

## The Theory of Social Role Valorization

Normalization had many strengths as a framework for service provision, but it was often misinterpreted, and limited in that it lacked an unambiguous ultimate purpose. Wolfensberger's work to rectify these drawbacks eventually led him to leave Normalization behind, and to formulate a more incisive approach—which he called Social Role Valorization (SRV)—to address the reality of social devaluation. Thus, there is a conceptual connection between Normalization and SRV, in that SRV has its roots in normalization as well as in the empiricism of fields such as sociology, psychology, and education (e.g., Wolfensberger, 1984).

The basic premise of SRV is that people are much more likely to experience the “good things in life” (Wolfensberger, Thomas, & Caruso, 1996) if they hold valued social roles than if they do not. Therefore, 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 the society has available to give, and that it can convey, or at least the opportunities for obtaining these. In other words, other people are almost automatically going to convey all sorts of good things to a person who they see in societally valued roles—at least those good things that are within the resources and norms of society.

In regard to what the good things in life are, there exists a near-universal consensus. To mention only a few major examples, they include 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.

Wolfensberger defined SRV as:

"The application of empirical knowledge to the shaping of the current or potential social roles of a party (i.e., person, group, or class)—primarily by means of enhancement of the party's competencies & image—so that these are, as much as possible, positively valued in the eyes of the perceivers." (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2005).

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. In any society, there are groups and classes who are at value risk or already devalued due to impairment, age, poverty, or other characteristics that are devalued in and by their society or some of its subsystems. They are far more likely than other members of

society to be treated badly, and to be subjected to a systematic--and possibly lifelong--pattern of negative experiences.

The reality that not all people are positively valued in their society makes SRV so important (Kendrick, 1994). It not only can help to prevent bad things from happening to socially vulnerable people, but can also increase the likelihood that they will experience the good things in life, things which 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:

1. 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.
2. Being rejected by community, society, and even family and services.
3. Being cast into negative social roles, some of which can be severely negative, such as "subhuman," "menace," and "burden on society."
4. Being put and kept at a social or physical distance, the latter most commonly by segregation.
5. Having negative images (including language) attached to them.
6. Being the object of abuse, violence, and brutalization, and even being made dead.

This is why having at least some valued social roles is so important. A person who fills valued social roles is likely to be treated much better than if he or she did not have these, or than other people who have the same devalued characteristics but do not have equally valued social roles. There are several important reasons why this is so. One is that a person who has valued roles is more likely to also have valued and competent allies or defenders who can mitigate the impacts of devaluation or protect the person from these. Also, 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.

As with Normalization and its related assessment tool PASS, there is a similar SRV-based evaluation tool called PASSING (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2007). Both SRV and PASSING are taught regularly in North America, Australia, Europe, South Amer-

ica, and India. International SRV conferences are held regularly, and there is an SRV publication, *The SRV Journal* ([journal@srvip.org](mailto:journal@srvip.org)). However, the Normalization movement largely faded away after it was superseded by SRV. It is hardly taught anywhere, but maintains a presence in law in certain Scandinavian countries.

While SRV and Normalization are only two of Wolfensberger's important contributions, they are particularly outstanding. If an award were given for the single most important intellectual development in the field of human service in the past one hundred years, normalization and SRV would have to be two of the top contenders. In fact, recognitions along these lines were given. In a poll of mental retardation leaders, Wolfensberger's 1972 book on normalization was selected as the most influential book in the field since 1940 from among 11,330 books and articles, and his 1983 article that introduced SRV (Wolfensberger, 1983) was cited as the seventeenth most influential publication in the field (Heller, Spooner, Enright, Haney, & Schilit, 1991). In 1999, Wolfensberger was selected by the National Historic Preservation Trust on Mental Retardation as one of 36 parties that had the most impact on mental retardation worldwide in the 20th century. Wolfensberger was identified in 2004 and again in 2008 in the ISI Web of Science database as the author of the most frequently-cited article in *Mental Retardation* (i.e., Wolfensberger, 1983), the journal of what was then the American Association on Mental Retardation, and is now the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. In 2008, Wolfensberger's work on normalization and SRV was identified by *Exceptional Parent Magazine* as one of "the 7 wonders of the world of disabilities" (Hollingsworth and Apel, 2008). Besides these recognitions, much has also been written about: (a) the nature of SRV and its application to people who are socially and societally devalued due to impairment, age, poverty or other deviant conditions (see, for example, Wolfensberger, 1995, 1998, 2000, and especially, Wolfensberger and Thomas, 2007), (b) the importance of SRV (e.g., see Flynn & Lemay, 1999; Thomas, 1999; Kendrick, 1994), and (c) the relationship of SRV to normalization (e.g., see Lemay, 1995, Thomas, 1999, and Wolfensberger, 1983). What all of this partially--but clearly--attests is that a great many people have appreciated the importance of Wolfensberger's work. Many individuals and families have attested to how much they have benefitted from Wolfensberger's thinking and teaching, and some have published testimonials to this effect (e.g., Duggin, 2010; Park, 1999).

Susan Thomas & Joe Osburn  
October 2018

## References

- Duggin, M. (2010). The Value of SRV to People's Lives. *The SRV Journal*, 5(2), 10 - 14.
- Flynn, R., & Lemay, R. (1999). *A quarter century of Normalization and Social Role Valorization: Evolution and impact*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- Heller, H.W., Spooner, F., Enright, B.E., Haney, K. & Schilit, J. (1991). Classic articles: A reflection into the field of mental retardation. *Education & Training in Mental Retardation*, 26(2), 202-206.
- Hollingsworth, J., & Apel, L. (2008, November). The 7 wonders of the world of disabilities. *Exceptional Parent Magazine*. 50-54,
- Kendrick, M. (1994). Why SRV is important. *SRV-VRS: The International Social Role Valorization Journal*, 1(1), 14-18.
- Lemay, R. (1995). Social Role Valorization and the principle of Normalization as guides for social contexts and human services for people at risk of societal devaluation. In A. E. Dell Orto, & R. P. Maraneli, *Encyclopedia of disability and rehabilitation*. New York: McMillan, 515-521.
- Park, P. (1999). The impact of Normalization and Social Role Valorization on my life. In R. J. Flynn, & R. Lemay (Eds.), *A quarter-century of normalization and Social Role Valorization: Evolution and impact*. (pp. 474-476). Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- Thomas, S. (1999). Historical background and evolution of normalization-related and social role valorization-related training. In R. J. Flynn, & R. Lemay (Eds.), *A quarter-century of normalization and Social Role Valorization: Evolution and impact*. (pp. 353-374). Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- Wolfensberger, W. (1983). *Social role valorization: A proposed new term for the principle of normalization*. *Mental Retardation*, 21(6), 234-239.
- 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, NY: Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency (Syracuse University).

- Wolfensberger, W. (2000). A brief overview of Social Role Valorization. *Mental Retardation*, 8(2), 105-123.
- Wolfensberger, W., & Thomas, S. (2005). *Introductory social role valorization workshop training package*. Syracuse, NY: Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency (Syracuse University).
- Wolfensberger, W., & Thomas, S. (2007). *PASSING: A tool for analyzing human service quality according to Social Role Valorization criteria. Ratings manual. (3rd rev.)*. Syracuse, NY: Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency. (Syracuse University).
- Wolfensberger, W., Thomas, S., & Caruso, G. (1996). Some of the universal "good things of life" which the implementation of Social Role Valorization can be expected to make more accessible to devalued people. *SRV/VRS: The International Social Role Valorization Journal/La Revue Internationale de la Valorisation des Roles Sociaux*, 2(2), 12-14.