

The Importance of Social Imagery in Interpreting Societally Devalued People to the Public

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One of the major assumptions incorporated into the principle of normalization (1,3,4,6,7) is that people will be attracted to whatever or whomever it is that they identify with and have positive mental associations to. It follows that if a human service is to enhance its clients' social value and image in the eyes of others (as is implied by normalization), then it must present and interpret its clients to typical and even valued citizens in ways which help them to identify with clients, and which in other ways attach positive imagery to clients and build positive mental associations to them. Such measures should lead to a more positive view of persons with disabilities by members of the society. For example, most people can identify with a residential program for disabled people that operates in a typical home or apartment setting in the community, because most people themselves reside in such settings. On the other hand, it is very difficult for typical citizens to easily identify with people having disabilities who live in large, segregated settings that are grossly unlike the places where most people live—and indeed, are not the kinds of residences that elicit positive mental associations for most members of the public.

This assumption, that the powerful dynamic of positive identification can be used to improve public attitudes and the quality of human services, is reflected in all sorts of normalization corollaries that have to do with modeling and imitation, social integration of devalued/disabled persons, service location and facility aspects, and so forth.(5) For instance, because disabled adults who are dressed in a fashion that is appropriate and valued by the society for its adults are more likely to be viewed in a positive light than if they are dressed in clothes that make them appear child-like, normalization implies that such people should be enabled and supported to develop and maintain personal appearances which meet positive cultural expectations and norms for the appearance of persons of the same age. Other people will be more likely to identify with a devalued person whom they perceive as “well-dressed” than with one who is clothed in outlandish or outmoded attire, or in shabby, torn, ill-fitting garb. Similarly, agency and service names which have positive image associations for people in the society (such as those connote competency, status, beauty, honor) increase the probability that the public will identify with the people who use those services, and that it will view them positively. Examples might be “Central Industrial Services,” “Washington School,” the Imperial Crest Apartments” - names which have positive connotations, and with which most people in the society would be more apt to identify than names such as “Sheltered Workshop for the Handicapped,” “Turtles’ Schools,” “Bleak House,” or “Eventide Lodge.”

The principle seems very clear, makes a good deal of sense, and is generally consistent with psychosocial research findings. However, many services neglect its positive potential and even operate in direct contradiction to it; such is the case when they present and interpret their clients in extremely negative ways and consistently surround them with images and associations that are negatively valued by the society, such as those of garbage, death, vice, shabbiness, or poverty.(2) For example, a great many services to devalued people are located next or near to (sometimes even in or on top of) garbage dumps, cemeteries, funeral homes, an condemned and abandoned buildings. Members of the larger society will be much less likely to identify with disabled persons thus presented, and will not come to value them positively.

One particularly striking violation of this principle of enhancing the likelihood of positive identification occurred in an advertisement for a 1977 television program about severely retarded persons. This ad showed several abnormal fetuses, which obviously is neither a positively valued picture in our society nor one with which many people would want to identify. In addition, the program was entitled *The Others*, a name which very clearly suggests vast differences rather than similarities between the viewers and the people who were the subject of the program. Obviously, such imagery is more apt to inhibit than to foster positive identification by members of the public regarding retarded people. Similarly,

a recent (1981) print advertisement encouraging employers to “hire handicapped people” shows a big picture of an artificial hand holding a business card. Though the business card alone would elicit positive mental associations in most people, the picture of the metal hand rather than a picture of, say, a man with an artificial hand dressed in a business suit and presenting his business card, is apt to scare people away from persons with disabilities.

In contrast to these negative practices which prevail so widely in human services, positive imagery and identification are capitalized upon in a systematic and highly conscious fashion by business and industry in their presentations of their products to the public in order to gain the public’s acceptance - and money. For instance, at about the same time *The Others* was on television, there was a TV advertising campaign for Chevrolet which ran “Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet”; while these words were being sung, the ad showed Chevrolet cars and people playing baseball and eating hot dogs and apple pies. By implication and association, Chevrolet cars were thus presented as being “as American as apple pie.” In fact, after viewing the ad, it might have felt almost unpatriotic to have bought anything other than a Chevy—especially a foreign car.

The universality with which the field of advertising uses the principle of appealing to things which have positive mental association for most people (or at least its “target audience”) was demonstrated by an interesting coincidence. Shortly after Chevrolet launched its baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet ad campaign, there was a campaign in Australia that went, “Football, meat pies, kangaroos, and Holden cars.” Of course, football, meat pies, and kangaroos would have the same kind of appeal to national identity and price among Australians as would baseball, hot dogs, and apple pies among Americans. Holden was the Australian component of Chevrolet, and we can assume that the campaign for Holden cars was probably just as effective down-under as the Chevrolet ad was in the U.S.

Advertisements for a multitude of other goods, including wines and liquor, cameras soaps, televisions, clothes, perfumes, telephones, coffee, real estate, cereals, soft drinks—in fact, just about any product that is on the market - use the same mechanisms of positive imaging to create positive identification on the part of the viewer with the product and the people who endorse or make it.

But suppose business and industry presented their products in the same negative fashion in which persons with disabilities are so often portrayed by human services. What would have been the effect on Chevrolet sales in 1977 if, instead of “Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet,” the ad had said, “High prices, poor roads, traffic accidents, and Chevrolet”? Or, “Junk, bloodshed, pollution, and Chevrolet”? And suppose that the new jingle were played while pictures were being shown of a gruesome car accident, or of the owner of a Chevrolet being presented with a high repair bill for the car?

By the same token, one can imagine the positive impact if human services were to present their clients in the consistently positive manner in which businesses typically portray their products and services. The ad for the program on severely retarded persons might have been entitled *Just Like Us* instead of *The Others*, and might have included scenes of retarded persons engaged in productive work, of non-disabled children playing together with disabled ones of whom at least some were attractive, of retarded persons eating in a fancy restaurant (not MacDonald’s) or flying in an airplane, celebrating the holidays with a family reunion, and so on. Viewers would have been presented with associations to retarded persons that are extremely positive, and with which they could (and perhaps would want to) identify. Such a program would have been much more likely to foster positive attitudes toward people with disabilities, instead of contributing to their rejection by emphasizing negatively valued differentness.

The above is only one example of the tremendous contrast between the negative ways in which perhaps the vast majority of service providers present their clients, and the much more positive manner in which they could present them. If human services and other organizations on behalf of devalued people really want to effect positive change in prevailing public attitudes toward disabled and devalued persons, then it is imperative that services help members of the society want and be able to identify with devalued people. And, if services wish to increase positive public identification with

devalued people, then it is essential that the ways in which devalued people are presented and the images with which they are associated, be extremely positive.

Unfortunately, the hiring of professional “image-makers” and advertisers to devise attitude change and educational programs on behalf of disabled people is no guarantee that such programs will then promote positive identification with these people by society. To that end, a positive ideology toward people with disabling conditions is much more important than technical expertise in how to put on a successful ad campaign. Of course, people who are knowledgeable in such matters may be able to contribute to the development of an effective positive attitude promotion project, but a truly positive and highly conscious ideology is the most important and most helpful characteristic that a promoter of disabled people can have.

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