

Contribution to the History of Human Service

A notable characteristic of Dr. Wolfensberger's "scholarly" persona was his consistent moral and intellectual orientation to seeking and professing truth. In this, he was guided by an orientation to "universals," i.e., things which are true always and everywhere, for instance about human beings, human nature, and human service. In this connection, he often urged his students and associates to "think higher," meaning to identify the universals that govern the specifics, in order to get to the heart of things. In encouraging others to elevate their understanding of important issues and developments in this way, he customarily explored the historical context to learn the origin of things, where they came from, why they started, how and why they evolved over time in a particular manner, and what their trajectory tells us is likely in the future.

In regard to human services in particular, he was convinced that: (a) it is not possible to fully comprehend the nature of contemporary services without some understanding of their history; and (b) an appreciation of their history sheds much light on modern human service practices and pursuits, and lends predictability to their likely future character. He saw history as a way "to see further out in time in both directions." This conviction led logically to his own scholarly approach to the study of human service history and his teaching it to others.

Circa 1979, Wolfensberger began to investigate and document the history of human services more broadly. Being both teacher and writer, he shared his findings about history in teaching and training events, as well as in writings, only some of which were published. His first teaching events on the history of human services started out as one-hour presentations, and eventually grew to 12+ hours taught over a two-day period, using hundreds of pictures and illustrations, to trace the history of service ideas and practices from the beginnings of Western civilization up to the current day.

Following is the full title and a brief description of Wolfensberger's full-day history workshop.

A Presentation On The History Of Human Services,
Tracing The Origins Of Some Of Our Major Contemporary Service Patterns,
& Some Universal Lessons Which Can Be Learned From This History

Using several hundred slides from many (often obscure) sources, this presentation documents the evolution of major human service concepts and practices from ancient, informal, voluntary, unpaid personal helping forms to the largely commercialized patterns that we see today. Especially, illustrations of the architecture of human service settings will be used to show what the service patterns and assumptions were in a given era, and how they changed over time.

The first part of the presentation will sketch important prehistoric and preChristian antecedents of current human service patterns, and will show that the history of human services of all types is inextricably intertwined with the history of care for the poor, and of residential services. The evolution of human services into the late Medieval period will be traced, and the impact of the collapse of medieval services preceding and during the Reformation will be explained. The presentation will also explain the negative effects of political and economic changes during the period of absolutism in the 16th-17th centuries.

The presentation will explain how services became alienated from their valued cultural roots and analogues, and how service recipients of all kinds began to be interpreted as menaces and treated accordingly in brutalizing fashion. At the end, universally applicable lessons from this historical review will be drawn, as well as some lessons that are more particular to contemporary services.

The entire presentation will demonstrate how the following current human service ideas evolved: that bigger services are better services; that afflicted people are a menace to society; that segregated services are preferable to integrated ones; and that service recipients should be thankful for what they receive from service workers. The presentation will demonstrate that human service concepts were propagated rather uniformly throughout the westernized world, and leapt across barriers of language, nations, and culture, as early as medieval times. Even then, there was an international human service community which was very well informed of innovations anywhere, so that an innovation was often copied elsewhere as quickly as it is today. It will also show how human services are more effective when they are deeply rooted in the historical traditions and values of their culture, and that the drift of services away from cultural-rootedness and towards nonnormative and culture-alien approaches contributes so much of the disfunctionality that infects current human service structures and practices.

The presentation as a whole will compellingly demonstrate that human services are full of practices which are now carried on unconsciously, but which are actually vestiges or distortions of practices that were originally instituted with high consciousness.

Even in advanced graduate training, there is very little teaching of this history of human services. This material is relevant to every human service worker, from those on the direct clinical level to those at the highest planning levels, including service professionals and nonprofessionals, clinicians, advocates, volunteers, administrators, planners, theorists, and analysts. Attendance at the presentation can help anyone gain a better understanding of the service challenges that confront them, some of the dangers that lurk everywhere, and what sorts of service patterns to strive for. Many people who have attended this presentation have remarked that it fundamentally altered their perception of many human service patterns and that it helped them to understand--often for the first time--some of the things they had witnessed, or of which they were a part, or to which they had contributed. Persons who have been through PASS and PASSING training will also find that the presentation can help them greatly to master the challenging issue of "model coherency" of human services.

Wolfensberger also studied and taught on the history of more narrow human service sectors. For instance, he first taught and then wrote up his thoughts about the state of human services over the time of his life that he spent working in the field. It was called, and was published as, *“Reflections on a Lifetime in Human Services, from Prior to the Reforms of the 1950s-70s to the Present, with Implications for the Future: What Has Gotten Better, What Has Gotten Worse, What Is the Same, & What Lies Ahead”* (Wolfensberger, 1991). Other examples are his teaching and writing on: the “iconography” of impairment, meaning how people with mental and physical handicaps are portrayed in art; how invalids were transported throughout history; the history of certain negative image associations to handicapped people, such as images of the demonic and its related imagery of clownery; the rise of the “eugenic” era (ca. 1875-1925) and the killing of handicapped people by the Nazis preceding and alongside the Nazi killing of the Jews. He also collected postcards from the late-1800s to early 1900s that illustrate institutions of all different types: prisons, hospitals, mental retardation and mental disorder facilities, tuberculosis sanatoria, orphanages, foundling homes, retirement villages, poor farms, and county homes. He also had large collections of classic books in the field, historical fiction in which mentally retarded characters were portrayed, historical records about certain services from locales around the world, including institutions, and historical instruments or tools of service, such as invalid feeding cups, ear trumpets, and customized eating utensils. He wrote about some of these materials, and developed presentations or courses on some others; and intended to do the same with yet others, but was overtaken by death before he was able to do so. However, whether or not he was able to present or write about them, he always learned from them and incorporated this learning in some of his teaching.

A Partial List of Wolfensberger's History-Related Writings

- Wolfensberger, W. (1974). *The origin and nature of our institutional models*. Syracuse, NY: Center on Human Policy. (Partial reprint in monograph form of chapter entitled "The Origin and Nature of Our Institutional Models." In R. Kugel, & W. Wolfensberger (Eds.). (1969). *Changing patterns in residential services for the mentally retarded* (pp. 59-171). Washington, DC: President's Committee on Mental Retardation.)
- Wolfensberger, W. (1975). *The origin and nature of our institutional models* (revised & illustrated). Syracuse, NY: Human Policy Press. (Revised and illustrated reprint of chapter entitled "The Origin and Nature of Our Institutional Models." In R. Kugel, & W. Wolfensberger (Eds.). (1969). *Changing patterns in residential services for the mentally retarded* (pp. 59-171). Washington, DC: President's Committee on Mental Retardation.)
- Wolfensberger, W. (1979). Some historical and moral reasons why members of the clergy and other religious ministries may join the devaluation of societally devalued people. *National Apostolate With Mentally Retarded Persons Quarterly*, 9(4), 16-17.
- Wolfensberger, W. (1981). The extermination of handicapped people in World War II Germany. *Mental Retardation*, 19(1), 1-7.
- Wolfensberger, W. (1982). Eulogy for a mentally retarded jester. *Mental Retardation*, 20(6), 269-270
- Wolfensberger, W. (1991). Reflections on a lifetime in human services and mental retardation. *Mental Retardation*, 29(1), 1-15.
- Wolfensberger, W. (1995, April). History of a Swiss-German family: 1400 to 1995. The lineage of Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger's family. *Wolfensberger*, 1(2), 8. (Newsletter of the Wolfensberger Family Association).
- Wolfensberger, W. (1999). A contribution to the history of normalization, with primary emphasis on the establishment of normalization in North America between 1967-1975. In R. J. Flynn, & R. A. Lemay (Eds.), *A quarter-century of normalization and Social Role Valorization: Evolution and impact* (pp. 51-116). Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: University of Ottawa Press.
- Wolfensberger, W. (1974). Reflections on reading old annual government reports on the lunatic and idiot asylums of the province of Ontario. *Canada's Mental Health*, 22(3), 21-24.
- Wolfensberger, W. (2001) The story of the "Cruikshank chairs" at Syracuse University: A contribution to the history of the brain injury construct. *Mental Retardation*, 39, 472-481.

Wolfensberger's teaching on the history of human services offers many benefits to any interested party. For instance, his treatment of history brings out many good lessons and ideas that should be preserved and taught, as well as bad ideas

recurring over and over throughout history that should be recognized and resisted. Another major benefit is that it brings out, and in a sense, honors the accomplishments of many “noble actors” throughout the history of human service who rose above the status quo in their service to lowly people. These were individuals who were able to perceive unmet or “mis-met” needs and act to address them in accord with their personal beliefs and ideals, and usually in contradiction to the prevailing structures. One might say that these were Wolfensberger’s teachers in the sense that he learned from them, integrated their ideas and ideals, and passed them along to benefit future generations. Examples of such individuals, all of whom believed strongly in the developmental potential of handicapped people or advocated against destructive forces, include:

William Tuke (1732-1822), an English Quaker who founded the York Retreat where he developed and carried out “moral treatment” as a more humane and “gentler” method of custody and care of people with mental disorders.

Jean Marc Gaspard Itard (1774-1838), a French physician, known as an educator of the deaf, who provided instruction and education for Victor, the so-called “wild boy of Aveyron” who had been found living wild in the woods, almost totally unsocialized, and presumably abandoned.

John Conolly (1794-1866), an English psychiatrist and resident physician to the Middlesex County Asylum where he introduced the principle of non-restraint into the treatment of the insane, throwing out 600 mechanical restraint devices, and was thus instrumental in non-restraint becoming a more widely accepted practice in England. He also wrote about moral treatment.

Samuel Gridley Howe (1801-1876), an American abolitionist and physician, was an advocate of education for the blind, who organized and directed the first school for the blind (1829) in Watertown, Massachusetts, called the New England Asylum for the Blind and later the Perkins School For the Blind.

Édouard Séguin (1812-1880), a physician and student of Itard, established the first private school (in Paris, 1840) dedicated to teaching the severely mentally retarded, and pioneered modern educational methods for what came to be called “special education.”

Johann Jakob Guggenbühl (1816-1863), a Swiss physician who ran a very influential institution for people with cretinism, and is considered one of the precursors of medico-educational care.

Thomas Story Kirkbride (1809-1883), a physician, advocate for the mentally ill, developer of the Kirkbride Plan, and founder of the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane (AMSAII), a precursor to the American Psychiatric Association.

Hervey Backus Wilbur (1820-1883), a physician and educator who, impressed by the example of Édouard Séguin, was the first in North America to attempt the “education of the feeble-minded,” taking several pupils into his own home; he was the first superintendent of the State Asylum For Idiots at Syracuse (later called the Syracuse Developmental Center)

Maria Montessori (1870-1952), a physician and educator who established the first Montessori School in Rome (1907) where she initially applied her pedagogical ideas to children labelled “mental defectives.” Also, unlike today, her schools were initially for the poor.

Marc Gold (1939-1982), an educator and researcher who developed the “Try another way” method for instructing the severely mentally retarded and led a reawakening regarding their competency development.

Burton Blatt (1927–1985), an educator and university professor and administrator who first brought Wolfensberger to Syracuse (New York) University, and a pioneer in the deinstitutionalization movement, perhaps best remembered for his photographic exposé *Christmas in Purgatory* (1966), depicting the everyday miseries of life in a mental institution.

There were many other people, such as Anne Sullivan (1866-1936), Erving Goffman (1922-1982), Jean Vanier (1928-2019), and others, from whom Dr. Wolfensberger took notice in his teaching of their ideas, accomplishments, and example. It is useful to note that the ideals that motivated the service of many noble actors (such as taking a vulnerable person or two into their own homes, offering humane and moral treatment in place of harsh and dehumanizing incarceration, having confidence in the educability and developmental potential of even the most severely impaired) were often distorted and perverted over time in and by the practice of others. The most common and recognizable such distortions began with small residential settings expanding into larger and ever larger separate segregated facilities, such as residential “schools” for the mentally impaired, almshouses, prisons, etc. and, in turn, so many of these eventually becoming huge “snake-pit” institutions,

exemplified by the old Bethlehem or “Bedlam” Hospital in London, and more contemporary custodial facilities like Willowbrook, and others.

Dr. Wolfensberger played major roles in not only helping to preserve and teach human service history to others, but also in shaping that history as well, facts that are clearly recognized by many of his contemporaries. For example, he was recognized as one of the most influential people in the field of mental retardation in the 20th century, specifically for normalization and SRV (Heller, et. al. 1991), and by *Exceptional Parent Magazine* as one of “the 7 wonders of the world of disabilities” (Hollingsworth & Apel, 2008). Fairly early in his career, in the late-1960s, while living in Nebraska (USA), he was a key member of a small group of change-minded service leaders with revolutionary ideas about serving mentally retarded people. The group succeeded in getting monies diverted away from the state’s large mental retardation institution and devoted instead to establishing the Eastern Nebraska Community Office of Retardation, or ENCOR, in Omaha in the late 1960s as a more humane and normative community-based system built on normalization principles. It was the first-of-its-kind and was visited and studied by service leaders from across North America and Europe. ENCOR provided a tangible example that helped to change the history of mental retardation services, and was a prime factor in inspiring the “deinstitutionalization” movement that eventually swept across North America and beyond. Another factor that provided ongoing momentum to this movement was Wolfensberger’s publication of *The Origin and Nature of Our Institutional Models* (1968, 1975), in which he first described the nature of human service models, and the devastation which institutional models in particular wrought in the lives of those upon whom they were imposed.

Also of notable historic import are two other Wolfensberger contributions, the principle of normalization and the theory of Social Role Valorization (SRV). These virtually reshaped the mindsets of many thousands of human service workers about how best to serve vulnerable people, and are now recognized as among the most developmentally sound and adaptive theoretical frameworks for organizing services to them. His contributions of PASS and PASSING have also had major impact by helping service workers extend normalization and SRV beyond being nice abstract ideals into systematic guidance for carrying out their service goals in actual practice. PASS, first published in 1972, has now been superseded by PASSING, which has been in use since its initial publication in 1983. Both PASS and PASSING were among the earliest, if not first, evaluation instruments to define what factors constitute good or bad service quality from the perspective of the service recipient, and to spell out qualitative criteria for determining a service’s performance in regard to those

qualitative factors. Normalization, SRV, PASS, and PASSING are all also described in this Wikipedia page.

Perhaps his major overall contribution to the general history of human service is that he helped to keep that history alive and relevant to contemporary services and service workers through his research, writing, and teaching. This is particularly true of sectors of human service that deal mainly with people at risk of being seen and treated as socially devalued. His recovery, documentation, and promulgation of that history and its lessons offer ongoing benefits to new and future generations of vulnerable people and those who serve upon them in almost any form of contemporary service.

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