An "If This, Then That" Formulation of Decisions Related to Social Role Valorization As a Better Way of Interpreting It to People

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Abstract: Social Role Valorization is interpreted as a high-order empirical social science theory that informs people about the relation between the social roles that people hold and what happens to them as a result, and how to valorize (improve or defend) the social roles of people at risk of social devaluation. Because Social Role Valorization is not a "religion," people must go to higher belief systems to determine whether and why other humans should be valued or devalued, whether the social valuation of others should be promoted, and which presumably effective means to this end are morally defensible or even imperative. Whether a pursuit of social valuation in certain cases has unacceptable implications can be in the domain of either "religion" or practical trade-offs.

There have been many misinterpretations of normalization theory and Social Role Valorization by their opponents. In the case of normalization, a contributing factor had been that there were so many versions of it, though two versions have been the dominant ones: those by Nirje (1969) and Wolfensberger (1970, 1972, 1980; Wolfensberger & Glenn 1973, 1975). Many people opposed normalization and/or Social Role Valorization because they had never studied, learned, or understood these, whereas others would not study, learn, or understand these because they opposed them—or whatever they thought constituted normalization or Social Role Valorization. Sometimes, opponents seize upon statements that supporters of the schemas intend to be probabilistic in nature, but interpret these as if they were meant to have been absolutistic in nature. For instance, a Social Role Valorization proponent may state something like,

We know that people tend to be judged by the company they keep. Therefore, devalued people are apt to be perceived more positively by others if they are associated with people who are highly valued by society.

However, this may get interpreted by those who are not sympathetic to Social Role Valorization as meaning that Social Role Valorization is implacably opposed to two handicapped people ever being together, or that such persons should never become friends, or that Social Role Valorization teaches that handicapped people who are integrated with nonhandicapped ones will definitely be seen and treated more positively by others in society. However, none of these interpretations would be correct.

But often, supporters of normalization or Social Role Valorization have also misinterpreted these schemes, as by stating things in improperly absolute terms (e.g., "Social Role Valorization says that you must always do . . ."). Some such supporters know better than to phrase things in this way; some do not, perhaps because they are unsophisticated, naive, or had little training in normalization or Social Role Valorization.

In this essay, I am addressing a particular kind of misinterpretation of Social Role Valorization by its supporters, or even teachers,

though most of the same points are also applicable to normalization theory. However, be it noted that I now consider normalization theory outdated and subsumed by the broader theory of Social Role Valorization, as formulated in Wolfensberger (1992), Wolfensberger and Thomas (1983), and Kristiansen (1993).

Social Role Valorization is in the class of overarching meta-theories of social relationships and human service that are empirical in nature. (This was less true of normalization theory—at least my version.) As an empirical theory, it states: a certain number of what appear to be facts (e.g., about how human beings relate to each other and behave). It then makes assertions about how various presumed facts are—or appear to be—related to each other. This means that Social Role Valorization theory makes assertions about what can be expected to happen if a certain course of action is, or is not, pursued. It then presents people with one or more action decisions that affect a person, group, or class—usually one that is societally devalued or at risk of such devaluation. Based on their view of what is needed for and by the party at issue (i.e., what they perceive as a positive future for that party), the decision-makers can then decide what "costs" would have to be paid to obtain this end, and whether the "costs" are worth the intended outcome.

Somewhat simplified, these relations—based on social laws of how humans individually and collectively behave can be stated as "if this, then that" formulations. Although Social Role Valorization theory can only forecast probabilities, not certainties, I believe that these probabilities not only have empirical validity, but in most cases can even be well-buttressed by the corpus of published empirical research. However, I will provide only a very limited and selective number of such citations here because this article is not intended to serve as a review of literature necessary or sufficient to support Social Role Valorization claims. Such literature relevant to Social Role Valorization is vast. On role theory alone, the literature is voluminous.

The major relations between Social Role Valorization-related action and outcomes can be formulated in four ways, elaborated below. However, these four statements on how actions and consequences are likely to be related should be understood (a) as being expressed in terms of the everyday logic of practical decision-making, not in terms of rigorous formal symbolic

logic; and (b) as being only probabilistic, with the probabilities not being identical either for all four classes of propositions, nor even for all posited relations within a specific class.

1. If X is done, then one must expect that Y will occur.

For instance, if one relentlessly says bad—e.g., image-degrading—things about Group A to Group B, then many members of Group B can be fully expected to eventually end up believing what is said, to think badly of Group A, and to do bad things to Group A as a result. After all, it is well-known from the literature on attitude formation and propaganda that a message that is received many times from many different sources, and especially from many credible sources, tends to be eventually accepted as true (e.g., Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986). This phenomenon is one of the cornerstones of advertisement practice. Or, if one consistently engages devalued people in childish activities and routines, then they will probably be viewed by many observers as overgrown or eternal children and be denied appropriate developmental challenges or adult roles. If one congregates devalued people together in numbers that are too large for the social systems around them to relate to and assimilate adaptively, then one will probably reap rejection, hostility, and efforts at segregation from these larger social systems. If an agency accepts deviancy-imaged funding, then the taint of the money may rub off on its clients, in which case they would then suffer image degradation.

In other words, Social Role Valorization proponents need to understand—and help others to understand—that a price will be paid for doing certain things, for instance, violating societal values, going against known social laws that govern positive attitude change or the facilitation of integration and acceptance, etc. Usually, the price for such things is failure of one's social role-valorizing plans, and disappointment of one's aspirations for the devalued people involved. For the latter, it may mean wounding experiences, such as rejection, that frighten observers.

The above "if this . . . then that" examples that have something to say about societal acceptance and integration could, of course, also be formulated for applicability where one is seeking valued participation for a party in a societal subcontext (e.g., a subculture, a specific

2. If Y has occurred, then it is quite likely that X has been done earlier.

For instance, if Group B has done dirt to Group A, then it is very likely that many people in Group B had a lot of bad things conveyed to

them on earlier occasions about Group A. Thus, to continue a previous example, if certain cases, the examples would have to be referenced to the norms and values of these smaller social systems. However, one must be fully aware that this may incur a cost of rejection by the larger society. This itself is an "if this . . . then that" issue: If one does the things that gain acceptance for Party A in Subsystem B but that are devalued or even unacceptable in the larger society, then one will have to be prepared for rejection of Party A from that larger society, even though Party A is gaining (or retaining) acceptance in Subsystem B.

3. If one wants Y to occur, then one will (probably) have to do X; or conversely, if one wants to avoid Y, then X will (probably) have to be done.

For instance, if one wants devalued people to become more positively valued and accepted in the society at large, and if one wants to win from that larger society certain good things for socially devalued people, then one must help the things that the larger society values positively. If one wants devalued people to be (more) accepted and better integrated in society, then one may have to do things that enable them to have positive appearances and to not have repugnant personal habits. (On the incredibly powerful and partially unconscious impact on others of personal appearance, first impressions, stature, bodily attractiveness, facial disfigurement and visible physical impairment, and memory retention thereof, see Ackerman, 1990; Adams, 1982; Aloia, 1975; Davies, Ellis, & Shepherd, 1981; Dijkstra, 1982; Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Herman, 1986; Huston & Levinger, 1978; Macgregor, 1974; Romer & Berkson, 1980a, 1980b; and Weiss, 1993.) If one wants Group B to do good things to Group A, then one will almost certainly have to communicate a lot of good things about Group A to Group B. If one wants handicapped adults to be seen and treated as adults, then at least in the sight of others, one must be prepared to engage them in adult activities and routines, perhaps to the maximum degree possible. If one wants to avoid devalued people being seen and treated as menaces, then one must certainly not attach menace imagery to them nor congregate them together in a way that frightens observers.

The above "if this . . . then that" examples

locale, or a specific group). Of course, in such cases, the examples would have to be referenced to the norms and values of these smaller social systems. However, one must be fully aware that this may incur a cost of rejection by the larger society. This itself is an "if this . . . then that" issue: If one does the things that gain acceptance for Party A in Subsystem B but that are devalued or even unacceptable in the larger society, then one will have to be prepared for rejection of Party A from that larger society, even though Party A is gaining (or retaining) acceptance in Subsystem B.

Again, as in Number 1 (see p. 164), Social Role Valorization proponents need to convey that in order to achieve a certain desirable goal, a price has to be paid, namely, learning and applying the strategies that are likely to attain that goal or to stave off the undesirable outcome.

4. If one concludes that doing X is too costly to oneself or the party at issue (i.e., that the price to be paid is too high), then one may have to modify, or even sacrifice one's goal Y.

Thus, if one is unwilling to say a lot of good things about Group A to Group B in order to get Group B to do good things to Group A, then one has to accept the high likelihood that Group B probably will not do good things to Group A. Or, to continue the issue of inclusion of a person either in Subsystem B or in the larger society: If the latter is seen as the more important goal in the long run, then one does the things that pursue this goal even at the risk of forfeiting acceptance by and in Subsystem B. If it is judged to be too demanding or difficult to arrange a handicapped adult's life so that the person is engaged in adult routines and activities, and is addressed and presented as an adult, or if it is judged that doing so is too cruel to an adult who has been used to a childish world and likes it, then one has to accept that many other people are not going to see and treat this adult as an adult, but will instead perceive and treat this adult as a child. When the societally devalued party itself is not in full accord with a role-valorizing measure, many people consider this too high a price to pay—though in my opinion, this situation is widely treated in a naively unnuanced fashion. At any rate, people can always decide not to pay the price—in fact, they

quite often do, though often they do so as much out of ignorance or lack of wisdom as in full knowledge of the almost certain consequences. If they do decide not to pay the price for greater societal acceptance, then there certainly must be expected to be—and often definitely are—negative consequences, such as continued de-valuation, rejection, segregation, etc., from the larger society.

Some additional examples may also help illustrate this fourth formulation. Suppose an agency's name and logo convey negative (or at least suboptimal) messages about the service and the people served. The name and logo could be changed to be more positive, but this might re-quire much expense, including a great deal of time and effort by a lot of people, and would mean that the agency would have to re-estab-lish a public name and visibility. Agency per-sonnel might therefore decide that changing the name and logo is not worth these efforts and costs—but if so, they should then honestly and overtly accept the image loss to clients or the loss of potential image improvement (and quite commonly also such image costs to other people similar to the clients) that is apt to come with maintaining the current name and logo. Of course, the agency may be able to do something positive—and perhaps even of much greater impact—in another domain to compensate for the price paid on this issue. But, instead, the almost normative behavior of service providers engaged in social role-devalorizing practices that they find difficult to change is to deny that the practices are, in fact, social role-degrading.

Or suppose a person has a very severe and visible facial malformation that elicits from oth-ers first shocked surprise and then rejection and negative distantiation. If many more people are to be more accepting of that person, then the malformation will have to be addressed, perhaps by cosmetic means, grooming, attire, or even surgery. (See the previously cited literature, among others. The evidence on facial disfigure-ment is especially strong. Response to such dis-figurement may even have a genetic component because even babies respond less positively to distorted or unattractive faces (e.g., Alley & Hildebrandt, 1988; Bruce, Cowey, Ellis, & Perrett, 1992; Flin & Dziurawiec, 1989; Freed-man, 1974).) Suppose surgery is the only thing that would make a big difference, but the dis-figured person is not willing to undergo it. Then that person and the person's allies must be pre-

pared for the rejection that will almost certainly come. Such rejection cannot be talked and ex-horted away; one cannot expect to legislate it away; and all sorts of similar efforts to shame or browbeat people into being accepting instead of rejecting cannot be expected to be very suc-cessful, though other and wiser attitude change strategies may have some positive effects on some people.

Suppose further that one wants a young adult to pursue a career that requires good so-cial relations, but early in life the person ac-quired one or more very obnoxious behavioral or verbal habits that result in almost total re-jection of that person by virtually everyone and, hence, loss of virtually all social and occupa-tional opportunities. If this person is to find acceptance and opportunities, then it simply will be necessary for him or her to unlearn some bad behaviors and probably to learn others instead. If the person is absolutely unwilling to do this (assuming for the moment that the capacity for change otherwise exists), perhaps because it would require too much effort or surrender of self-will, and/or if no servers around the person are willing to structure a relevant learning and growth program because it would take too much out of them or would be very uncertain of suc-cess, then it is simply not realistic to expect that this person can attain the desired career. In-stead, the career goals at issue will have to be greatly modified, or even foregone altogether. After all, some people can be so obnoxious that virtually nowhere will they be taken or kept in a paid job on the open competitive market. A persistent emittance—especially in public—of the behaviors at issue that greatly offend the majority culture will almost certainly incur on-going rejection.

Social Role Valorization can inform people of the above realities, but the values people draw on to select one option in preference to another must come from a higher level above that of social science. However, many people do not want to hear these truths or deal with them. What is meant by this is that people often ei-ther (a) confuse value issues with Social Role Valorization social science, or (b) complain that something should not be the way it is and act as if one could wish or talk it away: "People should not discriminate against . . . , reject . . . ," etc. But such moralizing and commonly related practices (e.g., messages of the "stop this bad habit" type) are known not to be very effective,

especially in the face of powerful known social dynamics that make for rejection, discrimina-tion, segregation, etc. (e.g., Brehm, 1968; Burgoon & Bettinghaus, 1980; Havelock, 1971, which is also relevant to "value loading" of messages; Katlins & Abelson, 1970; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986; Zimbardo, Ebbeson, & Maslach, 1977). In many situations, there sim-ply "is" that get people to emit the positive—or at least desired—"thens."

I believe that interpreting Social Role Valo-rization as an "if this, then that" set of proposi-tions is a better and more accurate way of teaching the theory than to present it to the effect that Social Role Valorization "dictates" that something must be done. For instance, a lot of written or oral feedback to human ser-vices that had been evaluated with instruments that embody normalization or Social Role Valo-rization (such as the PASS or PASSING tools; Wolfensberger & Glenn, 1973, 1975; Wolfens-berger & Thomas, 1983, 1989) have contained thoughtless recommendations that the assessed service change various practices—perhaps changes that would result in a gain of only a very few positive points on the overall PASS or PASSING score but entail a disproportionate amount of effort on the agency's part or are not even within the agency's power to change. This way of interpreting and presenting Social Role Valorization is sometimes impolitic and some-times outright incorrect. (Of course, the num-ber of points a service could gain or lose should only be one of several considerations as to whether something is recommended or imple-mented.)

The "if this, then that" formulation pre-sents members of an audience much more clearly with the types of decisions they have to make, namely, determining what they would or would not like to see happen to or for socially devalued people (the "if this" part); and then deciding whether that which is required—at least with a high degree of probability—in or-der to achieve or avert these outcomes can be done, whether they are prepared to do it, or whether they will do something else on the ba-sis of competing theories, higher values, etc. For instance, a PASSING report might phrase an issue along the lines of, "If the service contin-ues to engage in practice A, then X is apt to happen. On the other hand, if the service were to exchange practice A for practice B, then Y is apt to happen," or "if the service wanted such-

and-such to happen, it would have to do so-and-so." In other words, people need to understand that actions do have consequences—the same as do ideas; that these are often reasonably pre-dictable or even near-certain; and that once one knows what these consequences are likely to be (not what one wants them to be), then one will be in a better position to make both conscious and informed action decisions. If people decide to do what they want to do anyway, regardless of the consequences to themselves or others, then at least they will be doing so with greater consciousness of what effects their actions are likely to have. This formulation thus puts the onus on potential actors to assume responsibil-ity for making decisions more consciously.

Colleagues and I have also evolved an ex-tensive set of additional considerations related to Social Role Valorization-related decision-making. We plan to further elaborate these and publish them in due time. These considerations will distinguish between decisions that are based on Social Role Valorization criteria alone and those derived from other sources, such as val-ues, calculations of feasibility, and calculations of probability of success. Furthermore, in these guidelines, we make the distinction between Social Role Valorization decisions that affect oneself and those that affect others. This is rel-evant because when one acts on one's own be-half, one has a standing, and possibly other resources, that are different from those one has when acting (a) on behalf of others or (b) on others even though not necessarily on their behalf. Standing here refers to the nature of the relationship, authority, legitimacy and obliga-tion a decision-maker has vis-à-vis those who would be affected by the decision.

There may be certain issues on which So-cial Role Valorization proponents (or anyone else, for that matter) feel so strongly that they do not want to give people the option to de-cide to do something they think is wrong. For instance, one may be strongly opposed to the use of electric shock, institutionalization, abor-tion, etc. However, one must still be clear that if values are at issue, then unlike empirical is-sues, such questions involve considerations of mo-rality that go beyond Social Role Valorization, and Social Role Valorization itself cannot tell one whether electric shock, or institutionalization, or abortion, or anything else, are immoral. So-cial Role Valorization can only say what will likely contribute to valued or devalued roles and

what the likely consequences are if one holds such roles. A common error in either teaching or critiquing Social Role Valorization is to treat issues that are not Social Role Valorization issues as Social Role Valorization issues. For instance, on the one hand, people may look to Social Role Valorization to give answers to issues that can only be given from the supraempirical level of ideologies and values. On the other hand, it is extremely common for critics (e.g., Chappell, 1992) to fault Social Role Valorization because it does not give answers to such issues. Yet Social Role Valorization should not and cannot give answers to supraempirical questions, for the very reason that it is only an empirical theory.

In retrospect, I am aware that I could have better interpreted Social Role Valorization implications (and before it, normalization) along the above lines and regret not having done so. I present herewith what I consider to be a better idea on how to interpret Social Role Valorization, which is how I aspire to interpret it in the future in oral and written presentations.

Readers should note that the same discipline of counting the costs of any potential decision could be applied to and by proponents of other bodies of theory and knowledge, provided that such bodies have a reasonable empirical basis. For instance, in the allocation of funds, one could say, "If we find this, what will happen?," or "If we do not fund this, what will happen?" Some of the costs might be inability to fund other, perhaps more beneficial projects; alienation of powerful supporters; disruption of a community's economy; and so on. Of course, this itself is just one example of how the "if this, then that" decision schema could be applied to questions other than ones of Social Role Valorization.

Critics of the reasoning that permeates this article might say that it has been well-established that there is no empirical science that is not under value influence or even control and that, therefore, there can be no separation of values and "religion" from empiricism and science. However, the recent excesses of structuralist thinking have led many people to a mode of discourse that implies that there are no facts, and no valid empirical relations. I have always believed that interests and values dominate human relationships and services, but also that there do exist lawful regularities of behavior, of human relationships, and of social organization, and

that at least some of these laws are (a) universal and (b) ascertainable. One's study or application of these laws may be influenced, guided, controlled, or blinded by one's interests and values, but this does not mean that lawful regularities themselves have become totally and permanently inaccessible or irrelevant. Relatedly, to say that Social Role Valorization cannot and should not be looked to for supraempirical answers is not to claim that the formulation or practice of Social Role Valorization is free of influences from values and interests. As I have elaborated elsewhere (e.g., Wolfensberger, 1972) it is particularly unconsciously held values that are the most problematic. However, one good first defense against maladaptive value intrusion is to gain and maintain consciousness of the value issues involved, and in the case of Social Role Valorization, to strive for clarity about what the boundaries of Social Role Valorization theory are.

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