

Wolf Wolfensberger's contributions to role theory

The development of Social Role Valorization (SRV) (Wolfensberger, 1983) put social role theory front and center in Wolfensberger's (2012) project of developing an empirically-based system of ideas (meta-theory) that would help describe the dynamics of social (de)valuation and assist in devising comprehensive strategies for social change. Wolfensberger has often commented upon the importance of "sociologizing" strategies of human intervention (1993; 1999) and the importance of social and physical contexts in determining life outcomes (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2007).

Role theory is an important tool of analysis that helps explain apparent regularities of behavior as well as the structure of the social system (Biddle, 1979). Biddle, in his review of role theory (1986), shows that it represents an important body of social science theorizing and research, and that role concepts come close to being the "lingua franca" (p. 8) of the behavioral sciences.

"Role theory concerns one of the most important features of social life, characteristic behavior patterns or roles. It explains roles by presuming that persons are members of social positions and hold expectations for their own behaviors and those of other persons" (Biddle, 1986, p. 67).

There are a number of role/social role theories that are meant to describe a variety of social dynamics (Lemay, 1999). Wolfensberger acknowledges that "the sociologist Talcott Parsons (e.g., 1951) was one of the early authorities to emphasize the importance of social roles" (2013, p. 45). Also, he often referenced the (1958, 1961, 1963) works of another influential sociologist, Erving Goffman (e.g., Wolfensberger, 1999). In an extensive review, Lemay (1999) documents how Wolfensberger's role theory is consistent with the extant sociological literature, including the works of Parsons and Goffman, though it stands on its own and makes original contributions to role theory's explanatory power (as described below).

Role theory has had a place in Wolfensberger's works since at least 1969 with the publication of his "Origin and Nature of our Institutional Models" (later published as a separate book), where he describes how the architecture, activities, amenities, and other characteristics of the large congregate care facilities of the era (ca. 1970) contributed to casting residents into six negative ascribed roles – i.e., a social identity that is attributed to an individual because of group membership or

other factors over which the person has little control (race, religion, gender, citizenship, type of disability, age, etc.). These roles are:

- Sick person
- Subhuman organism
- Menace
- Object of pity
- Burden of charity
- Holy innocent

Such ascriptions, acting as stereotypes, would then engender in those who encountered such people, negative expectations of them, perceptions of low social value, and resulting maltreatment. He goes on to suggest that, in contrast, a positive role, such as that of “developing person” would give rise to more positive expectations, perceptions, and treatment, such as better residential arrangements and more valued activities. Thus, membership in a devalued group and the attribution of such stereotypical roles has a profound impact on how people are perceived and treated.

As Wolfensberger’s definition of the principle of normalization evolved, he came to the conclusion that social roles were a key construct that allowed for a parsimonious statement of means and goals. “Normalization implies, 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, p. 131). This led to a new direction of theory development and the abandonment of the term normalization for Social Role Valorization (Wolfensberger, 1983), a name change that he accompanied with a reformulation of the principle itself (Wolfensberger, 1983).

A few years later, Wolfensberger observed that access to the good things of life (Wolfensberger, Thomas & Caruso, 1996), or what may be termed objective well-being, is qualified by one’s social status as determined by one’s social roles. Thus, the application of SRV aims at improving the quality of life conditions and experiences through the attribution and/or achievement of valued social roles. With SRV, social integration is defined in terms of valued social roles that bring about the valued social participation of an individual through shared valued activities, in valued settings, in interaction with members of valued society (Wolfensberger, 2013; Lemay 2006).

Wolfensberger's most recent update of his definition of SRV further reflects the centrality of roles in describing the processes of social evaluation.

“Social Role Valorization is a theoretical framework that, based on empirical knowledge, and drawing on multiple theories in sociology and psychology, (a) posits a relationship between the social roles people occupy, and how these people are then perceived, evaluated, and treated; and (b) affords the formulation of predictions of how shaping the social roles of individuals, groups, or classes will influence how perceivers of these roles respond to, and treat, these respective parties, and of a great many strategies for doing so” (Wolfensberger, 2012, 78-79).

In other words, the knowledge of empirical dynamics could be of very practical use in shaping how people are seen and treated, and especially, how people who tend to be viewed and treated very badly could have their life situations greatly improved.

Roles are the context of human interaction, and it is indeed hard to imagine role-less social intercourse. People are perceived and perceive themselves largely through the roles they occupy (Wolfensberger, 2012). Such perceptions are essentially subjective and lead to social judgments whereby individuals and groups are valued according to the roles they are seen to occupy and play. “The value people attribute to various social roles tends to decisively shape their behavior toward persons whom they see in valued or devalued roles. Those in valued roles tend to be treated well and those in devalued roles, ill” (p. 13).

Thus for SRV, social roles determine one’s place in a social system.

“A social role may be viewed as a combination of behaviors, functions, relationships, privileges, duties and responsibilities that is socially defined, is widely understood and recognized within a society (or at least within one of its subsystems), and is characteristic or expected of a person who occupies a particular position within a social system” (Wolfensberger, 2012, p. 26).

However, one’s social status also opens or impedes access to certain social roles: “Social roles can be placed along a continuum from deeply devalued to highly valued ones, and most of these polarities fall within a relatively small number of clusters” (2013, p. 49). Wolfensberger (2013) describes eight “role domains” that include (a) relationships, (b) residence, domicile, (c) economic productivity, occupation, (d) education, (e) community, civic identity, participation, (f) cultus, values, and (g) culture (adapted from p. 50). Roles within these domains are variously valued and are available to be taken up in keeping with the person’s perceived social status. Generally one’s social status will be improved by moving into a valued role. For

instance, in the domiciliary domain, the perceived social value of someone in the role of renter in a bad neighborhood is likely to improve if the person moves into the role of home-owner in a better neighborhood.

Wolfensberger argues that all roles are ultimately ascribed, but some are also “competency-contingent” (2012, p. 60) – requiring certain defined skills – and thus achieved. The ascribed roles are tied to the social categories and groups we are perceived to belong to – they are in a sense in the eye of the beholder – whereas we do have some control over achieved roles. But if a role appears incongruous – a person does not “look the part” (does not conform to people’s expectations) or does not have some of the basic skills required – recognition of the person in the role may be withheld, and thus the person lacks the legitimacy to occupy the role. Eagly and Wood note a similar phenomenon as it pertains to changing gender roles: “Women entering male dominated roles contend with cultural incongruity between people’s beliefs about what it takes to excel in those roles and stereotypes about the attributes of women ... As a result, even highly qualified women may be judged to lack the attributes necessary for success” (p. 470).

In a posthumously published work, Wolfensberger (2012) laid out a hierarchy of propositions that stem from SRV, that include the following concerning social roles:

“Social roles carry perceived social value that can range along a continuum from extremely negative to highly positive.

In any social system of any size, the roles inhabited by members will range from being of relatively high value to relatively low value, including outright devalued ones.

People can, and usually do, hold multiple roles, including valued and devalued ones at the same time.

Insofar as there are cultural differences in what is valued, and often subcultural differences as well, there are differences between cultures (and subcultures) in respect to which roles are valued and devalued, and how much.

Even within a given culture or subculture, how positively a given role is valued will differ according to many factors. For instance, a role might be positively valued only if held by a party of a certain age or sex, and only if carried out in certain contexts, but not if carried out by or in others. (We refer to this as

“perceived role coherency.”) What may be at issue here is either the perceived coherency of the incumbent with the role (e.g., is this person too old or too young to fill the role?), and/or the perceived coherency of the role with the environment or content (e.g., is this the kind of role that is carried out in this setting?).

In any social grouping--large or small--people relate to each other largely on the basis of their (perceived) social roles.

Within a social system, a strong positive feedback loop exists between a party's social valuation, and the value of the roles that party occupies.

The social roles that an individual, group, or class fills, and/or is perceived to fill, are extremely powerful determinants of how that party will be perceived, valued, and treated by perceivers.

To the degree that people are seen as occupying valued roles, the perceivers are apt to afford them the good things of life, including many positive opportunities.

To the degree that people are seen as occupying devalued roles, the perceivers will tend to not only withhold the good things of life from them, but even impose bad things on them.

The consequences of being cast into certain devalued roles (namely, the menace, non-human or sub-human, or death-related roles) will be much worse than the consequences of other devalued roles.

The more widely in society the social perceptions and valuations of roles are shared, the higher can the correlation be expected to be between the roles a party occupies and that party's life experiences.

There is a feedback loop between role expectancies that get conveyed to a party and absorbed by the party, and the party's role performance. (Wolfensberger, 2012, 114-119).”

Wolfensberger's (1999) goal early on was to develop a universally applicable social science theory of social valuation that would help explain, among other things, the systematic marginalization and other forms of maltreatment that affect vulnerable groups. With Social Role Valorization theory, social role theory has become a hinge

concept that describes critical social dynamics that are at the heart of social exclusion, and where valued social roles are a key ingredient to the equalization of opportunity.

Wolfensberger mostly worked and published in the field of disability (though he did not use that term), especially intellectual disability, and his further development of role theory, and especially his application of the concept to address complex social problems, has not yet been noticed by mainstream role theorists, though it has had a recognized impact in the field of disability research and theorizing (Heller et al., 1991).

Wolfensberger has mined the vast body of social role theory and shown that it has many elements that can be further developed and systematically applied to efforts to improve the lives of vulnerable people. In doing so, he has made a contribution to sociology and social psychology that will inevitably be recognized.

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