An Overview of Social Role Valorization Theory

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"SOCIAL ROLE VALORIZATION" (SRV) is the name given to a concept for transacting human relationships and human service, formulated in 1983 by Wolf Wolfensberger, Ph.D., as the successor to his earlier formulation of the principle of normalization (Lemay, 1995; Wolfensberger, 1972; Wolfensberger, 1983). His most recent definition of Social Role Valorization is: *"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).

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 are available to that society, and that can be conveyed by it, or at least the opportunities for obtaining these. In other words, all sorts of good things that other people are able to convey are almost automatically apt to be accorded to a person who holds societally valued roles, at least within the resources and norms of his/her society.

There exists a high degree of consensus about what the good things in life are (Wolfensberger, et al., 1996). 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.

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 fact, SRV is primarily a response to the historically universal phenomenon of social devaluation, and especially societal devaluation. In any society,

there are groups and classes who are at value risk or already devalued in and by their society or some of its subsystems. (For instance, in North America, it has been estimated that from one-fourth to one-third of the population exists in a devalued state because of impairment, age, poverty or other characteristics that are devalued in society.) Devalued individuals, groups, and classes are far more likely than other members of society to be treated badly, and to be subjected to a systematic -- and possibly life-long -- pattern of such negative experiences as the following.

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.

THE REALITY that not all people are positively valued in their society makes SRV so important (Kendrick, 1994). It can help not only to prevent bad things from happening to socially vulnerable or devalued people, but can also increase the likelihood that they will experience the good things in life. Unfortunately, the good things in life 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 the six experiences listed above. 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 such a person 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.

IT IS ROLE-VALORIZING to enhance the perceived value of the social roles of a person, a group, or an entire class of people, and doing so is thus called social role valorization. There are two major broad strategies for pursuing this goal for (devalued) people: (1) enhancement of people's social image in the eyes of others, and (2) enhancement of their competencies, in the widest sense of the term. Image and competency form a feedback loop that can be negative or positive. That is, a person who is competency-impaired is highly at risk of suffering image-impairment; a person who is impaired in image is apt to be responded to by others in ways that delimit or reduce or even prevent the person's competency. But both processes work equally in the reverse direction. That is, a person whose social image is positive is apt to

be provided with experiences, expectancies, and other life conditions which are likely to increase, or give scope to, his/her competencies; and a person who displays competencies is also apt to be imaged positively.

Role-valorizing actions in the image-enhancement or competency-enhancement domains can be carried out on four distinct levels and sectors of social organization.

1. The individual;

2. The individual's primary social systems, such as the family;

3. The intermediate level social systems of an individual or group, such as the neighborhood, community, and services the person receives;

4. The larger society of the individual or group, including the entire service system.

Combining these different dimensions and levels yields a 2x4 matrix for classifying the major implications of SRV, as shown in Table 1 (adapted from Thomas, 1999).

Table 1: Social Role Valorization Action Implications

		Primarily to Enhance Social Images	Primarily to Enhance Personal Competencies
Level of Action	**Individual Person**	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions for a Specific Individual That are Likely to Enhance Positive Perceptions of That Individual by Others	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions for a Specific Person That are Likely to Enhance the Competencies of That Individual
	Primary Social Systems	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions in a Primary Social System That are Likely to Enhance Positive Perceptions of a Person in & via This System	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions of a Person's Social System That are Likely to Enhance That Person's Competencies
	Intermediate & Secondary Social Systems	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions in Secondary Social Systems That are Likely to Enhance Positive Perceptions -- in & via Those Systems -- of People in Them, & of Others like Them	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions in Secondary Social Systems That are Likely to Enhance the Competencies of People in Them
	Entire Society of an Individual, Group, or Class of People	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions Throughout Society That are Likely to Enhance Positive Perceptions of Classes	Arranging Physical & Social Conditions Throughout Society That are Likely to Enhance the Competencies of Classes of People

FOR THOSE who wish to improve the situation of devalued people, SRV constitutes a high-level and systematic framework to guide their actions. In other words, it provides a coherent overall conceptual foundation for addressing the plight of individuals, groups, or classes of devalued people. Within this overall framework, SRV points to comprehensive service principles, from which are derived major service strategies, from which, in turn, flow innumerable specific practical action measures. These principles, strategies, and action measures are relevant in both formal and informal service contexts, and are thoroughly spelled-out in the SRV literature. In fact, SRV is one of the most fully articulated broad service schemas in existence. For example, within each of the eight boxes in Table 1, innumerable more specific role-valorizing actions can be imagined, and indeed, a great many have been explicitly identified (Thomas, 1999). Even in just the few words of the short definition of SRV (stated above), there is incorporated an enormous amount of explanatory power and implied actions which can give people much food for thought in their whole approach to serving others. If implemented, SRV can lead to a genuine address of the needs of the people served, and thus to a great increase in service quality and effectiveness.

SRV IS A SOCIAL SCIENCE CONCEPT and is thus in the empirical realm. It rests on a solid foundation of well-established social science theory, research, and empiricism within fields such as sociology, psychology, and education and pedagogy, drawing upon multiple bodies of inquiry, such as role theory, learning theory, the function and power of social imagery, mind-sets and expectancies, group dynamics, the social and psychological processes involved in unconsciousness, the sociology of deviancy, and so forth. SRV weaves this body of knowledge into an overarching, systematic, and unified schema.

SRV is not a value system or ideology, nor does it prescribe or dictate value decisions. Decisions about whether to implement SRV measures for any person or group, and to what extent, are ultimately determined by people's higher-order (and not necessarily conscious) values which transcend SRV and come from other sources, such as their personal upbringing, family influences, political and economic ideas, worldviews, and explicit religions. What people do in their relationships and services, or in response to the needs of the people they serve, or for that matter in any other endeavors, depends greatly on their values, assumptions, and beliefs, including those they hold about SRV itself. However, SRV makes a big point of how positive personal and cultural values can be powerfully brought to bear if one wishes to pursue valued social roles for people. For example, in most western cultures, the Judeo-Christian value system and liberal democratic tradition are espoused and widely assented to, even if rarely actualized in full. SRV can recruit such deeply embedded cultural values and traditions on behalf of people who might otherwise be devalued and even dehumanized. Every society has values that can be thusly recruited to craft positive roles for people (Wolfensberger, 1972, 1998).

As a social science schema, SRV is descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is, SRV can describe certain realities (e.g., social devaluation), and can say what are the likely outcomes of doing or not doing certain things in regard to those realities, in what has come to be called the "if this...then that" formulation of SRV (Wolfensberger, 1995a). For example, SRV

points out that if parents do things that help others to have a positive view of their child and that help the child acquire skills needed to participate positively in the community, then it is more likely that the child will be well-integrated into the community. If one does not emphasize the adult status of mentally retarded adults, and/or does not avoid things which reinforce their role stereotype as "eternal children" (such as referring to adults as children, engaging adults in children's activities, and so on), then one is likely to perpetuate the common negative stereotype that mentally retarded adults really are overgrown children, with all the negative consequences that attend this stereotype. So, these are things that SRV can tell one. However, once people learn SRV, they themselves have to determine what they think about it, whether they believe in its power, whether they want to apply it in valorizing the roles of a person or class, and to what extent -- if at all -- they even want to valorize other people's roles. For example, while SRV brings out the high importance of valued social roles, whether one decides to actually provide positive roles to people, or even believes that a specific person, group, or class deserves valued social roles, depends on one's personal value system, which as noted, has to come from somewhere other than SRV.

THE IDEAS BEHIND SRV first began to be generated by the work that was being conducted by Wolfensberger and his associates at the Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agentry, which he directs at Syracuse University. One major source of these ideas was an on-going effort on the part of Wolfensberger to continually explore, advance, and refine the principle of normalization -- an effort that began almost as soon as normalization first appeared on the scene. For example, since normalization was first explicitly formulated in 1969, several books, numerous articles, chapters, and other publications (several hundred altogether) on the topic have been written and disseminated (see, for example, St-Denis & Flynn, 1999). And it was Wolfensberger, more than anyone else, whose writings successively clarified and helped to increase comprehension of the meaning and application of normalization. This process involved a concerted effort on his part to systematically incorporate into teaching and training materials the deepening understanding achieved in the course of: (a) thinking, writing, and teaching about normalization over the years; (b) its increasing incorporation into actual human service practice; and (c) numerous normalization-based service assessments, mostly using the PASS tool (Wolfensberger & Glenn, 1973, 1975, reprinted in 1978). There were also continuous attempts, again mostly on Wolfensberger's part, to deal with frequent misconceptions and even "perversions" of the concept of normalization (see Wolfensberger, 1980), often due to the ease with which the term "normalization" itself could be (and was) misconstrued or misapplied.

This stream of concentrated development resulted in an evolution in thinking which brought about the conceptual transition from normalization to Social Role Valorization. Not surprisingly, the main substance of the concept of SRV began to evolve before the concept itself was defined, and before a new term was coined to describe it. For instance, Wolfensberger's last published formulation of the principle of normalization defined it as, "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), thus foreshadowing both the new concept and the new term Social Role Valorization. This article was the first publication that articulated the insight that valued social roles for people at risk of social devaluation were -- even more than merely culturally normative conditions -- the real key to the good things of life for them. This represented such an advance that it was clearly a higher conceptualization than the earlier formulation of normalization. Thus, SRV definitely amounts to far more than a renaming or rewording of the normalization principle; rather, it constitutes a major conceptual breakthrough based on the double insight that (a) people with valued social roles will tend to be accorded desirable things, at least within the resources and norms of their society, and (b) the two major means to the creation, support, and defense of valued social roles are to enhance both a person's image and competency.

Another big boost to the conceptualization of Social Role Valorization was the work being done by Wolfensberger, and his Training Institute associate, Susan Thomas, over a three to four year period on a human service evaluation tool called PASSING (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 1983), which stands for "Program Analysis of Service Systems' Implementation of Normalization Goals." One could say that this first published edition of PASSING (i.e., the second edition) was ahead of its time in at least one sense: it spelled out the major action implications of the new concept of SRV in much more detail than in any other previous publication, and did so even before a term had been coined to name the new concept. PASSING thus incorporates mostly SRV concepts while still using the earlier normalization language. Happily, this anachronism is corrected in the anticipated third revised edition (Wolfensberger

& Thomas, in press) which uses SRV terminology exclusively. The development of PASSING contributed much to the insight that actions to achieve the ultimate as well as intermediate goals and processes of SRV can all be classified as dealing with either image and/or competency enhancement.

In order to help communicate new concepts, new terms are often needed. The selection of the term "Social Role Valorization" was quite deliberate (see, for example, Wolfensberger, 1983, 1984, 1985, and 1991a). Not only does it overcome many of the historical and other problems that had always plagued the term "normalization," but it is based on two additional discoveries that are highly relevant to the essence of its meaning (Wolfensberger, 1985).

1. In modern French human service contexts, people had begun to use the word *valorisation* in order to signify the attachment of value to people. In Canadian French specifically, the term *valorisation sociale* had been used in teaching the normalization principle since ca. 1980 (Wolfensberger, 1991b).

2. In both French and English, the term valorization has its root in the Latin word *valere,* which means to value or accord worth. Relatedly, the word "valorization" has, or elicits, very strong positive connotations that clearly correspond to the concept it is meant to convey.

In combination, the above discoveries suggested that in English "Social Role Valorization," and in French *La Valorisation des Roles Sociaux* (Wolfensberger, 1991b), would be eminently suitable terms for the new concept, both having positive connotations, while being unfamiliar enough not to evoke wrong ideas. The French term brings out even better than the English the fact that people hold multiple roles, and that more than one can be valorized.

Table 2: Sequence of Topics for a Leadership-Oriented Introductory Social Role Valorization (SRV) Workshop

PART 1: INTRODUCTORY ORIENTATION
- a. How the Workshop Will be Conducted
- b. Introduction to the Workshop Topic, Including a Brief Preliminary Sketch of SRV
- c. Orientation to Some Concepts Crucial to the Workshop

PART 2: SOCIAL EVALUATION, DEVALUATION & ITS IMPACT
- a. Basic Facts About Human Evaluation, & Social Devaluation Specifically
- b. The Devalued Classes in Contemporary Western Societies
- c. The Expressions of Social Devaluation: The Most Common Wounds of Devalued People
- d. The Common Effects on Devalued People of Being Systematically Wounded
- e. Conclusion to the Material on Wounds

PART 3: A MORE DETAILED INTRODUCTION TO SRV
- a. The Rationale Behind SRV
- b. Some Facts About Social Role Theory That Are Easily Understood & Crucial to SRV
- c. A More Global Overview Sketch of Social Role Valorization (SRV)
    - c1. Some Broad Facts About SRV
    - c2. Making Distinctions Between Empirical Versus Nonempirical Propositions
    - c3. Concluding Clarifications

PART 4: TEN THEMES OF GREAT RELEVANCE TO UNDERSTANDING & APPLYING SRV
- a. Introduction to the Ten Themes
- b. The Dynamics of UNCONSCIOUSNESS, Particularly About Deviancy-Making, & the Unrecognized Aspects & Functions of Human Services
- c. The CONSERVATISM COROLLARY of SRV, i.e., the Importance of Employing the Most Valued Options, & Positive Compensation for Disadvantage
- d. The Importance of INTERPERSONAL IDENTIFICATION
- e. The Power of MIND-SETS & EXPECTANCIES
- f. The Realities of IMAGERY, Image Transfer, Generalization, & Enhancement
- g. The Concept of Service MODEL COHERENCY, With Its Requirements of RELEVANCE & POTENCY
- h. The Importance of PERSONAL COMPETENCY ENHANCEMENT & THE DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL
- i. The Pedagogic Power of IMITATION, Via Modeling & Interpersonal Identification
- j. The Relevance of ROLE EXPECTANCIES & ROLE CIRCULARITY to Deviancy-Making & Deviancy-Unmaking
- k. SOCIAL INTEGRATION & VALUED SOCIETAL PARTICIPATION of Devalued People in Valued Society
- l. Grouping & Association Issues That Derive From Combinations of Themes
- m. Conclusion to, & Relationship Among, All the Themes

PART 5: IMPLEMENTATION, ELABORATIONS, CLARIFICATIONS & CONCLUSION
- a. Some Further Issues of SRV Implementation or Practice
- b. The Benefits of SRV
- c. Brief Review of the Limitations of, & Constraints on, SRV
- d. A Brief Note on the Limitations of This Workshop
- e. Ways to Learn More About SRV
- f. Conclusion & Adjournment

Finally, another advantage of the switch from normalization to SRV is that because Social Role Valorization is an uncommon term, people are more likely to listen to definitions and explanations of it rather than attaching their own preconceived notions to it, as they had tended to do with the word "normalization."

SRV IS BEING DISSEMINATED across the world. For example, in the English language, both the overarching SRV schema and its major elements have been described in an original introductory monograph (Wolfensberger, 1992), which was later revised into a 139-page edition (Wolfensberger, 1998) that now serves together with the PASSING manual (Wolfensberger & Thomas 1983; revision in press) as the main current SRV texts. Other prominent SRV-related texts in English are the published proceedings of the 1994 International SRV conference held in Ottawa (Flynn & Lemay, 1999), with many chapters that reflect recent perspectives on SRV, and two books published in England (Race, 1999, 2003). There is also a massive set of (unpublished) teaching materials used in SRV training by qualified trainers (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2005). The multitude of SRV action implications to human services and human service workers are thoroughly spelled out in SRV and PASSING training workshops, both of which are intensive teaching events, conducted in a variety of formats, of anywhere from one to seven days in length. Table 2 provides a list of topics covered in the most recent version of introductory SRV training workshops.

To date, most SRV and/or PASSING training events have been conducted in English, with several variations in terms of length (i.e., anywhere from half a day to five days duration), processes, and depth and quantity of content. There have also been a significant number of SRV/PASSING training events in French, conducted mainly by francophone trainers, again in different versions. In addition to English and French, such training has also been conducted in Spanish, Dutch, Welsh, Icelandic, Norwegian, and possibly other languages, typically with the aid of interpreters.

Both the English SRV (Wolfensberger, 1991a) and PASSING (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 1983) texts have been translated into French (Wolfensberger, 1991b; Wolfensberger & Thomas, 1988), and the SRV monograph into Italian (Wolfensberger, 1991c) and Japanese (Wolfensberger, 1995b), and is in the process of being retranslated into German.

Another obvious vehicle for dissemination (in English) of general SRV related information and news is *The SRV Journal*. On the internet, there are several websites devoted to SRV matters, including one called Social Role Valorization at <http://www.socialrolevalorization.com/>. There are also several groups in various countries that have formed around SRV; while these range from formal to informal and have slightly different purposes and processes, they tend to be composed of people well-versed in SRV development, dissemination, and/or application. Perhaps the two most prominent of these are the (North American) SRV Development, Training, and Safeguarding Council, comprised of members from both Canada and the United States of America, and the Australian SRV Group. The membership of both of these groups includes representatives of smaller more localized groups in various parts of their respective countries.

Information on the most recent SRV-related developments, and/or SRV training events, can be requested from the above-mentioned Train-

ing Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agentry (800 South Wilbur Avenue, Suite 3B1 Syracuse, New York 13204, USA; 315/473-2978; fax: 315/473-2963).

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The citation for this article is:
Osburn, J. (2006). An overview of Social Role Valorization theory. *The SRV Journal, 1(1), 4-13.*