

The Competence/Deviance Hypothesis

Mark Kilsby and Julie Allan
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According to Marc Gold¹ this hypothesis suggests that the more competent an individual is deemed to be by society, the more ‘deviance’² or difference will be tolerated in that person by others. So, for example, a Professor who talks to his or herself may be considered simply eccentric by society, while a person with a mental health condition or a learning disability may be considered mad or even dangerous for the same act.

The competence/deviance theory can be useful when applied to supported employment. For example, in TSI we insist upon the trainer utilizing the ‘natural method’ because, apart from being the most efficient method, it is also the way that other employees do the task. If we change that method too much, then this increases the risk that the person will stand-out and when attention is drawn to people with disabilities in this way it is invariably negative. In this situation, when we apply the competence deviance hypothesis the person’s work colleagues are unlikely to conclude that “she must be cleverer than us – she’s doing the task differently” and more likely to conclude: “poor woman, she can’t do it the same as us!”

The hypothesis suggests that as service providers we need to find ways to empower people to demonstrate their skills and competences to the rest of society and in supported employment we have a fantastic opportunity to do this! With the application of TSI approaches we can demonstrate time and time again, not only that people can perform the same work tasks as their non-disabled peers, but at the same rate, to the same standards and within the lead-times set by the employers.³

The Conservatism Corollary

In Social Role Valorization Dr Wolf Wolfensberger identifies people as either valued (competence) or devalued (deviancy) in our society. In order to counter the effects of the competence/deviance hypothesis, Wolfensberger

¹ Gold, M.W. (1980). Try Another Way Training Manual, Champaign, Illinois: Research Press (page 99).

² Deviance is defined as “the fact or state of diverging from usual or accepted standards, especially (in the current context) social behaviour.”

³ Lead time is defined as the amount of time it usually takes for non disabled employees to learn the skills associated with the job.

proposes that we adopt the ‘conservatism corollary when developing our services, meaning that we must bend over backwards to enhance the person’s perceived image - the more complex and outwardly obvious a person’s needs are, the more important it is that we apply the Conservatism Corollary.⁴

As an example, consider a social enterprise cafe set up to employ people with learning disabilities. The food service should not be simply average or good, in this situation, but of the highest quality and cleanliness, to counter the perception that people with learning disabilities are unable to cook and follow basic hygiene rules. If we now apply this concept to lead-time, work rate and quality in employment, then TSI aims to enable people to demonstrate that they can not only perform the same tasks as their non-disabled colleagues, but often at a faster rate and to a higher quality.

As mentioned in the main text, we can almost guarantee that a high proportion of people with learning disabilities who help us on our TSI course learn to assemble the bike brake faster than those attending the course as trainers. This has obvious implications for realising a greater potential for people with learning disabilities and is an incredibly potent way of countering the societal biases associated with the competence/deviance hypothesis.

⁴ Wolfensberger, W. (1998). A brief introduction to Social Role Valorization: A high-order concept for addressing the plight of societally devalued people, and for structuring human services. (3rd ed.) Syracuse University.