

Obituary

In memoriam: Wolf Wolfensberger 19342011

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Abstract

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Professor Emeritus Wolf Wolfensberger died in Syracuse, New York, on 27 February 2011 following a long illness. He was one of the most eminent scholars and critical thinkers in the field of disability in the twentieth century, and a powerful and often controversial voice in the reform of human services worldwide, particularly for people with intellectual disabilities.

Born in Mannheim, Germany in 1934, Wolfensberger's childhood was strongly affected by Nazi Germany and the Second World War which influenced his views and understandings of human nature. He emigrated to the United States in 1950 at the age of 16. Following degrees in philosophy and clinical psychology he earned his doctorate from Peabody College, where he specialized in mental retardation and special education. Wolfensberger worked in the United States, primarily based at Syracuse University, but also in England and Canada. At Syracuse University he established and directed the Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency. Much of his influence was mediated through workshops and consultations through this Training Institute, where he also welcomed numerous visiting scholars and students from around the world. The driving force behind his work was his analysis of the harmful effects of societal devaluation on the lives of disabled people and his call to us to prevent or undo this harm.

Wolfensberger was an early leader in promoting deinstitutionalization, social integration, and the development of comprehensive community-based services and supports. He learned about normalization from Niels-Erik Bank Mikkelsen (Denmark) and Bengt Nirje (Sweden) during their visits to the United States in the 1960s. Wolfensberger developed a comprehensive version of the principle of normalization articulated in detail in his most influential book *The principle of normalization in human services* published in 1972. He later re-formulated normalization as social role valorization (SRV). His work in this area has had a tremendous influence on disability policy and practice around the world. Less known internationally is his work on the history of disability and services for disabled people, his development of family advocacy, his analysis of the vulnerability and marginalization of disabled people and other disadvantaged groups, the increasing danger of death-making (new patterns of eugenics), and the fact that he was one of the originators of Citizen Advocacy. His work aims not only to safeguard the lives of people with disabilities but also to develop valued roles and better access to the good life for all marginalized and vulnerable people. He highlighted their gifts and contributions and called upon us all to act with moral coherency. Wolfensberger's work combines an unusual theoretical rigour, sharp critical analysis and a passion for fellow human beings. Much of his work is concerned with how ideology, consciously or not, guides the planning and structure of human services, often in unhelpful and even harmful ways. During his last years, Wolfensberger was

increasingly concerned with the decline in the functionality of service systems and advocated for more personal relationships between disabled and non-disabled people.

Wolfensberger was the author and co-author of more than 40 books and monographs, and more than 250 chapters and articles. His writings have been translated into 12 languages. His best known and most groundbreaking books were *Changing patterns in residential services for the mentally retarded* (1969), *The principle of normalization* (1972), *PASS (Program Analysis of Service Systems)* (1973), and *PASSing (Program Analysis of Service Systems implementation of normalization goals)* (1983).

Wolf is survived by his wife Nancy and his three children Margret, Joan, and Paul. We send them our deepest condolences.

For the two of us, Wolf was a mentor and a friend who greatly influenced our lives. We join many who will miss his wit and wisdom, his infallible integrity, his gentle yet firm guidance, his impeccable scholarship, and his hospitality. Thank you, Wolf.

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