

Toward An Engagement in Social Support: A Key to Community Integration in Rehabilitation

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Abstract

Community integration is one of the most important as well as most frequently identified goals of rehabilitation and habilitation for people with disabilities. Although rehabilitation professionals have identified community integration as an important goal, the role of community leisure service providers in this process has not been as clear. This article offers the core ideas associated with community integration. In addition, using Duck's (1994) theoretical model of social relationships, this paper presents how social relationships are developed in order to engage in social support. Further, this paper demonstrates how leisure could be used to facilitate development of meaningful relationships. Such information can clarify the professional's role in providing community integration services.

Keywords: *Community integration, social support, meaningful relationships, leisure*

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Social limitations, according to National Center for Medical Rehabilitation and Research (U.S Department of Health and Human Services, 1993), are restrictions attributable to barriers that limit fulfillment of social roles and full participation in society. The concept of social limitation corresponds to the concept of "handicap" in the World Health Organization's (1980) International Classification of Impairment, Disability and Handicap (ICIDH). Regardless of regions in the world, the concept associated with re-integration to normal pattern of social and community life is one of key ideas in rehabilitation. Numerous international rehabilitation scholars have identified the importance of social and community integration to the well-being of people with disabilities (e.g., Cardol, de Haan, van den Bos, de Jong, & de Groot, 1999; Trigg, Wood, & Hewer, 1999).

However, prominent North American rehabilitation researchers have been critical of rehabilitation service providers for focusing more on independence in physical functioning than on social limitations imposed by disability on community living (e.g., Whiteneck, 1994; Willer, Ottenbacher & Coad, 1994). Being part of natural social groups and having "typical" activities, roles, and relationships are important to most people with traumatic injuries. Thus, achievements in community living following rehabilitation are often how rehabilitation specialists define successful treatment outcome (Whiteneck, 1994). Although rehabilitation services personnel regard community integration as the primary goal of treatment, this important goal has not been adequately addressed (Whiteneck, 1994; Willer, et al, 1994).

In the United States, community integration has been identified as one of the most

important domains of therapeutic recreation (TR) intervention in rehabilitation settings. According to Kinney, Warren, Kinney and Witman (1999), community integration programs are the most frequently used TR interventions and also the most critically needed modality in rehabilitation. At the same time, there has not been a clear definition or exploration of the concept within the TR literature. Furthermore, although professionals working in healthcare services have historically attempted to facilitate community inclusion, the success of such efforts ultimately rests with clients and their communities. The purpose of this article is to thoroughly examine community integration with the aim of providing conceptual guidelines to assist leisure service professionals to plan and implement community integration program that result in meaningful inclusion in the community for people with disabilities.

Conceptualizations

Although many leisure service professionals might have an intuitive understanding of community integration, they may have difficulty defining it explicitly due to the term having been loosely defined in most literature (Dijkers, 1999). For example, Townsend and Ryan (1991) described community integration as synonymous with "community living," which they defined as "participation and contribution in every aspect of community life" (p. 53). Corrigan (1994) identified community integration as the "assumption or resumption of culturally and developmentally appropriate social roles" (p. 110). More recently, Dijkers (1999) has offered a broader concept of community integration. He wrote that community integration involves:

...acquiring/resuming age-gender-culture-appropriate roles/statuses/activities, including independence/interdependence in decision making, and productive behaviors performed as part of multi varied relationships with family, friends, and others in natural community settings. (p. 41)

One element that all of these definitions have in common is that they focus on the as-

sumption or resumption of valued social roles. Essentially what all of these authors are arguing for is that rehabilitation should facilitate social access if it is to create successful community integration. This theme also represents most current thinking on inclusion practices in recreation and leisure services. Dattilo (1994) stated that people with disabilities must have both physical access to communities and access to valued social roles. However, simple access to roles may not facilitate integration. For example, in studies of people with mental retardation and psychiatric disabilities, simply being able to hold a job (social role) has not been clearly related to positive outcomes (Banks, Charleston, Grossi, & Mank, nd; Mank, Cioffi, & Yovanoff, 1997).

In contrast, social interaction afforded through the occupation of social roles does appear to be related to positive inclusion outcomes. At issue here is that community integration goes beyond physical presence and the resumption of social roles. It must include these as well as ongoing, meaningful interpersonal relationships of mutuality and reciprocity. Through such relationships, people with or without disabilities have access to support from their community. Thus, meaningful social integration can be represented by a Pyramid model (see Figure 1) in which community integration means more than physical and social access (e.g., opportunity for social interaction, social roles).

Figure 1. Pyramid Model of Community Integration

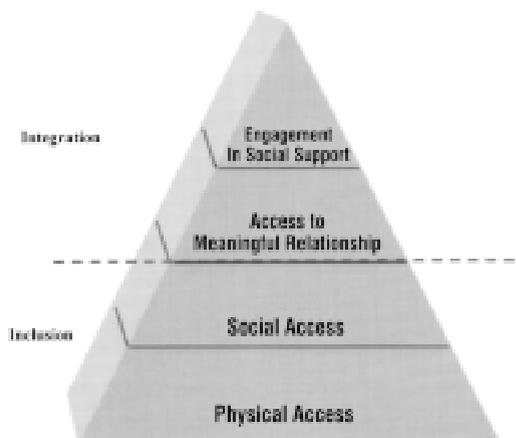
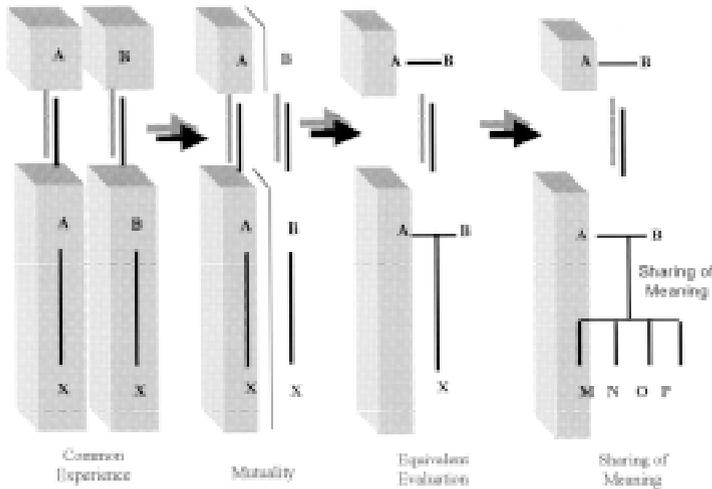


Figure 2. Duck's (1994) Social Relationships Formation Model



In this conceptualization, the term community means more than a place or simply a small-scale population aggregate. It is a social experience (Bender, 1982; Calhoun, 1988). Thus, the Pyramid model of community integration reflects an experiential definition of community. The experiential nature of meaningful social relationships and the exchange of social support are important concepts to real integration of people with disabilities into a community.

Meaningful Social Relationship and Exchange of Social Support

Meaningful relationships do not happen instantly. They are developed progressively. Duck (1994) proposed that meaningful relationships form through the development of a shared understanding about some phenomena. Shared meanings are formed "in relation to a particular range of experience, but may be extended to others as a result of reflection or interaction" (p. 95).

The process identified by Duck in Figure 2 indicates that first, there must be a commonality of experience. Commonality of experience is seen when the same event occurs in the lives of two people (i.e., person A and person B) and they discuss (through self-disclosure) the common experience (i.e., topic or event X). From this commonality of experience, mutuality of understanding may occur.

Mutuality is seen when both individuals share feelings and thoughts about the common experience, thereby creating a common frame of reference. This mutual frame of reference permits an equivalence of evaluation. Through the evaluation of one's own and the others' thoughts and feelings about the topic or event, one may begin to recognize equivalence of values that are shared. Finally, this equivalence of understanding can expand beyond a single common

experience to sharing of meaning. Thus, through continued interaction, the two interacting individuals may find that they "share the same comprehension in respect of other unrelated, domains of meaning within which they interpret, comprehend and cherish these equivalences" (Duck, 1994, p. 118).

Figure 2 suggests a process model that describes the changes in the relationship between person A and B as they progress through different levels of social relationship. Although Duck's progressive model on social relationships indicate primarily dyadic situation, the principle may apply to a larger number of relationships. One of the most important exchanges in interpersonal relationships is social support. Vaux (1988) asserted that:

At the extreme, one might argue that a large component of social support goes on in close relationships. What constitutes support in these relationships may be embedded in the private language that characterizes communication in close relationships – special gestures, private jokes, obscure allusions, private meanings, and shared associations. (p. 16)

Thoits (1982) defined social support as the degree to which a person's basic social needs are gratified through interaction with others. Another definition includes the experience of

being cared for and loved, valued and esteemed, and able to count on others should need arise (McCull & Friedland, 1989). These definitions refer to the experiential aspect of support received from others. Consequently, the interactions as well as the satisfaction with these supportive interactions are important ideas in social support. Any kind of social support does not guarantee the satisfaction of interaction. As discussed previously, meaningful interpersonal relationships are the keys that bring satisfaction.

Connections Between Meaningful Relationships and Leisure

Meaningful relationships can be facilitated through leisure engagement. Leisure is a social space in which the social bonding of intimate family and friends is developed (Kelly, 1983). The experience of leisure is often characterized by "sharing friendship," "family companionship," and "meeting new friends" (Lee, 1990). In a way, meaningful social relationship itself becomes the basis of leisure experiences.

Through leisure activities, people can effectively create commonality of experience. Many leisure activities have potential for social interaction. However, the key ingredients in this case are similar interest in an activity and an enjoyable interaction. For example, interacting with another person through activities such as learning a craft, taking a trip, or engaging in a tennis match creates commonality of experience. With joint participation in enjoyable activities, two individuals accommodate each other and create a mutual interest that triggers relationships.

Through leisure activities, people can effectively create commonality of experience. Many leisure activities have potential for social interaction. However, the key ingredients in this case are similar interest in an activity and an enjoyable interaction. For example, interacting with others who have same interests such as collections of coins or baseball cards create commonality of experience. With joint participation in enjoyable activities, two individuals accommodate each other and create a mutual interest that triggers relationships.

Mutuality is a joint realization that two individuals have something in common (Duck, 1994). The notion of mutuality plays an important role in experiencing leisure. For example, Scott and Godbey (1992) claim that leisure "is largely organized around people interacting with others as a result of mutual tastes and out of a sense of belonging" (p.48). Continuous interaction through commonality of experience permits mutual transfer of feelings and thoughts about the commonality; and thus creates a common frame of reference. Larson, Mannell and Zuzanek (1986) support this notion through empirical research in which they found that "the power of friends to generate positive feelings is partly a result of the greater rate of active leisure activities with them" (p. 122).

Realization of mutuality shared through leisure may lead to a further reconstruction of meaning that reflects an underlying equivalence of values the two individuals hold. In other words, two individuals draw meaning from leisure engagement and co-construct the common subjective meaning that is called "leisure" (Shaw, 1985). Both individuals not only participate in the same activity, but appraise the experience equivalently. Once both individuals evaluate the equivalence of leisure meaning, evaluation of each other's acts in leisure becomes positive. Samdahl and Kleiber (1989) reported that social evaluation contains negative affect in non-leisure, but positive in leisure. It is this joyful interaction that facilitates co-construction of equivalent meaning.

Mutuality in enjoyable activity may be sequentially reconstructed in a process that acknowledges the original commonality and moves toward sharing of meaning from an initial commonality. In other words, two individuals reach a sharing of meaning as they see each other's similar values in a common leisure engagement. At this stage, they may bring some other topics, events and experiences close to their initial common leisure activity into the relationship. Borrowing Duck's words, "they have a common organization for meaning" (p. 120) surrounding the commonality of leisure engagement. Engagement of social support can occur naturally at this stage of social relationships.

While many forms of leisure are conducive for developing meaningful relationships, Stebbins' (1992) idea of serious leisure offers an excellent context to build and maintain meaningful social relationships. Serious leisure is defined as "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge" (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). Serious leisure also provides a sense of belonging through membership, or identification of self with a group of participants with distinct values and beliefs. Further, serious leisure expands participant's social circle, fosters responsibility and creates the opportunity to feel valued and needed by other members (Stebbins, 1992). Particularly, the specialized skills offer social competence, which affect social acceptance by others.

Conclusion

Community integration is one of the most important as well as most frequently identified goals of rehabilitation and habilitation for people with disabilities. Although rehabilitation professionals have identified community integration as an important goal, the role of community leisure service providers in this process has not been as clear. This article offered the core ideas associated with community integration and how relationships are developed in order to engage in social support. Further, this paper identifies how leisure could be used to facilitate the development of meaningful relationships. Such information can clarify the professional's role in providing community integration services.

Throughout the rehabilitation process, social support can have a direct effect on health (Haften, Karren, Frandsen, & Smith, 1996). Therefore, the social support-based community integration program should start as early as possible, ideally as the clients are admitted. During the in-patient stage, social support as a main component in community integration can be a very efficacious intervention. In a rehabilitation setting, an influx of support at the onset of injury and disability is a natural

phenomenon. However, TR professionals should remember that this initial support "wears down" as time goes on (Kutner, 1987; Lanza & Revenson, 1993). TR professionals should begin to intervene by identifying key supporters and assess their client's social needs. While therapeutic recreation programs typically focus on a variety of activities in the early phases of the rehabilitation process, community integration programs need to gain more impetus as clients move toward discharge.

Another suggestion is that meaningful relationships and social support should not be limited to persons without disabilities. Social relationships can be meaningfully developed among people with disabilities through various leisure-related activities such as wheelchair sports. Disability itself may easily become commonality of experience.

A final suggestion is included as a word of caution. While the social relationship model (Figure 2) reflects the regularities in social relationships from a variety of research findings (Duck, 1994), social life is dynamic and complex and is continually "in the process of becoming rather than being" (Hall, 1987, p. 5). Meaningful social relationships may take many different forms and are influenced by numerous factors. The model presented in this paper introduces helpful means to understand how general patterns in terms of how relationships are developed. It will be up to every leisure professional, however, to apply the model in order to facilitate meaningful relationships among his or her clients.

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