

The Fruitlessness of Trying to Convey Competencies to People While Ignoring Their Image

Wolf Wolfensberger

Social Role Valorization (SRV), which interprets personal image and competencies as important because they are the two broad avenues to valued roles, has been described in this *Journal* (Wolfensberger, 2000), but the most extensive up-to-date elaboration of SRV can be found in Wolfensberger (1998) and Race (1999). However, there are other human development or service-related theories that focus on virtually nothing but competencies, and not even as means to valued roles, but as virtual ends in themselves. Behavioral schemes have tended to do this. According to them, much of human service should be one consequence after another designed to increase competencies, often by overcoming competing competencies, such as manipulative or destructive behaviors.

The problem with any purely, or primarily, competency-oriented service or living scheme that ignores not only social imagery but also roles is that it can produce what can be called “disembodied competencies” (i.e., competencies that do not necessarily tie the person to the social fabric). A person of disembodied competencies could be a Robinson Crusoe, supremely competent—but just as alone as if stranded on an uninhabited island.

As Lemay (2006) has compellingly argued in this *Journal*, social integration is transacted *through* the medium of social roles, and social integration as defined by SRV requires the medium of *valued* social roles. Further, at least some valued roles can be established entirely through imagery, even in the absence of competencies, or in situations where competencies play no part in defining the valued role, for example, the roles of son or daughter, aunt or uncle, friend, member of a faith community, regular theater-goer, and fan of a sports team. Yet many more roles require only a very small amount of competency, but in combination with a large amount of positive imagery. Many ceremonial roles are of this nature, as, for instance, that of the flag-raiser at a school.

All this informs us that there is a gigantic insufficiency in any scheme of human development or service that emphasizes only competencies, or even primarily competencies, but fails to firmly link these to social functioning, which, in turn, depends heavily on imagery. To cite another example, there are many people who master a musical instrument but rarely or never play it. Their own family members may be unaware that this person has this competency, and it may come as a total surprise to them when one day, some occasion prompts the person to play the instrument. Part of the problem in such cases is that the competency had not been tied to a role (such as virtuoso, piano player, family entertainment provider, amateur band member, church musician, organ player, or trumpeter at funerals, etc., etc.). Such a role would not only have revealed the competency, but applied it in a way that had social significance to family, friends, acquaintances, fellow church members, etc.

Of course, parallel to focusing only on competencies, there could be another erroneous strategy, namely, to focus only on a person's imagery and not on any competencies, even when these can reasonably be expected to be attainable by that person. This is most likely to be done (but by no means only so) with persons who are very impaired—perhaps even profoundly retarded—or similarly very reduced mentally, and for whom other people either cannot imagine what competencies they might attain and/or perform, or do not know how to convey competencies to such severely impaired persons, or how to evoke competencies that they had acquired earlier.

References

- Lemay, R. (2006). Social Role Valorization insights into the social integration conundrum. *Mental Retardation*, 44, 1–12.
- Race, D. (1999). *Social Role Valorization and the English experience*. London: Whiting & Birch.

Wolfensberger, W. (1998). *A brief introduction to Social Role Valorization: A high-order concept for addressing the plight of societally devalued people, and for structuring human services* (3rd ed.). Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership & Change Agency.

Wolfensberger, W. (2000). A brief overview of So-

cial Role Valorization. *Mental Retardation*, 38, 105–123.

Author:

Wolf Wolfensberger, PhD, Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership, and Change Agency, Syracuse University, 800 S. Wilbur Ave., Suite 3B1, Syracuse, NY 13204.