The Construct of Service Model Coherency

One of Dr. Wolfensberger's more important but under-utilized contributions to service design, operation, and quality is the construct of "model coherency" which developed over time. It began in 1968 when the Nebraska state legislature enacted a new mental retardation service reform bill and provided service funding. Wolfensberger and other key actors in shaping this reform wanted to see the newly available monies shifted away from institutional services toward a new system of community services based on normalization ideas. They wrote a set of service standards to judge applications for funds, which included a standard called "specialization" that implied such things as separation of the domiciliary function, and smaller and more dispersed service settings that each accommodated people with different needs.

When the service evaluation tool PASS came out in 1973 (Wolfensberger & Glenn, 1973), it contained a rating also called "Specialization," which required that "the service provides a coherent program in which a number of variables combine harmoniously so as to meet the specific needs of each client at that particular time of his life." Note the word coherent in that definition. In the revised 1975 edition of PASS (Wolfensberger & Glenn, 1975, reprinted 1978), the "Specialization" rating was expanded and its name changed to "Model Coherency." Thus, Wolfensberger's initial concept of specialization was the conceptual parent of his construct of model coherency.

Every service has a model, i.e., an overarching schema or framework according to which it is organized, shaped, and enacted, though not necessarily consciously so. There are many different service models. Some of the more familiar ones are the medical model, the social casework model, the correctional model, the religious reform model, the military/disciplinary model, the developmental model, and others (Wolfensberger, 2013, p. 145). There are several component elements to a service model. One is the underlying assumptions (e.g., about the people to be served and their needs and the best way to address these). Another is the content that is delivered to presumably address the identified needs, and a third is the various processes through which the content is delivered and that reflect the underlying assumptions. The service processes include the service setting, the way the people served are selected and grouped, the identities of the servers, the activities and methods and "tools" used to deliver the content, and the language that is used to refer to all this. This combination of elements constitutes a service model, and then models get applied to actual persons. If the model elements fit together, it is said to be a coherent model; but if there are elements that do not fit well or mesh with each

other, and if the model or elements thereof do not fit the needs of the people served, then there is some type of model incoherency.

A shorthand way of phrasing the concept of model coherency is that it asks several questions: (1) who are the people, and what are the service assumptions about them; (2) what do they need, and what are the service assumptions about these; (3) what content is relevant to address that need; and (4) what are the best processes for addressing that need in a way that is most potent, effective, and image-enhancing.

Model Coherency is the most highly weighted of the 50 ratings in PASS, and research has shown it to be the rating most closely correlated to a service's overall quality, meaning that a service's overall performance on PASS usually closely parallels how it rates on model coherency (see Flynn, 1975). In other words, it is an empirical fact that a model coherent service is almost always a programmatically sound service in all sorts of other ways.

Model coherency was mostly taught through the 1970s and 1980s via the PASS training culture. There were hundreds of PASS workshops, and thousands of participants. But by the 1990s, as the PASS training culture began to fade, so did the teaching of model coherency. Starting in the early 1980s, Dr. Wolfensberger's teaching of normalization also shifted to Social Role Valorization, which led to a new service evaluation tool called PASSING (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 1983, 2007). In PASSING, there is no Model Coherency rating, but most of the constituent parts of model coherency are assessed by separate ratings. So, as PASSING began to be disseminated, PASS itself fell rapidly by the wayside, and the teaching and learning of model coherency also greatly diminished.

Separate sections of this wikipedia entry explain PASS and PASSING, and normalization and Social Role Valorization, or SRV.

However, the model coherency construct was used infrequently by those who had previously learned it as a basis for conducting assessments on existing services, and as a guide for planning new services. Dr. Wolfensberger continued to evolve and elaborate the concept through the 1990s, with experimental versions of a revised model coherency rating, called Model Coherency Impact. But these were unpublished, and used only selectively at a few training events.

In training events on SRV, participants continued to be taught a bit about model coherency as one of what are called core "themes" of SRV. In this teaching, the concept of relevance and potency are emphasized, in addition to coherency.

Relevance refers to the provision of content that actually addresses the needs of the people served, and potency refers to whether, and to what degree, the processes are effective for doing so. SRV adds that the combination of elements should be not only effective but also protective and even enhancing of the social image of the people served.

Just before his death in 2011, Wolfensberger brought to near-completion his most thorough, extensive, and in-depth work on model coherency, a two volume book draft entitled *The Construct of Model Coherency as the Key to Human Service Quality: What Model Coherency Is, & How to Design & Evaluate Service Model Coherency* (Wolfensberger, in press). This book represents the culmination of his thinking on what model coherency is, why it is important, and how it can be used in both service design and evaluation. The book explains service models and gives examples of different models and how they are expressed in actual service practice, it lays out what Wolfensberger calls the "tool subjects" for understanding and applying model coherency, and it provides a step-by-step method for designing a service so as to be maximally model-coherent as well as being as social role-valorizing as possible. There is also a model coherency rating for assessing the degree of model coherency of an existing service. Both the design and assessment are meant to be done by a team of people versed in both the model coherency construct as well as the accompanying tool subjects.

The book draft is currently being prepared for publication. For information on its availability, check the website https://www.socialrolevalorization.com/en/.

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