



The
Rehabilitation
Detectives
Doing Human Service Work

Paul C.
Higgins

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Paul C. Higgins



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*To my wife, Leigh, whose competence and caring
in teaching hearing-impaired children is what
human service work should be*

PREFACE

Detective Work

Gary L. Albrecht

University of Illinois at Chicago

The street is an office for both the social scientist and the human service worker. If we want to find out what people are doing and understand their behavior, we have to go take a look. If researchers and service providers are to touch those they serve or understand the people in their studies, they must “hang out” on the street. Managers of human service workers and dissertation directors, therefore, are happiest when their minions are out in the field, for the streets are where ideas are generated and hunches validated.

Paul Higgins uses the metaphor of the rehabilitation detective to take us vicariously into the world of vocational counselors and their clients. He challenges professionals who construct their work world through meetings and paper documents to revisit their primary work site, the street. Once we venture into the world of the vocational rehabilitation counselor, we discover that the nostrums of researchers and politicians often are not tenable. Human service workers and their clients frequently are intelligent, reasonable, and responsive, but they operate within the boundaries of a complex world where clear principles seldom pertain. Often, what appears rational to external observers makes no sense to the participants. Theirs is the world of trade-offs designed to reap rewards for and minimize risk to counselor and client. Paul Higgins takes us inside the operational dynamics of this social world.

Rehabilitation detectives are sleuths and managers trying to maintain a balance among multiple forces in the social service arena. These counselors are enjoined to make the system work and, simultaneously, to “look good.” In fact, appearances are more important than reality. Given a public mandate, it is more important for service organizations and counselors to look good than actually to help the client. This does not release them, however, from their concomitant obligation to serve the public. For, while achievement of the public good requires that the culture and norms of the community be upheld by major institutions, counselors recognize at the same time that the good of the individual also should be protected. Negotiation and maintenance of this balance is a major component of the rehabilitation counselor’s job.

The fundamental task of the counselor involves constructing, managing, and vindicating an appropriate social self for the client that will meet the test of the organization. A classic illustration of this activity is provided through the words of a functionally blind vocational counselor I interviewed some years ago in Detroit:

One day about twelve years ago a teenage inner-city Black kid was brought to me. The mother and friends pleaded with me to accept this kid for services but I said, "Man, the kid is young, blind, isn't doing well in school. What job is he goin' to get. What are we goin' to train him for?" The kid spoke up, "I'm a musician. Listen to me. I want to play the piano and go to Hollywood." I can't see either and I had dreams I couldn't meet. This kid . . . he had a dream. I could feel it in my gut. He was goin' to make it. But, there was no way I could get him on the rolls according to the rules. My supervisor said "no dice" so I took the kid under my wing and massaged a few of the rules. He got piano and music lessons. Man, what a thrill when Stevie Wonder paid my way to Hollywood years later to watch him get an Emmy. We showed 'em. I was right and then they wanted to take credit for it, but Stevie and I knew the story.

This vocational counselor exulted in the success of his risk-taking behavior, which resulted in a triumph for the client, the counselor, and the agency. Everyone won. Yet, even by his own admission, such success stories are moderated by the risky human investments that pay meager dividends. The work life of a rehabilitation counselor involves a continual calculus of risk in making allocational decisions. In the Stevie Wonder case, the counselor was faced with a difficult set of facts but decided to bend some rules based on a "gut reaction" to the individual and a personal knowledge of visual impairment. The counselor's street experience and insider's view of the system accounted for his good decision.

The exercise of complex decision models used in determining client eligibility is difficult because often it is disrupted by unpredictable events: The state runs out of money for services before the end of the fiscal year, the demand for services increases with unemployment, or there are few jobs in which to place clients. Therefore, to be successful the counselor needs to know how to make the case. Stevie Wonder's counselor is not unique. Proficient human service workers are able to weigh the advantages of receiving services against the disadvantages of being labeled. They are able to make complex decisions about the best use of resources in specific cases, keeping in mind the dual goals of looking good while helping those in need. Since the human service delivery business is characterized both by self-serving interests and *pro bono* ideologies and actions, sensitive and sophisticated analyses are needed. Paul Higgins provides us with a firsthand description and analysis of this complex social world. His work stands in the best tradition of sociological fieldwork. May it stimulate others to move their offices out into the street.

Acknowledgments

Social research is always a collective enterprise. The finished product may be typed and retyped or nowadays entered on a word processor by others. Colleagues read and comment upon rough drafts. Universities provide institutional support. Previous research and writing of others stimulate one's own work. And, of course, there are the social actors who are the focus of the investigation.

Without the cooperation of the rehabilitation counselors and the other professionals within the rehabilitation agency in which my research was conducted, this book would not have been possible. To let an outsider come in and observe showed courage and confidence. I wish that I could publicly identify the rehabilitation professionals, but to do so would destroy their anonymity, which I promised to maintain.

Jaber F. Gubrium, John M. Johnson, and Robert L. Stewart read previous drafts of this book and provided many useful suggestions.

I appreciate the support of my department of sociology. That support enabled many people, in particular Mrs. Jo Ann Hess, to transcribe tape recordings of my observations and to type and retype drafts of this book.

To all those who helped in this collective enterprise, thanks.

INTRODUCTION

This is kind of a tricky case.

So you know you have to rely on what they tell you to a great extent, too, but then you also have to, you know, dig around and get some other information as well.

So what are you saying I do with this one? / You are going to have to look at it and make your decision. Do you feel like it's a case? / I do.

Sounds like a good case.

The above remarks are not those of law enforcement detectives discussing criminal cases and investigations. They are the remarks of another kind of detective: vocational rehabilitation counselors. They are the rehabilitation detectives. What follows is a "story" of the work of rehabilitation counselors and more generally of human service professionals.

SOCIOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

One of the promises, as well as one of the tasks, of the social sciences is to develop frameworks through which the social world can be understood. Whether we call those frameworks "theoretical perspectives," "schemes," "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer, 1969), or "stories" (Davis, 1974), they enable us to give coherence to an otherwise odd assortment of observations. Through these frameworks we develop a basic understanding of the social world. They remain with us, to be used again and again, long after the facts and figures have been forgotten.

For example, several years ago I wrote *Outsiders in a Hearing World*, a sociological analysis of the lives of people who are deaf. I saw deaf people as outsiders in two related ways. First, they live within a world of sounds, a world in which being able to hear (and speak) is not only important, but also taken for granted. Yet deaf people are not fully part of that world. In this obvious sense they are outsiders in a hearing world. Second, and more significant, deaf people are outsiders in a world largely created and controlled by those who hear. Based on historically changing assumptions about deafness and deaf people, the hearing have decided what educational, occupational, and other opportunities are to be made available to deaf people. Thus deaf people "live within a world

which is not of their own making, but one which they must continually confront" (Higgins, 1980: 22). From this perspective, I tried to understand and clarify deaf people's lives. Of course, the specifics of deaf people's lives are important. However, the concept of "outsiders" helps us to make sense of those specifics, sensitizes us to new areas of inquiry, and will be with us long after the specifics are forgotten.

If developed well, these frameworks enable us to see the social world in ways we had not seen it before. As Joseph Gusfield (1976: 32) notes:

It is the capacity to recognize the context of unexamined assumptions and accepted concepts that is among the most valuable contributions through which social science enables human beings to transcend the conventional and create new approaches and policies.

Thus the metaphor of "detective" may enable us to transcend the conventional and commonsense view of rehabilitation counselors.

These frameworks do more than help us make sense of our observations. They suggest to us possibilities, connections within the social world that we have yet to investigate. They help us see similarities among social phenomena where only differences were initially noted; and, they help us see differences where only similarities were thought to exist. For example, not only are deaf people outsiders in a hearing world, but black Americans are outsiders in a white world and gays are outsiders in a straight world. The concept of "outsiders" helps us to notice significant similarities among people who otherwise are thought to be quite different. Conversely, while two elderly adults, one deaf due to aging and the other deaf from birth, may have similar hearing losses, their lives are likely to be worlds apart. The first is a hearing person who happens to have had a hearing loss. The second is a deaf person, an outsider in a hearing world.

The "detective" metaphor may be similarly instructive. Vocational rehabilitation counselors, social service workers, mental health professionals, parole agents, and other human service professionals may have a great deal in common in addition to providing services to people. They may in fact have a great deal in common with detectives. With increased emphasis on bureaucracies in the human services, where clients are processed on a mass level (Weatherley, 1979: 145), rehabilitation counselors and other human service professionals increasingly find themselves handling cases and not simply serving people. Conversely, *from this viewpoint*, there may be relatively fewer ties that bind rehabilitation counselors to clinical psychologists, therapists, ministers, and others who guide and counsel.

As any good storyteller knows, stories that contain many plots may become confusing. The same is true for sociological frameworks. While they enable us to understand a variety of observations, they cannot help us organize all the observations we have made. Frameworks can encompass only so much material. They help give meaning to what we include, but they also necessitate that we exclude. We cannot tell everything in one story, within one framework. What we exclude might be appropriately understood within other frameworks, left for other storytellers to tell.

Therefore, just as *Outsiders in a Hearing World* was *one* sociological story of the lives of deaf people and not the *only* possible story, so it is with this work. It is just one look at vocational rehabilitation counselors and human service professionals through a particular framework. It does not tell everything one might want to know about rehabilitation counselors. It does not even tell all I have learned about rehabilitation counselors. Other stories could and must be told.

While the story told here is based primarily on observations of one area office of one state vocational rehabilitation agency, its scope is not limited to that one office or state agency, or even to rehabilitation counselors. Though the specifics of the story are likely to vary as one moves further from the area office described—to other area offices, to other state vocational rehabilitation agencies, to other human service agencies—the framework may prove useful for understanding what human service professionals do in a large variety of settings. Even the specifics may often be similar because the human service professionals are doing their work under similar circumstances. Thus a story about rehabilitation detectives becomes more generally a story about human service detectives.

What a story says to a reader depends, to a great extent, on what the reader brings to the story. Different readers will come away with different understandings because their purposes in reading the story and the experiences they bring to it will differ markedly. Regardless, if social scientists use different frameworks in order to tell different stories about the “same” social world, then surely different readers of the “same” story can come away with different understandings.

This volume is aimed at several different audiences: social scientists and students interested in disability and organizations that serve those with disabilities, those interested more broadly in human service organizations, professionals in rehabilitation and in human services, and concerned citizens. Even those interested in detective work, whether it concerns crime or not, may find this story useful. However, what is novel and instructive to one group of readers may be well known to

another. Thus a difficult balancing act is attempted between stating what is obvious to some and taking too much for granted with others.

ORDINARY PEOPLE

The following chapters describe and analyze how ordinary people do their jobs as rehabilitation detectives, as vocational rehabilitation counselors and, more generally, as human service professionals. In using the term “ordinary people,” I do not mean to denigrate or belittle vocational rehabilitation counselors, certainly not those who allowed me to be a part of their work world. Instead, I use the term to emphasize that rehabilitation counselors and human service professionals are just like you and me. We are made of the same stuff. Ordinary people can be caring and despairing, considerate and rude, concerned and indifferent. They can go out of their way to help some, and they can deprecate those who do not lift a finger to help themselves. They can work long past quitting time, and they can watch the clock on Friday afternoon. Ordinary people are human; neither saints nor sinners, yet at times a bit of both. So it is with rehabilitation detectives.

Too often we mystify other people. We caricature them and, in doing so, we set them apart from ourselves. Teachers of children with disabilities have enormous patience; artists are slightly odd; librarians are repressed; and police officers are authoritarian. Depending on one’s point of view, human service professionals are compassionate, cold (bureaucratic), or indifferent, or have some other attribute that signifies they are somehow different from us. This mystical difference is then used to explain what these folks do, whether they be teachers, artists, librarians, police officers, or human service professionals. In overlooking the “ordinariness” that we share, we jump too quickly to “person-pointing” (and often faulting) in order to understand what people do (see McKinlay, 1978: 31-32).

Within social scientists’ concerns about human service organizations, one focus is on the “unsanctioned behavior of policemen, social workers, medical personnel, assistant district attorneys, employment office officials, and countless other low-level bureaucrats” (Prottas, 1979: 163). While that unsanctioned behavior may be seen as a response to the organizational and social circumstances under which the “low-level bureaucrats” work, the bottom line is that often such bureaucrats and their behavior need to be “shaped up” so human services can be provided more equitably.¹ No doubt, instances abound in which that is

true. But to say only that is merely to point one's finger at human service providers, who with the intentions and skills of ordinary people are doing their work in ways others find unacceptable. We may as well point the finger at all of us, for we are all fallible.

Rather than pointing a finger, I will try to describe and explain how rehabilitation counselors do their work within an organizational and social context. From the descriptions of the counselor's behaviors, some may infer laudable or disagreeable qualities about those people, *that would be a mistake*. To psychologize what rehabilitation counselors do, whether we deem it praiseworthy or blameworthy, overlooks the social circumstances in which they do what they do. Certainly, counselors (and ordinary people) vary on attributes we admire or dislike. But to focus primarily on those attributes encourages us needlessly to make invidious distinctions, and often misleads us to think that "getting better people" is *the way* to make improvements (see Lipsky, 1980: xv).

PLAN OF THE BOOK

In the following chapters I describe and analyze what vocational rehabilitation counselors do. To do so, I use the metaphor of detective work. Chapter 1 establishes that framework, which is then used in subsequent chapters. However, rehabilitation counselors are not the only human service detectives. Social service and mental health caseworkers, parole agents, child welfare workers, drug abuse counselors, and other human service professionals are detectives, too. Therefore, I draw on information about other human service professionals in order to tell a broader story.

Rehabilitation counselors do their work within an organization. The philosophy, policies, procedures, and people that constitute the organization provide the setting within which rehabilitation detective work is accomplished. What counselors do can be understood only within that organization, and what they do constitutes a significant part of the organization. Chapter 2 describes that setting.

In order to serve people who are vocationally handicapped due to disabilities, rehabilitation counselors must establish their eligibility for services. They must make a case for the client. Chapter 3 explores how rehabilitation counselors work cases in order to make a case for serving individuals with disabilities.

Once eligibility has been established, rehabilitation counselors seek to serve clients to enable them to remain or become successfully

employed. However, cases do not always end successfully. Chapter 4 describes how rehabilitation detectives conclude cases.

Rehabilitation counselors work with many individuals simultaneously. At any given time, the individuals and their cases are at various stages in the rehabilitation process: Some are referrals, others are applicants whose eligibility is being investigated, and still others are clients who are being served in order to conclude their cases satisfactorily. Rehabilitation detectives cannot, and do not, solve one case before going on to the next. Instead, as Chapter 5 explains, counselors manage their caseloads. And in doing so, their concerns transcend the management of any individual case.

Specialization is important within both detective work and human service work. Much of detective work is done in details: the juvenile detail, burglary detail, or major crimes detail. While the basic nature of detective work is found in the various details, the details of a particular case may vary. So it is with the work of rehabilitation counselors. Many do rehabilitation work within specialty caseloads, where the specifics of the work vary. Chapter 6 examines four specialty caseloads in rehabilitation work.

Concern continues, perhaps even grows, regarding how well justice is served by detectives (and the criminal justice system of which they are a part) as well as how just (and efficient, effective, and so forth) is the service of rehabilitation counselors and other human service professionals and the agencies of which they are a part. Human service work is increasingly recognized as problematic. If service is not just, then why, and what can be done? In concluding this investigation, I address these two questions.

This story was based on my investigation of rehabilitation counselors. The Research Appendix explains my work as a sociological detective (Sanders, 1976). Of course, no crime had been committed. Rather, the problem was to make sense of what I was observing about rehabilitation counselors. As the jury, the readers can decide whether or not this case was successfully solved.

In part, my case rests on quotes from counselors and other rehabilitation professionals. Some of those quotes do not appear in grammatically correct form. This is no reflection on the competence of the rehabilitation detectives. We all speak and write ungrammatically at times. I tried not to modify significantly how these rehabilitation counselors wrote or talked.

Throughout this book I have tried to maintain the anonymity of those who shared their world with me. My concern is not that social scientists or students interested in disability, vocational rehabilitation, or human service work will recognize these detectives. They will not.

Instead, without anonymity, others in the vocational rehabilitation field—from the national level to the area office—would recognize these people. Therefore, no names appear. Information that would have identified specific people was generally deleted, although this was not always possible. For example, if only one rehabilitation counselor primarily handles clients with a certain disability, then to discuss working with such clients necessarily identifies the counselor, at least to fellow counselors. If a few counselors handle certain kinds of cases, then to discuss the working of those cases necessarily identifies a limited group of counselors, though not a specific counselor. Unproductive, even destructive, guessing games may ensue. Where that was a potential problem, I checked with the individuals involved. However, it is neither possible nor desirable to bowdlerize a sociological investigation such as this one. Nevertheless, detectives, whether they be of the law enforcement, human services, or sociological kind, often face difficult ethical decisions such as this in their work (Warren, 1980).

NOTE

1. The attitude toward “low-level bureaucrats” may at times be derisive or condescending:

This is a story about magicians. But it is not a story about old crones in secluded hovels turning princes into frogs. It is about modern, mundane magicians, with powers more relevant to urban crisis than to sleeping princesses. Times have changed for magicians as for everyone else. The outputs of vast pharmaceutical laboratories can change princes into frogs (or anything else) far more easily and quickly than can even the most skilled old crone. What is called for in modern magic is mass marketing—the capacity to change a great number of citizens into a limited number of creatures economically and efficiently. For such magic 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. is a more propitious time than the full of the moon, and printed forms conjure better than bat-wings and are more readily available. These modern magicians are organization men and women. They work for welfare departments, police departments, hospitals, housing authorities, courts, and so forth, and if they can't change a citizen into a frog they can certainly do a goat and will generally try for a sheep. These practitioners of modern magic are frequently called bureaucrats—street-level bureaucrats (but who knows what Merlin was called behind his back). Their occult task is to turn ordinary citizens into “clients” (or “suspects,” “patients,” or any other trade name for client). This is a study of how they ply their trade [Protts, 1979: 1].