

An Overview of Social Role Valorization Theory

by Joe Osburn

Social Role Valorization (SRV) is the name given to a concept for transacting human relationships and human service, formulated in 1983 by Wolf Wolfensberger, PhD, as the successor to his earlier formulation of the principle of normalization (Lemay, 1995; Wolfensberger, 1972). His most recent (1995) definition of SRV is: "The application of what science can tell us about the enablement, establishment, enhancement, maintenance, and/or defense of valued social roles for people" (Wolfensberger, 1995a).

The major goal of SRV is to create or support socially valued roles for people in their society, because if a person holds valued social roles, that person is highly likely to receive from society those good things in life that are available to that society, and that can be conveyed by it, or at least the opportunities for obtaining these. In other words, all sorts of good things that other people are able to convey are almost automatically apt to be accorded to a person who holds societally valued roles, at least within the resources and norms of his/her society.

There exists a high degree of consensus about what the good things in life are. To mention only a few major examples, they include home and family; friendship; being accorded dignity, respect, acceptance; a sense of belonging; an education, and the development and exercise of one's capacities; a voice in the affairs of one's community and society; opportunities to participate; a decent material standard of living; an at least normative place to live; and opportunities for work and self-support.

SRV is especially relevant to two classes of people in society: those who are already societally devalued, and those who are at heightened risk of becoming devalued. Thus, SRV is primarily a response to the historically universal phenomenon of social devaluation, and especially societal devaluation. In any society, there are groups and classes who are at value-risk or already devalued in and by their society or some of its sub-systems. (In North America, it has been estimated that from one-fourth to one-third of the population has characteristics that are societally devalued to the point that they exist in a devalued state.) Devalued individuals, groups, and classes are far more likely than other members of society to be treated badly, and to be subjected to a systematic--and possibly life-long--pattern of such negative experiences as the following.

Being perceived and interpreted as "deviant," due to their negatively-valued differentness. The latter could consist of physical or functional impairments, low competence, a particular ethnic identity, certain behaviors or associations, skin color, and many others.

1. Being rejected by community, society, and even family and services.
2. Being cast into negative social roles, some of which can be severely negative, such as "subhuman," "menace," and "burden on society."

3. Being put and kept at a social or physical distance, the latter most commonly by segregation.
4. Having negative images (including language) attached to them.
5. Being the object of abuse, violence, and brutalization, and even being made dead.

The reality that not all people are positively valued in their society makes SRV so important (Kendrick, 1994). It can help not only to prevent bad things from happening to socially vulnerable or devalued people, but can also increase the likelihood that they will experience the good things in life. Unfortunately, the good things in life are usually not accorded to people who are devalued in society. For them, many or most good things are beyond reach, denied, withheld, or at least harder to attain. Instead, what might be called "the bad things in life" are imposed upon them, such as the six experiences listed above. This is why having at least some valued social roles is so important. In fact, a person who fills valued social roles is likely to be treated much better than people who have the same devalued characteristics, but who do not have equally valued social roles. This is because when a person holds valued social roles, attributes of theirs that might otherwise be viewed negatively are much more apt to be put up with, or overlooked, or "dismissed" as relatively unimportant.

Enhancing the perceived value of the social roles of a person or class is called social role valorization, and doing so is role-valorizing. There are two major broad strategies for pursuing this goal for (devalued) people: (a) enhancement of people's social image in the eyes of others, and (b) enhancement of their competencies, in the widest sense of the term. Image enhancement and competency enhancement form a feedback loop that can be negative or positive. That is, a person who is competency-impaired is highly at risk of suffering image-impairment; a person who is impaired in image is apt to be responded to by others in ways that delimit or reduce the person's competency. But both processes work equally in the reverse direction. That is, a person whose social image is positive is apt to be provided with experiences, expectancies, and other life conditions which are likely to increase, or give scope to, his/her competencies; and a person who displays competencies is also apt to be imaged positively.

Role-valorizing actions in the image-enhancement or competency-enhancement domains can be carried out on four distinct levels and sectors of social organization.

- The individual;
- The individual's primary social systems, such as the family;
- The intermediate level social systems of an individual or group, such as the neighborhood, community, and services the person receives;
- The larger society of the individual or group, including the entire service system.

Combining these different dimensions and levels yields a 2x4 matrix for classifying the major implications of SRV, as shown in Table 1 (adapted from Thomas, 99).

For those who wish to improve the social situation of devalued people, SRV constitutes a very high-level systematic framework to guide such action. In addition to providing a

very coherent conceptual foundation, SRV also points to high-level principles and strategies for shaping services, as well as to innumerable specific practical action measures. These principles, strategies, and action measures are thoroughly spelled-out in the SRV literature. In fact, SRV is one of the most fully articulated broad service schemas in existence. For example, within each of the eight boxes in Table 1, innumerable more specific role-valorizing actions can be imagined, and indeed, a great many have been explicitly identified (Thomas, 99). Even in just the few words of the short definition of SRV (stated above), there is incorporated an enormous amount of explanatory power and implied actions which can give people much food for thought in their whole approach to human service. If implemented, SRV can lead to a genuine address of the needs of the people served, and thus to a great increase in service quality and effectiveness.

Table 1. Social Role Valorization Action Implications

Level Of Action	Primarily To Enhance Social Images	Primarily to Enhance Personal Competencies
Individual Person	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions for a Specific Individual that are Likely to Enhance Positive Perceptions of That Individual by Others	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions for a specific Individual that are Likely to Enhance the Competencies of That Individual
Primary Social Systems	Arranging Physical & Social Systems that are Likely to Enhance Positive Perceptions of a Person In & Via this System	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions of A Person's Primary Social System that are Likely to Enhance that Person's Competencies
Intermediate & Secondary Social Systems	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions in Secondary Social Systems that are Likely to Enhance Positive Perceptions-In & Via Those Systems-of People in Them, & Others Like Them	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions in Secondary Social Systems that are Likely To Enhance the Competencies of People in Them
Entire Society of an Individual, Group or Class of People	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions Throughout Society that	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions Throughout Society that

	Are Likely to Enhance Positive Perceptions of Classes	Are Likely to Enhance the competencies of Classes of People
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SRV is a social science concept and is thus in the empirical realm. It rests on a solid foundation of well-established social science theory, research, and empiricism within fields such as sociology, psychology, and education and pedagogy, drawing upon multiple bodies of inquiry, such as role theory, learning theory, the function and power of social imagery, mind-sets and expectancies, group dynamics, the social and psychological processes involved in unconsciousness, the sociology of deviancy, and so forth. SRV weaves this body of knowledge into an overarching, systematic, and unified schema.

SRV is not a value system or ideology, nor does it prescribe or dictate value decisions. Decisions about whether to implement SRV measures for any person or group, and to what extent, are ultimately determined by people's higher-order (and not necessarily conscious) values which transcend SRV and come from other sources, such as their personal upbringing, family influences, political and economic ideas, worldviews, and explicit religions. What people do in their relationships and services, or in response to the needs of their clients, or for that matter in any other endeavors, depends greatly on their values, assumptions, and beliefs, including those they hold about SRV itself. However, SRV makes a big point of how positive personal and cultural values can be powerfully brought to bear if one wishes to pursue valued social roles for people. For example, in most western cultures, the Judeo-Christian value system and liberal democratic tradition are espoused and widely assented to, even if rarely actualized in full. SRV can recruit such deeply embedded cultural values and traditions on behalf of people who might otherwise be devalued and even dehumanized. Every society has values that can be thusly recruited to craft positive roles for people (Wolfensberger, 1972, 1995a).

As a social science schema, SRV is descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is, SRV can describe certain realities (e.g., social devaluation), and can say what are the likely outcomes of doing or not doing certain things in regard to those realities, in what has come to be called the "if this...then that" formulation of SRV (Wolfensberger, 1995b). For example, SRV points out that if parents do things that help others to have a positive view of their child and that help the child acquire skills needed to participate positively in the community, then it is more likely that the child will be well-integrated into the community. If one does not emphasize the adult status of mentally retarded adults, and/or does not avoid things which reinforce their role stereotype as "eternal children" (such as referring to adults as children, engaging adults in children's activities, and so on), then one is likely to perpetuate the common negative stereotype that mentally retarded adults really are overgrown children, with all the negative consequences that attend this stereotype. However, once people learn SRV, they themselves have to determine what they think about it, whether they believe in its power, to what extent (if at all) they want to apply it in valorizing the roles of a person or class, and even to what extent they want

to valorize other people's roles. For example, while SRV brings out the high importance of valued social roles, whether one decides to actually provide positive roles to people, or even believes that a specific person or group deserves valued social roles, depends on one's personal value system, which (as noted above) has to come from somewhere other than SRV.

The ideas behind SRV first began to be generated by the work that was being conducted by Wolfensberger and his associates at the Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency, which he directs at Syracuse University. One major source of these ideas was an on-going effort on the part of Wolfensberger to continually explore, advance, and refine the principle of normalization--an effort that began almost as soon as normalization first appeared on the scene. For example, since normalization was first explicitly formulated in 1969, several books, numerous articles, chapters, and other publications (several hundred altogether) have been written and disseminated on the topic (see, for example, Flynn, in press; Flynn & Lemay, in press; Flynn & Nitsch, 1980; Wolfensberger, 1972; Wolfensberger & Glenn, 1973, 1975; and Wolfensberger & Thomas, 1983), which successively clarified and helped to increase comprehension of the meaning and application of normalization. This process involved a concerted effort to systematically incorporate into teaching and training materials the deepening understanding which had been reached in the course of: (a) thinking, writing, and teaching about normalization over the years; (b) its increasing incorporation into actual human service practice; and (c) numerous normalization-based service assessments, mostly using the PASS tool (Wolfensberger & Glenn, 1973, 1975, reprinted in 1978). There were also continuous attempts to deal with frequent misconceptions and even "perversions" of the concept of normalization (see Wolfensberger, 1980a, in press), often due to the ease with which the term "normalization" itself could be (and was) misconstrued or misapplied.

As part of the refinement of normalization, Wolfensberger and his Training Institute associates developed a service evaluation instrument that came to be known as PASSING, which stands for "Program Analysis of Service Systems' Implementation of Normalization Goals" (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 1983, 1988). PASSING was designed to assess the quality of human services in relation to their adherence to SRV. The major action implications of SRV are spelled out in much more detail in PASSING than in any other publication to date. However, the term "Social Role Valorization" had not yet been coined when PASSING was printed. PASSING thus incorporates mostly SRV concepts while still using the earlier normalization language. The development of PASSING contributed much to the insight that actions to achieve the ultimate as well as intermediate goals and processes of SRV can all be classified as dealing with either image and/or competency enhancement.

This stream of concentrated development resulted in an evolution in thinking which brought about the conceptual transition from normalization to SRV. Not surprisingly, the main substance of the concept of SRV began to evolve before the concept itself was defined, and before a new term was coined to describe it. For instance, Wolfensberger's last published formulation of the principle of normalization defined it as, "as much as

possible, the use of culturally valued means in order to enable, establish and/or maintain valued social roles for people" (Wolfensberger & Tullman, 1982), thus foreshadowing both the new concept and the new term Social Role Valorization. This article was the first publication that articulated the insight that valued social roles for people at risk of social devaluation were--even more than merely culturally normative conditions--the real key to the good things of life for them. This represented such an advance that it was clearly a higher conceptualization than the earlier formulation of normalization. Thus, SRV definitely amounts to far more than a renaming or rewording of the normalization principle; rather, it constitutes a major conceptual breakthrough based on the double insight that (a) people with valued social roles will tend to be accorded desirable things, at least within the resources and norms of their society, and (b) the two major means to the creation, support, and defense of valued social roles are to enhance both a person's image and competency.

In order to help communicate new concepts, new terms are often needed. The selection of the term "Social Role Valorization" was quite deliberate (Wolfensberger, 1983, 1984, 1996). Not only does it overcome many of the historical and other problems that had always plagued the term "normalization," but it is based on two additional discoveries that are highly relevant to the essence of its meaning (Wolfensberger, 1985).

In modern French human service contexts, people had begun to use the word *valorisation* in order to signify the attachment of value to people. In Canadian French specifically, the term *valorisation sociale* had been used in teaching the normalization principle since ca. 1980.

In both French and English, the term valorization has its root in the Latin word *valere*, which means to value or accord worth. Relatedly, the word "valorization" has, or elicits, very strong positive connotations that clearly correspond to the concept it is meant to convey.

In combination, the above discoveries suggested that in English "Social Role Valorization," and in French "La Valorisation des Rôles Sociaux" (Wolfensberger, 1991b), would be eminently suitable terms for the new concept, both having positive connotations, while being unfamiliar enough not to evoke wrong ideas. The French term brings out even better than the English the fact that people hold multiple roles, and that more than one can be valorized.

Finally, another advantage of the switch from normalization to SRV is that because Social Role Valorization is (as yet) still an uncommon term, people are more likely to listen to definitions and explanations of it rather than attaching their own preconceived notions to it, as they had tended to do with the word "normalization."

SRV is being disseminated across the world. For example, in the English language, both the overarching SRV schema and its major elements have been described in an introductory monograph, the second 80-page edition of which (Wolfensberger, 1992) serves together with the *PASSING* manual (Wolfensberger & Thomas 1983, 1988) as the

current SRV text. Also, Flynn and Lemay (in press) have published the proceedings of a major SRV conference, with many chapters that reflect the most recent perspectives on SRV. There is also a massive set of (unpublished) teaching materials used in SRV and PASSING training by qualified trainers. The multitude of SRV action implications to human services and human service workers are thoroughly spelled-out in SRV and PASSING training workshops which are intensive teaching events, conducted in a variety of formats, of anywhere from one to seven days in length. Versions of such events have been conducted in English, French, Norwegian, Icelandic, and Welsh.

Both the English SRV (Wolfensberger, 1991a) and PASSING (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 1983) texts have been translated into French (Wolfensberger, 1991b; Wolfensberger & Thomas, 1988), and the SRV text into Italian (Wolfensberger, 1991c) and German (Wolfensberger, 1991d). A revised version has appeared in Japanese (Wolfensberger, 1995c), and is in the process of being retranslated into German.

Information on the most recent SRV-related developments, and/or SRV training events, can be requested from the above-mentioned Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency (230 Euclid Avenue, Syracuse, New York 13244-5130, USA; 315/443-4264).

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