, K. M. (2024). The impact of organizational factors and professional identity on turn over intent in state vocational rehabilitation agencies. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 67*(4), 269–282.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00343552231155215>
- Landsberger, H. A. (1958). *Hawthorne revisited: management and the worker, its critics, and developments in human relations in industry*. Cornell University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00140136008930482>
- Lane, F. J., Shaw, L. R., Young, M. E., & Bourgeois, P. J. (2012). Rehabilitation counselors' perceptions of ethical workplace culture and the influence on ethical behavior. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 55*(4), 219–231. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355212439235>

- Layne, C. M., Hohenshil, T. H., & Singh, K. (2004). The relationship of occupational stress, psychological strain, and coping resources to the turnover Intentions of rehabilitation counselors. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 48*(1), 19–30.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00343552040480010301>
- Leahy, M. J. (2012). Qualified providers of rehabilitation counseling services. In D. R. Maki, & V. M., Tarvydas, (Eds.), *The professional practice of rehabilitation counseling*. Springer.  
<https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=C-zCTNh0x3sC&oi=fnd&pg=PA193&dq=Qualified+Providers+of+Rehabilitation+Counseling+Services.+&ots=5Z9X9aj0fW&sig=7RO5gVUKbYnBT8G4cXr8kQLrsa8#v=onepage&q=Qualified%20Providers%20of%20Rehabilitation%20Counseling%20Services.&f=false>
- Leahy, M. J., & Hartley, M. (2018). Rehabilitation counseling professional competencies. In D. R. Maki & V. M. Tarvydas (Eds.), *The professional practice of rehabilitation counseling* (pp. 15–30). Springer Publishing.  
[https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=HM2pDgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA15&dq=Rehabilitation+counseling+professional+competencies&ots=cVlnPq9nNq&sig=1iOqDwZ80EG7CSAsvFZq\\_9fTA0c#v=onepage&q=Rehabilitation%20counseling%20professional%20competencies&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=HM2pDgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA15&dq=Rehabilitation+counseling+professional+competencies&ots=cVlnPq9nNq&sig=1iOqDwZ80EG7CSAsvFZq_9fTA0c#v=onepage&q=Rehabilitation%20counseling%20professional%20competencies&f=false)
- Leahy, M. J., & Szymanski, E. M. (1995). VR counseling: Evolution and current status. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 74*(2), 163–166. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1995.tb01843.x>
- Leahy, M. J., & Tarvydas, V. M. (2001). Transforming our professional organizations: A first step toward the unification of the rehabilitation counseling profession. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, 32*(3), 3-8. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Transforming-Our-Professional-Organizations%3A-A-Step-Leahy-Tarvydas/de336b0607d7470c5d33c2475dd05aacb4d45475>

- Leahy, M. J., Chan, F., Iwanaga, K., Umucu, E., Sung, C., Bishop, M., & Strauser, D. (2019a). Empirically derived test specifications for the certified VR Counselor examination: Revisiting the essential competencies of VR Counselors. *VR Counseling Bulletin*, *63*(1), 35–49.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355218800842>
- Leahy, M. J., Chan, F., Lui, J., Rosenthal, D., Tansey, T., Wehman, P., Kundu, M., Dutta, A., Anderson, C. A., Del Valle, R., Sherman, S., & Menz, F. E. (2019b). An analysis of evidence-based best practices in the public vocational rehabilitation program: Gaps, future directions, and recommended steps to move forward. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, *41*(2), 147-163.  
<https://content.iospress.com/download/journal-of-vocational-rehabilitation/jvr707?id=journal-of-vocational-rehabilitation/jvr707>
- Leahy, M.J., Muenzen, P., Saunders, J.L., & Strauser, D. (2009a). Essential knowledge domains underlying effective rehabilitation counseling practice. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, *52*(2), 95-106.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355208323646>
- Leahy, M. J., Rak, E., & Zanskas, S. A. (2009b). A brief history of counseling and specialty areas of practice. In Marini, I., & Stebnicki, M. A. (Eds.). *The professional counselor's desk reference* (2nd ed., pp. 3-8). Springer Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826171825.0001>
- Leahy, M., & Holt, E. (1993). Certification in rehabilitation counseling: History and process. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, *37*(2), 71–80. <https://connect.springerpub.com/content/sgrjarc/24/4/5>
- Leahy, M.J., Chan, F., Sung, C., & Kim, M. (2013). Empirically derived test specifications for the CRC Examination. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, *56*(4), 199-214.  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0034355212469839>
- Leavy, P. (2020). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice* (3rd ed.). The Guilford Press.  
[https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=sb\\_nDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Levy,+P.+&context=books](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=sb_nDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Levy,+P.+&context=books)  
[https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=sb\\_nDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Levy,+P.+&context=books](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=sb_nDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Levy,+P.+&context=books)



- Based+Research+Practice+(3rd+ed.).+The+Guilford+Ford.+ISBN:+1-4625-3897-5+&ots=MS5VuE4HaS&sig=xPmEha6NjD5g23tgzs-smLXay-g#v=onepage&q&f=false
- Lin, C.-C., & Ni, C.-F. (2021). The association between adaptive reserve, burnout, and stress among rehabilitation counselors during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Human Services, 40*(2). <https://doi.org/10.52678/001c.75389>
- Linkowski, D. C., & Szymanski, E. M. (1993). Accreditation in rehabilitation counseling: Historical and current context and process. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, 24*(4), 10–15. <https://connect.springerpub.com/content/sgrjarc/24/4/10>
- Locke, E. A. (1970). Job satisfaction and job performance: A theoretical analysis. *Organizational behavior and human performance, 5*(5), 484-500. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073\(70\)90036-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(70)90036-X)
- Lu, J., Brickham, D., Jaeger, B. J., & Lo, C.-L. (2023). Vocational rehabilitation counselor burnout profiles and mindfulness. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 101*, 204-213. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/jcad.12461>
- Lu, J., Maiden, R. J., Lo, C.-L., & Driver, N. N. (2023). Examining burnout and its correlates among rehabilitation counselors: Implications for research and practice. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 1-11*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00343552231176529>
- Lustig, D. C., & Strauser, D. R. (2009). Rehabilitation counseling graduate students' preferences for employment agreement between actual and perceived job tasks of state: Federal vocational rehabilitation counselors. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 52*(3), 179–188. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355208320932>
- Mackay, M. M., Dunn, J. P., Suedmeyer, E., Shiro-Geist, C., Strohmer, D. C., & West, S. L. (2020). Rehabilitation counselor degree type as a predictor of client outcomes: A comparison of quantity versus quality in closure rates. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 63*(2), 91–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355218806378>

- Maki, D. R., & Tarvydas, V. M. (2012). Rehabilitation counseling: A specialty practice of the counseling profession. In D. R. Maki & V. M. Tarvydas (Eds.), *The professional practice of rehabilitation counseling* (pp. 3–19). Springer Publishing Company.  
<https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=zubMpzBP-TcC&oi=fnd&pg=PA3&dq=Rehabilitation+counseling:+A+specialty+practice+of+the+counseling+profession.+&ots=K-nHiHVA6Z&sig=4bhVMACx4dYiDS9KSSc-LsCnQo0#v=onepage&q=Rehabilitation%20counseling%3A%20A%20specialty%20practice%20of%20the%20counseling%20profession.&f=false>
- Maloney, W. (2017, December 21). Re: World War I: Injured veterans and the disability rights movement. *Library of Congress*. <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2017/12/world-was-i-injured-veterands-and-the-disability-rights-movement>
- Maroto, M., & Pettinicchio, D. (2015). Twenty-five years after the ADA: Situating disability in America's system of stratification. *Disabilities Studies Quarterly*, 35(3).  
<https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v35i3.4927>
- Maslow, A. H. (1987). *Motivation and personality* (3rd ed.). Harper & Row Publishers.
- Matkin, R. E. (1983). Credentialing the rehabilitation profession. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 49(2), 25-67.  
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/6876034/>
- Matkin, R. E., & Bauer, L. L. (1993). Assessing predeterminants of job satisfaction among CRCs in various work settings. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling*, 24, 26-33.  
<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Assessing-Predeterminants-of-Job-Satisfaction-Among-Matkin-Bauer/95c647243667a7aef0af3359f9a476404310e89a>
- May, R. (2009). *Man's search for himself*. WW Norton & Company.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1954.56.2.02a00650>

- McAdams, D. P., & Cowan, H. R. (2020). Mimesis and myth: Evolutionary roots of psychological self-understanding. In J. Carroll, M. Clasen, & E. Jonsson (Eds.), *Evolutionary perspectives on imaginative culture* (pp. 89–106). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46190-4\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46190-4_5)
- McCarthy, A. K. (2013). Relationship between supervisory working alliance and client outcomes in state vocational rehabilitation counseling. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 57*(1), 23–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355213484177>
- McCarthy, H. (2020). Advocacy to invigorate rehabilitation counseling professional associations: A reflective inquiry and suggested action goals. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 63*(3), 179-186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355219864649>
- McClanahan, M. L., & Sligar, S. R. (2015). Adapting to WIOA 2014 minimum education requirements for vocational rehabilitation counselors. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 81*(3), 3-8. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283090956\\_C\\_Adapting\\_to\\_WIOA\\_2014\\_Minimum\\_Education\\_Requirements\\_for\\_Vocational\\_Rehabilitation\\_Counselors](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283090956_C_Adapting_to_WIOA_2014_Minimum_Education_Requirements_for_Vocational_Rehabilitation_Counselors)
- McDonnall, M. C., Cmar, J. L., & McKnight, Z. S. (2022). The impact of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act on agency-level vocational rehabilitation outcomes for adults and youth with blindness and low vision. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 34*(4), 299-308. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10442073221135811>
- McFarlane, F. R., Enriquez, M., Schroeder, F. K., & Dew, D. (2011). How do we lead when change is constant. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 77*(4), 4–12. <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=1de79da6-4cf1-4256-ac5b-b79d839289fd%40redis>
- McGowan, J. F., & Porter, T. L. (1967). *An introduction to the vocational rehabilitation process: A training manual* (Rehabilitation Service Series No. 68-32). U.S. Department of Health, Education, and

Welfare, Vocational Rehabilitation Administration.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED042011.pdf>

McKee-Ryan, F. M., Song, Z., Wanberg, C. R., & Kinicki, A. J. (2005). Psychological and physical well-being during unemployment: A meta-analytic study. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 90*(1), 53–76.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.90.1.53>

Mehl-Madrona, L. (2015). *Remapping your mind: The neuroscience of self-transformation through story*.

Simon and Schuster.

[https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=tFgoDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT10&dq=Remapping+your+mind:+The+neuroscience+of+self-transformation+through+story.&ots=djWOfcnlvK&sig=nJuH1Hhw2mjOY\\_eTIFyMcQC7c3U#v=onepage&q=Remapping%20your%20mind%3A%20The%20neuroscience%20of%20self-transformation%20through%20story.&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=tFgoDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT10&dq=Remapping+your+mind:+The+neuroscience+of+self-transformation+through+story.&ots=djWOfcnlvK&sig=nJuH1Hhw2mjOY_eTIFyMcQC7c3U#v=onepage&q=Remapping%20your%20mind%3A%20The%20neuroscience%20of%20self-transformation%20through%20story.&f=false)

Mehl-Madrona, L., & Mainguy, B. (2022). Neuroscience and narrative. *Anthropology of Consciousness, 33*(1), 79-95. <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/anoc.12144>

Meltzer, B., Petras, J., & Reynolds, L. (2020). *Symbolic Interactionism (RLE Social Theory): Genesis, varieties and criticism*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003074311>

Mertens, D. (2023a). The pursuit of social, economic, and environmental justice through evaluation:

Learning from indigenous scholars and the fifth branch of the evaluation theory tree. *Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Evaluation, 19*(44), 11-23. <https://doi.org/10.56645/jmde.v19i44.749>

Mertens, D. M. (2023b). *Mixed Methods Research: Research Methods*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

[https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=CT6sEAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=mertens+Mixed+Methods+Research:+Research+Methods.&ots=WNTA2\\_144P&sig=cUOkFRu5VcJdiv9XIJEqQsD3cAo#v=onepage&q=mertens%20Mixed%20Methods%20Research%3A%20Research%20Methods.&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=CT6sEAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=mertens+Mixed+Methods+Research:+Research+Methods.&ots=WNTA2_144P&sig=cUOkFRu5VcJdiv9XIJEqQsD3cAo#v=onepage&q=mertens%20Mixed%20Methods%20Research%3A%20Research%20Methods.&f=false)

- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Vocational. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved September 5, 2024, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vocational>
- Miller, D. J., & Millington, M. J. (2002). What is required of us? Rethinking ethical conduct in the practice and profession of vocational rehabilitation. In J. D. Andrew & C. W. Faubion (Eds.), *Rehabilitation services: An introduction for the human services professional* (pp. 278–295). Aspen. [https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1206&context=sped\\_facpub](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1206&context=sped_facpub)
- Miller, L. A., & Muthard, J. E. (1965). Job satisfaction and counselor performance in state rehabilitation agencies. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 49*, 280-283. <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=ded3c283-e7ec-401c-864f-1145d024556c%40redis>
- Millington, M. J. (2021). Social justice and community-based rehabilitation counseling. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, 52*(1), 1-8. <https://connect.springerpub.com/content/sgrjarc/early/2021/01/11/jarc-d-20-00032>
- Mills, J. (2020). Toward a theory of myth. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior, 50*(4), 410-424. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12249>
- Minor, T. D., Chowdhury, D., & Flowers, C. R. (2017). Recruitment, retention, and mentoring for diversity among rehabilitation counselor educators. *Rehabilitation Research, Policy, and Education, 31*(2), 105-120. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:79546147>
- Mitra, S., & Palmer, M. (2023). Economics of disability. In K. F. Zimmermann (Ed.), *Handbook of labor, human resources and population economics* (pp. 1–36). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57365-6\\_340-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57365-6_340-1)
- Mitra, S., & Yap, J. (2022). *The disability data report*. Disability Data Initiative, Fordham Research Consortium on Disability. [https://disabilitydata.ace.fordham.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/Main\\_text\\_2022\\_Disability\\_Data\\_Report.pdf](https://disabilitydata.ace.fordham.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/Main_text_2022_Disability_Data_Report.pdf)

Miyamoto, S. F. (2023). Self, motivation, and symbolic interactionist theory. In T. Shibutani (Ed.), *Human nature and collective behavior* (pp. 271–285). Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003420446>

Morgan, P. L., Woods, A. D., Wang, Y., Farkas, G., Hillemeier, M. M., & Mitchell, C. (2023). Which students with disabilities are placed primarily outside of US elementary school general education classrooms? *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 56*(3), 180-192.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00222194221094019>

Murphy, J. (2022). Improving the recruitment and retention of counselors in rural substance use disorder treatment programs. *Journal of Drug Issues, 52*(3), 434-456.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00220426221080204>

Muthard, J. E. (1969). The status of the profession. In D. Malikin & H. Rusalem (Eds.), *Vocational rehabilitation of the disabled: An overview* (pp. 275–308). New York: New York University Press.

<https://lccn.loc.gov/69019258>

O'Toole, J. (2018). Institutional storytelling and personal narratives: reflecting on the 'value' of narrative inquiry. *Irish Educational Studies, 37*(2), 175–189.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2018.1465839>

O'Brien, M., & Graham, M. (2009). Rehabilitation counseling in the state or federal program: Is there a future? *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 52*(2), 124–128.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355208323948>

O'Brien, R. (2001). *Crippled justice: The history of modern disability policy in the workplace*. University of Chicago Press. <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/C/bo3620510.html>

O'Sullivan, D., & Bates, J. K. (2014) The relationship among personal and work experiences: Implications for rehabilitation counselor well-being and service provision. *Rehabilitation Research, Policy, and Education, 28*(1), 45-60. <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Deirdre->

Osullivan/publication/263560359\_The\_Relationship\_Among\_Personal\_and\_Work\_Experiences\_Implications\_for\_Rehabilitation\_Counselor\_Well-Being\_and\_Service\_Provision/links/6095696d458515d31503ef90/The-Relationship-Among-Personal-and-Work-Experiences-Implications-for-Rehabilitation-Counselor-Well-Being-and-Service-Provision.pdf

Obermann, C.E. (1965). *A history of vocational rehabilitation in America*. T.S. Dennison.

<https://lccn.loc.gov/79006919>

Oexle, N., & Corrigan, P. W. (2018). Understanding mental illness stigma toward persons with multiple stigmatized conditions: Implications of intersectionality theory. *Psychiatric Services, 69*(5), 587–589. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201700312>

Pacheco Barzallo, D., Oña, A., & Gemperli, A. (2021). Unmet health care needs and inequality: A cross-country comparison of the situation of people with spinal cord injury. *Health services research, 56*(6), 1429-1440. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6773.13738>

Parker, R. M., Hansmann, S., Thomas, K. R., & Thoreson, R. W. (2005). Rehabilitation counseling theories. In R. M. Parker, E. M. Szymanski, & J. B. Patterson (Eds.), *Rehabilitation counseling: Basics and beyond* (4th ed., pp. 117–153). PRO-ED. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2004-22159-005>

Patterson, C. H. (1957). Counselor or coordinator? *Journal of Rehabilitation, 23*(3), 13-15.

<https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:26925348>

Patterson, J. B. (2009). Professional identity and the future of rehabilitation counseling. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 52*(2), 129-132. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355208323949>

Patterson, J. B., & Pointer, M. P. (2007). A model for preparing leaders and promoting leadership skills within professional associations. *Journal of Rehabilitation Administration, 31*(2), 101–112. <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=d74b40d5-0a68-4a94-b447-6a3637fdf165%40redis>

- Patterson, J. B., Bruyère, S., Szymanski, E. M., & Jenkins, W. (2005). Philosophical, historical, and legislative aspects of the rehabilitation counseling profession. In R. M. Parker, E. M. Szymanski, & J. B. Patterson (Eds.), *Rehabilitation counseling: Basics and beyond* (4th ed., pp. 27–53). Pro-Ed. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2004-22159-002>
- Patterson, J. B., Szymanski, E. M., & Parker, R. M. (2005). Rehabilitation counseling: The profession. In R. M. Parker, E. M. Szymanski, & J. B. Patterson (Eds.), *Rehabilitation counseling: Basics and beyond* (4th ed., pp. 1–25). Pro-Ed. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2004-22159-001>
- Patterson, J.B., McFarlane, F.R., & Sax, C. (2006). Challenges to a legacy: Retaining CORE accreditation of VR counselor education programs. *Rehabilitation Education, 19*(4), 203-214.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314153595\\_Challenges\\_to\\_a\\_Legacy\\_Retaining\\_CORE\\_Accreditation\\_of\\_Rehabilitation\\_Counselor\\_Education\\_Programs](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314153595_Challenges_to_a_Legacy_Retaining_CORE_Accreditation_of_Rehabilitation_Counselor_Education_Programs)
- Paul, H., & Brodwin, M. G. (2017). Recruiting for rehabilitation counselor education programs: Twenty years later. *Rehabilitation Research, Policy & Education, 31*(1), 21-26.  
<https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=0033f954-d1a8-4259-9cdc-0f57a6fb6a99%40redis>
- Peterson, D. B., Hautamaki, J. B., & Hershenson, D. B. (2006). Reflections on our past and prospects for our future: A survey of the members of the American Rehabilitation Counseling Association (ARCA). *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 50*(1), 4-13.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00343552060500010201>
- Peterson, S. (2020). Celebrating the role of VR Counseling. *Counseling Today*.  
<https://ctarchive.counseling.org/2020/02/celebrating-the-role-of-rehabilitation-counseling/>
- Phan, A. C., Nguyen, H. T., & Pham, T. K. (2021). Relationship between service recovery, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty: Empirical evidence from e-retailing. *Uncertain Supply Chain Management, 9*(1), 1-10. [https://m.growingscience.com/uscm/Vol9/uscm\\_2020\\_62.pdf](https://m.growingscience.com/uscm/Vol9/uscm_2020_62.pdf)



- Phillips, B. N., Boland, E. A., Edwards, Y. V., & Zanskas, S. A. (2022a). Prologue: The future of rehabilitation counseling professional associations. *Rehabilitation Counselors and Educators Journal*, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.52017/001c.37928>
- Phillips, B. N., & Leahy, M. J. (2012). Prediction of membership in rehabilitation counseling professional associations. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 55(4), 207–218. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355212446533>
- Phillips, B. N., Walker, Q., Grenawalt, T. A., Dunlap, P., Bezyak, J. L., Anderson, C. A., & Levine, A. (2022b). Contemplating consolidation: Acting on a decades old call to survey professionals in the discipline. *Rehabilitation Counselors and Educators Journal*, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.52017/001c.37922>
- Phillips, L., Christensen-Strynø, M. B., & Frølund, L. (2022c). Thinking with autoethnography in collaborative research: A critical, reflexive approach to relational ethics. *Qualitative Research*, 22(5), 761-776. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211033446>
- Pitt, J.S., Leahy, M.J., & Lewis, A.N. (2013). Turnover intent predictors among state vocational rehabilitation counselors. *Journal of Rehabilitation Administration*, 37(1), 5-18. <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=e0f14748-51f1-4fcb-90de-c7116c539249%40redis>
- Plomondon, M. E., Magid, D. J., Steiner, J. F., MaWhinney, S., Gifford, B. D., Shih, S. C., Grunwald, G. K., & Rumsfeld, J. S. (2007). Primary care provider turnover and quality in managed care organizations. *The American Journal of Managed Care*, 13(8), 465–472. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17685827/>
- Poulos, C. N. (2021). *Essentials of autoethnography*. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000222-000>

- Pratap, P., Dickson, A., Love, M., Zanoni, J., Donato, C., Flynn, M. A., & Schulte, P. A. (2021). Public Health Impacts of Underemployment and Unemployment in the United States: Exploring Perceptions, Gaps and Opportunities. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 18(19), 10021. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph181910021>
- Reed-Danahay, D. (Ed.). (1997). *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003136118>
- Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Pub. L. No. 111-256, 124 Stat. 2643 (1973). <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-34/subtitle-B/chapter-III/part-361>
- Reichard, A., Stransky, M., Brucker, D., & Houtenville, A. (2019). The relationship between employment and health and health care among working-age adults with and without disabilities in the United States. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 41(19), 2299- 2307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2018.1465131>
- Reinarts, N., & Melo, V. (2023). ADA to Ph. D.? The Americans with disabilities act and post-secondary educational attainment. *Public Choice*, 197(3), 421-432. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-023-01075-8>
- Repke, M.A., & Ipsen, C. (2020). Differences in social connectedness and perceived isolation among rural and urban adults with disabilities. *Disability and Health Journal*, 13(1), 100829–100829. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2019.100829>
- Riggart, T. F., & Maki, D. R. (2003). *Handbook of rehabilitation counseling*. Springer. <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=cb4Lkoo8u-EC&oi=fnd&pg=PR5&dq=Handbook+of+rehabilitation+counseling,+riggar&ots=qOgMoXrkti&sig=oqB-yTNwI0VBXLamb7hw3peSj1Q#v=onepage&q=Handbook%20of%20rehabilitation%20counseling%2C%20riggar&f=false>

- Rogers, C. R. (1995). *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- <http://dspace.vnbrims.org:13000/jspui/bitstream/123456789/4397/1/On%20Becoming%20a%20Person%20A%20Therapist%E2%80%99s%20View%20of%20Psychotherapy.pdf>
- Rumrill, P. D., Jr., & Koch, L. C. (2015). Vocational rehabilitation counseling. In P. J. Hartung, M. L. Savickas, & W. B. Walsh (Eds.), *APA handbook of career intervention, Vol. 2: Applications* (pp. 139–155). American Psychological Association. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/14439-000>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2022). Self-determination theory. In F. Maggino (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research*. Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69909-7\\_2630-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69909-7_2630-2)
- Sabella, S. A. (2017). Stratified leadership components and needs in public rehabilitation. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 61(1), 41–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355216676466>
- Sahito, Z., & Vaisanen, P. (2020). A literature review on teachers' job satisfaction in developing countries: Recommendations and solutions for the enhancement of the job. *Review of Education (Oxford)*, 8(1), 3–34. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3159>
- Sales, A. (2012). History of rehabilitation counseling. In D. R. Maki & V. M. Tarvydas (Eds.), *The professional practice of rehabilitation counseling* (pp. 39–60). Springer.
- <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2012-30921-003>
- Sales, A. P. (2007). *Rehabilitation counseling: An empowerment perspective*. Pro-Ed.
- <https://lcn.loc.gov/2007296452>
- Sales, A., & Organist, J. (1986). Special issue - the-national-rehabilitation-association - its history, its components, its future - introduction. *The Journal of Rehabilitation*, 52(3), 5–5.
- <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2012-30921-003>

- Saputra, F., & Mahaputra, M. R. (2022). Effect of job satisfaction, employee loyalty and employee commitment on leadership style (Human resource literature study). *Dinasti International Journal of Management Science*, 3(4), 762-772. <https://doi.org/10.31933/dijms.v3i4.1324>
- Sartre, J.-P., Macomber, C., Cohen-Solal, A., & Elkaïm-Sartre, A. (2007). *Existentialism Is a humanism* (1st ed.). Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15vwkgx>
- Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership* (Vol. 2). John Wiley & Sons.  
<http://dspace.vnbrims.org:13000/jspui/bitstream/123456789/2373/1/ORGANIZATIONAL%20CULTURE%20Organizational%20Culture%20and%20Leadership%2C%203rd%20Edition.pdf>
- Schultz, H., & Gordon, J. (2012). *Onward: how Starbucks fought for its life without losing its soul*. Rodale.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10686967.2012.11918349>
- Schultz, J. C., & Millington, M. J. (2007). A microeconomic model of the personnel shortage in public rehabilitation agencies. *Rehabilitation Education*, 21(2), 133-141.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263172293\\_A\\_Microeconomic\\_Model\\_of\\_the\\_Personnel\\_Shortage\\_in\\_Public\\_Rehabilitation\\_Agencies](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263172293_A_Microeconomic_Model_of_the_Personnel_Shortage_in_Public_Rehabilitation_Agencies)
- Schultz, J. C., Ososkie, J. N., Fried, J. H., Nelson, R. E., & Bardos, A. N. (2002). Clinical Supervision in Public Rehabilitation Counseling Settings. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 45(4), 213–222.  
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1177/00343552020450040401>
- Schwandt, T. A. (2014). *The Sage dictionary of qualitative inquiry*. Sage publications.  
<https://methods.sagepub.com/book/embed/the-sage-dictionary-of-qualitative-inquiry-4e>
- Scotch, R. (2009). *From good will to civil rights: Transforming federal disability policy* (2nd ed.). Temple University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bt0vm>
- Shan, Y. (2022). Philosophical foundations of mixed methods research. *Philosophy Compass*, 17(1), e12804. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12804>

- Shandra, C. L. (2020). Disability segregation in volunteer work. *Sociological Perspectives*, 63(1), 112-134.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121419842133>
- Shandra, C. L. (2021). Disability and patterns of leisure participation across the life course. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 76(4), 801-809. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaa065>
- Shanklin, E. (1998). The profession of the color blind: Sociocultural anthropology and racism in the 21st century. *American Anthropologist*, 100(3), 669-679. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/682045>
- Shaw, L. R., & Kuehn, M. D. (2009). Rehabilitation counselor education accreditation: History, structure, and evolution. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 52(2), 69–76.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355208323950>
- Sherman, S. G., Sanders, M. P., Schuster, R., Bloomberg, M., Eischens, P., Scroggs, L. B., & Limbrunner, L. (2019). Perceptions of vocational rehabilitation professionals regarding workforce innovation and opportunity act policy changes and employment outcomes. *The Journal of Rehabilitation*, 85(4), 50–61.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349380932\\_Perception\\_of\\_vocational\\_rehabilitation\\_professionals\\_regarding\\_workforce\\_innovation\\_and\\_opportunity\\_act\\_policy\\_changes\\_and\\_employment\\_outcomes](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349380932_Perception_of_vocational_rehabilitation_professionals_regarding_workforce_innovation_and_opportunity_act_policy_changes_and_employment_outcomes)
- Simpson, B. & Coleman, S. (2017). *Ethnography: Glossary of terms*. Royal Anthropological Institute.  
[www.discoveranthropology.org.uk](http://www.discoveranthropology.org.uk)
- Sinek, S. (2009). *Start with why: How great leaders inspire everyone to take action*. Penguin.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/e515802011-001>
- Smart, J. F. (2018). *Disability definitions, diagnoses, and practice implications: An introduction for counselors* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315276694>

- Smart, J. F., & Smart, D. W. (2006). Models of disability: Implications for the counseling profession. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 84*(1), 29-40.  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2006.tb00377.x>
- Smart, J.F. (2016). *Disability, society, and the individual* (3rd ed.). Pro-ed.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10822/940811>
- Smith-Fess Act of 1920, Pub. L. No. 66-236, 41 Stat. 735 (1920).  
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-41/pdf/STATUTE-41-Pg735.pdf#page=2>
- Smith, T. J., Dillahunt-Aspillaga, C., Chou, C. C., Ching, D., & Weston, A. (2020). Rehabilitation scholarship program: A solution to personnel shortages in the vocational rehabilitation system. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 52*(3), 267-277. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-201076>
- Smits, S. J., & Ledbetter, J. G. (1979). The practice of rehabilitation counseling within the administrative structure of the state-federal program. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, 10*(2), 78-84. <https://doi.org/10.1891/0047-2220.10.2.78>
- Spry, T. (2017). Who are “we” in performative autoethnography? *International Review of Qualitative Research, 10*(1), 46-53.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2017.10.1.46>
- Stebnicki, M. A. (2009). A call for integral approaches in the professional identity of rehabilitation counseling: Three specialty areas, one profession. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin, 52*(2), 133-137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355208324263>
- Storr, W. (2020). *The science of storytelling: Why stories make us human and how to tell them better*. Abrams. <https://www.thescienceofstorytelling.com/books>
- Strauser, D. R. (2017). Expanding opportunities and new directions in VR Counseling: Beyond CACREP. *Rehabilitation Research, Policy, and Education, 31*(1), 2–6.  
<https://connect.springerpub.com/content/sgrrrpe/31/1/2>

Strong, S. (1998). Meaningful work in supportive environments: Experiences with the recovery process.

*The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 52(1), 31-38.

<https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.52.1.31>

Sussman, M. B. (1965, October). *Professional associations and memberships in rehabilitation counseling*.

Western Reserve University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED054322.pdf>

Sussman, M. B., & Haug, M. R. (1968). Rehabilitation counselor recruits. *Journal of Counseling*

*Psychology*, 15(3), 250-256. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0025877>

Szymanski, E. M. (1991). The relationship level of rehabilitation counselor education to rehabilitation

client outcome in the Wisconsin Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. *Rehabilitation Counseling*

*Bulletin*, 35(1), 23-37. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1992-06897-001>

Tansey, T. N., Bishop, M., Iwanaga, K., Zhou, K., & Chan, F. (2023). Vocational rehabilitation service

delivery: Technical assistance needs of vocational rehabilitation professionals. *Journal of*

*Vocational Rehabilitation*, 58(1), 49-62. <https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-221224>

Tansey, T.N., Bishop, M., & Smart, J.F. (2004). Recruitment in rehabilitation counseling: Maximizing

benefits for graduate programs and the state-federal VR system. *Rehabilitation Education*, 18(1),

49-59. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2004-13511-005>

Tarvydas, V. M., Leahy, M. J., & Zanskas, S. A. (2009). Judgment deferred: Reappraisal of rehabilitation

counseling movement toward licensure parity. *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, 52(2), 85-94.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0034355208323951>

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.). *Occupational outlook handbook: Rehabilitation counselors*.

Retrieved November 9, 2024. [https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-](https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/rehabilitationcounselors.htm)

[service/rehabilitationcounselors.htm](https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/rehabilitationcounselors.htm)

- U.S. Department of Education. (2020, April). *The state vocational rehabilitation services program before and after enactment of the workforce innovation and opportunity act in 2014*. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services; Rehabilitation Services Administration.  
<https://rsa.ed.gov/sites/default/files/publications/state-of-vr-program-after-wioa.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2018, April). *Rehabilitation Services Administration Report for Fiscal Years 2014-15*. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services; Rehabilitation Services Administration.  
<https://rsa.ed.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ARC%20to%20Congress/fy2014-2015-annual-report-to-congress.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education.(2018). Response to the request for information; Long-term training program. Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation.  
[https://www.csavr.org/\\_files/ugd/c151f8\\_db78f0d82b384ac2af13343f419aa845.pdf](https://www.csavr.org/_files/ugd/c151f8_db78f0d82b384ac2af13343f419aa845.pdf)
- Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1954, Pub. L. No. 565, § 2., Stat. 68. (1954).  
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-68/pdf/STATUTE-68-Pg652.pdf>
- Walker, M. J. (2012). Neuroscience, self-understanding, and narrative truth. *AJOB neuroscience*, 3(4), 63-74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21507740.2012.712603>
- Warren, J., & Kleisath, M. (2019). The roots of US anthropology's race problem: Whiteness, ethnicity, and ethnography. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 52(1), 55–67.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2019.1632230>
- West, J. E., McLaughlin, V. L., Shepherd, K. G., & Cokley, R. (2023). The Americans with disabilities act and the individuals with disabilities education act: Intersection, divergence, and the path forward. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 34(3), 224-234.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10442073221114113>



- Wilkinson, A.D. & Wagner, R.M. (1993) Supervisors leadership styles and state vocational rehabilitation: Counselor job satisfaction and productivity. *Rehabilitation Counselling Bulletin*, 37(1), 15-24.  
<https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:140744038>
- Woltmann, E. M., Whitley, R., McHugo, G. J., Brunette, M., Torrey, W. C., Coots, L., Lynde, D. D., & Drake, R. E. (2008). The role of staff turnover in the implementation of evidence-based practices in mental health care. *Psychiatric Services*, 59(7), 732–737.  
<https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/epdf/10.1176/ps.2008.59.7.732>
- Wong, P. T. (2020). Existential positive psychology and integrative meaning therapy. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 32(7-8), 565-578. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2020.1814703>
- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, Pub. L. No. 113-128, 128 Stat. 1425. (2014).  
<https://www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ128/PLAW-113publ128.pdf>
- Workforce Investment Act of 1998, Pub. L. No. 105-220, 112 Stat. 936 (1998).  
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/105th-congress/house-bill/1385/text>
- Wright, G. N. (1980). *Total rehabilitation*. Little, Brown, & Company.  
<https://archive.org/details/totalrehabilitat0000wrig/page/n1/mode/2up>
- Zaidel, D. W. (2020). Imagination, symbolic cognition, and human evolution: The early arts facilitated group survival. In J. Carroll, M. Clasen, & E. Jonsson (Eds.), *Evolutionary perspectives on imaginative culture* (pp. 71–89). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46190-4\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46190-4_4)
- Zaninotto, P., Batty, G. D., Stenholm, S., Kawachi, I., Hyde, M., Goldberg, M., & Head, J. (2020). Socioeconomic inequalities in disability-free life expectancy in older people from England and the United States: a cross-national population-based study. *The journals of gerontology: Series A, Biological Sciences and Medical Sciences*, 75(5), 906-913.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/gerona/glz266>

- Zanskas, S. (2017). Stewardship, the accreditation merger, and opportunities for growth *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, 48*(3), 16–19. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ashlee-Mckee/publication/320531458\\_Improving\\_the\\_Evidence\\_Base\\_of\\_Telerehabilitation\\_A\\_Future\\_Modality\\_for\\_Delivering\\_Clinical\\_Services\\_to\\_People\\_with\\_Disabilities/links/59e9f8edaca272cdddb6d38/Improving-the-Evidence-Base-of-Telerehabilitation-A-Future-Modality-for-Delivering-Clinical-Services-to-People-with-Disabilities.pdf#page=18](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ashlee-Mckee/publication/320531458_Improving_the_Evidence_Base_of_Telerehabilitation_A_Future_Modality_for_Delivering_Clinical_Services_to_People_with_Disabilities/links/59e9f8edaca272cdddb6d38/Improving-the-Evidence-Base-of-Telerehabilitation-A-Future-Modality-for-Delivering-Clinical-Services-to-People-with-Disabilities.pdf#page=18)
- Zanskas, S., & Strohmer, D.C. (2011). The state-federal rehabilitation counselor work environment. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, 42*(3), 3-11. <https://connect.springerpub.com/content/sgrjarc/42/3/3>
- Zheng, L.X., Talley, W.B., Faubion, C.W., & Lankford, G.M. (2017). The climate of job satisfaction: The relationship between extrinsic job factors and satisfaction among community rehabilitation program professionals. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 83*(1), 23-30. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317934192\\_The\\_climate\\_of\\_job\\_satisfaction\\_The\\_relationship\\_between\\_extrinsic\\_job\\_factors\\_satisfaction\\_among\\_community\\_rehabilitation\\_program\\_professionals](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317934192_The_climate_of_job_satisfaction_The_relationship_between_extrinsic_job_factors_satisfaction_among_community_rehabilitation_program_professionals)

## Appendix A

### Semi-Structured Self-Interview Protocol

The following semi-structured self-interview protocol stimulated memory mining through systematic self-reflexive introspection. As the study was framed around love letters to my profession the self-interview protocol focused on six stages of romantic relationships. This protocol was used to focus memory mining to recall specific formative experiences and begin creating a descriptive storytelling narrative of the meaning and impact of the event.

Relationship Stage:	Keyword Primers:	Formative Experience:	Descriptive Story:	Meanings/ Impacts:
<b>1. Attraction:</b> How did you find it? What caught your attention? Why were you drawn to it? What made you think it was the one?	Recruitment Discovery Allure Appeal Enticement			
<b>2. Infatuation:</b> What did you envision in it? Why did you pursue it? What did you think it was? What made you want more of it?	Fantasy Dream Desire Idealization Intrigue			
<b>3. Romance:</b> What made you fall in love? Why did it give you purpose? What made you propose to it? What made you marry it?	Excitement Passion Love Adoration Infatuation			
<b>4. Disillusion:</b> Tell me about after the honeymoon? When did you first have doubts? Tell me about the annoying quirks? Did you consider leaving?	Honeymoon Reality Conflict Regret Doubt			

<p><b>5. Intimacy:</b>  Why did you stay?  What kept you from leaving?  What did you have to accept?  How did you adjust?</p>	Retention Acceptance Affinity Attachment Affection			
<p><b>6. Attachment:</b>  Did the connection deepen?  How did it change you?  How did you change it?  What did you do to make it work?</p>	Thriving Connection Dedication Commitment Devotion			

**Appendix B****IRB Approval****INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

Robert S. Swanson Learning Center #201

715-232-4042

[irb@uwstout.edu](mailto:irb@uwstout.edu)

**Date:** July 2, 2024

**PI:** Kyle Walker

**Department:** STOUT VOC REHAB INSTITUTE, TEACHING LEARNING & LEADERSHIP

**Re:** Initial - IRB-FY2024-323

**Love Letters to My Profession: An Autoethnography of a CRC.**

Dear Kyle Walker,

In accordance with Federal Regulations, your project, **Love Letters to My Profession: An**

**Autoethnography of a CRC.**, was reviewed on July 2, 2024 by a member of the University of Wisconsin-

Stout Institutional Review Board and was determined to be **not defined as research** in accordance with

Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46). This project therefore does not require

further review or approval of the UW-Stout Institutional Review Board, and you may now proceed with

your project. If you chose to change the research focus, questions, method, or intend to disseminate

your findings outside of the campus community, please contact us for further instructions.

Please note, researchers who collect data from human subjects, even when the activity is deemed as not meeting federal definitions of human subjects research, are still ethically bound to follow the basic principles of the Belmont Report, as reflected in the practice of obtaining informed consent from participants when applicable and adherence to appropriate research methods.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and best wishes with your project. If you have questions, please contact the IRB office at [irb@uwstout.edu](mailto:irb@uwstout.edu) or by phone 715-232-4042, and your question will be directed to the appropriate person.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mike Mensink". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the "k".

Michael Mensink, Ph.D.; IRB Chair

University of Wisconsin-Stout Institutional Review Board

## Appendix C

### Selected VRC quotes about PVR practice

*"I just couldn't let myself care anymore. Caring that much and not being able to do anything about it will kill you. I just stopped caring and stayed. It is what it is. Not what I want it to be."*

*"It's like a marriage. You fall in love with an idea, an abstraction. Then you move in together and see the warts. You smell the farts. You hate how they want you to replace the toilet paper roll. You either compromise or you leave. I compromised. I think most just leave."*

*"I stayed because I gave up on being who I wanted to be. I don't know, maybe I was too young immaturely clinging to a professional dream. I just had to finally embrace the reality of what this all is. If they want an apathetic efficient paper pusher that is what I will be. But even that is a challenge. They speak with forked tongues and criticize us for being exactly what they demand and force us to be. They don't really know what want because it is always changing."*

*"I do what I can for the clients I can, not because of the system but in spite of it."*

*"I don't want to sound arrogant. But everything is designed for the lowest common denominator. We have to hire people who are not qualified because we can't find or keep CRCs. The few CRCs are constrained and controlled by a system designed to keep the unqualified from going off the rails. Instead of letting CRCs raise all boats, the unqualified creates a system that sinks all boats."*

*"What kills me is the gulf between what we could be and what we are."*

*"It's all games people play. Have you read that book? Congress passes a law, RSA plays games with the regulations, and agencies play games so they can look good on paper. I play their games so I can make the agency look good on paper. But I play my own games too, so I look good on paper. Everything looks good on paper. But we wonder why clients disengaged and drop out of the program. Go figure."*

*"I'm not one of those people who rail against paperwork or performance data. We work in government. We must show results. I just think it has kind of taken over. It seems like the paperwork has become the whole point. Maybe that much paperwork would be fine if my caseload was half as big as it is. But the documentation has pushed the clients off my schedule."*

*"We celebrated mediocrity because it came in large volume and was easily counted."*

*"Why can't the people in charge of all this understand there are 40 hours in my week? If you give me 50 hours of paperwork and data entry, meetings, and mandatory training don't tell me I don't care enough about my clients."*

*"It was the pay, but it really was not about the pay. They could never pay me enough to do the job they wanted done. If I could have done the job I was educated and prepared to do, I would volunteered to do that job. Ha! I did, I volunteer doing that job at my church."*

*"I stayed because I found a way to balance what clients need from me professionally with a willingness to occasionally get criticized for not having perfect paperwork. So many compromise clients for paperwork. I do the opposite. It is impossible to do both in this system. Everyone has to compromise. I just did it in the client's favor. But you should see my performance reviews. Lol. It is like Bob Dillon sang; in VR everybody must get stoned. I just prefer to get stoned for focusing too much on my clients."*

*"I do what I can. My hands are tied. It is what it is. I don't think anything will change because it keeps getting worse."*

*"It's like knowing you have the skills to swim out and really save someone drowning, but being told we don't have the time because that isn't an outcome that gets reported."*

*"You know truck drivers and airline pilots have established workload standards; their work loads are capped to prevent tragedy caused by overload. Not us, no one asks about capping caseload sizes, so many tragedies."*



*“They say it is all about the customer, but every action says something else.”*

*“I just found it hard to stomach the faux humanitarians at the top. They were never Counselors, don't know anything about what it takes to help a client succeed, they are administrative bean counters who I think look down on us as bleeding heart humanitarians.”*

*“When you are constantly told through words and actions that they think you are incompetent and lazy, I don't know... maybe part of you believes that I lost all my confidence. I just accepted the role they wanted me to play. That's not a great answer. But it's my truth.”*

*“He had the nerve to ask me what I did not understand about my job and what was expected of me. Really? A lifelong accountant appointed because he knows the governor is asking someone with a master's degree and national certification who has 15 years of professional experience as a rehabilitation counselor is going to ask what I don't understand about my job. Nope, just nope. I was finished with that mess.”*

*“I can't tell you how many times my boss with an undergraduate degree in special education ordered me to do something that violated the CRC Code of ethics. Not because he was unethical, he just did not know anything about our ethical obligations because he had no business supervising a CRC. I don't blame him, it hurt both of us and our clients. He went through all the CRCs. I don't think there are any left over there.”*

*“It's funny, I did not realize how far down the bureaucratic rabbit hole I allowed myself to get until her mom called and told me what happened. I just broke down crying. That was totally preventable if I was able to be the counselor I was clinically trained to be. All the forms and perfect case file documentation meant nothing when I realized she needed more from me, and I could not take the time to give it to her. That was the end. That was the moment I could not keep going back in that office. I have never looked back.”*

*“There is complete indifference to my professional abilities. An indifference to what clients need. A complete indifference to what actually gets quality results. My expertise is not valued or fully employed. I feel like I am capable of being a supped-up race car, but my owner won’t let me go over 15 miles per hour.”*

*“If I am able to really help or positively impact any client, I would be shocked.”*

*“It's funny, I feel like I am capable of painting my own Mona Lisa, but here they just want me to follow a paint by numbers format to mass produce uninspired replicas. I feel like a professional fraud.”*

*“I came into this job confident in my ability to help people, but the way my job is structured and measured I have lost all my confidence, I feel incompetent and always on the verge of total failure. At least I can delude myself into thinking I am set up to fail because I just follow their rules. I am so tired. If I hear one more person say we need to be held accountable I may just pop.”*

*“I am drowning professionally.”*

*“As a professional with a self-identity of a counselor, that job was suffocating, the climate prevented us from being professionals, counselors, or even a clinician in any sense of the word.”*

*“She told me my problem was I spent too much time talking to clients, not enough time focusing on the process. I forgot; the process was our purpose. We never said that part out loud, but we all knew the only thing that mattered was the process and the numbers. No one asked where those numbers come from. I doubt anyone asked where I went. No one cares why I left.”*

*“I stayed until I just couldn’t anymore. The job is impossible, you are always on the verge of having them discover how far behind you are on everything.”*

*“I will just say it was not the job they claimed it was. In fact, nothing they said was genuine, it was all subterfuge and code words that sounded client focused but in reality, was program focused.”*