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## A Quarter-Century of Normalization and Social Role Valorization

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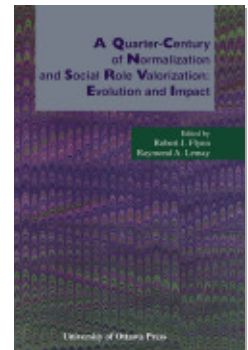
Published by University of Ottawa Press

Flynn, Robert J. and Raymond Lemay.

A Quarter-Century of Normalization and Social Role Valorization: Evolution and Impact.

University of Ottawa Press, 1999.

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## The personal impact of Normalization-related and Social Role Valorization-related training

JOE OSBURN

I have been asked to respond to Susan Thomas (chapter 15) and Deborah Reidy (chapter 15) who have written about the impact of Normalization-related and Social Role Valorization-related training as vehicles of personal, service, and policy change, and to do so particularly from the personal perspective. I take this charge to mean that I should concern myself with the effects of Normalization/SRV *training* on its recipients, including, of course, myself. (The impact of training on individuals should also be distinguished from the impact of Normalization/SRV *actions* on individuals, which, as Susan Thomas points out in her paper, is one of the four levels to which such actions are directed.) However, I would like to note at the outset that I claim no special expertise on this subject. By now, I would estimate that several tens of thousands of people throughout the (Western) world have undergone Normalization/SRV training. I am sure that that experience has had some sort of personal impact on each of them, which they could certainly relate as well as, or better than, I could my own. So the thoughts that I will now offer about the personal significance of Normalization/SRV training are based on my own experiences with this training over the past 20 years, as well as those of many other people whom I witnessed having been changed by Normalization/SRV training.

In order to describe the impact of Normalization/SRV training on me personally, I would like to first describe what I was like before Normalization/SRV training. Thirty years ago I was on the liberal

fringes of, but still quite caught up in, the culture of human service professionalism and political activism. I think I really believed that right thinking by right politicians and the right service managers would result in the right actions on behalf of poor and oppressed people. I felt I was a part of a great struggle between good and evil, the forces of liberation and oppression, and that in that struggle it was important to be aligned with the poor and the oppressed. I saw many wrongs that needed to be righted, and I thought that human services, done right, could accomplish much good.

However, I also saw that human services were often *not* done right, that, in fact, they often made life much harder for the poor and the oppressed, that they did not need to be that way, and that they could and should be made better. This is why I liked the then emerging idea of accountability. I thought services should be held responsible for being good to, and doing good for, the people who needed their help. Acting on this belief seemed to naturally lead me further and further away from direct service and into human service supervision and management, where I really thought I would have sufficient scope of influence and responsibility to help services become better.

The first human service job I held where I felt I could actually do something about accountability was more than 20 years ago, and it quickly taught me that services were not all that eager to change, nor did the term *accountability* mean the same thing to me as it did to most of the human service administrators, boards, founders, and politicians on whom I tried it out. Most

of them talked about accountability but saw no real need for change in their own pet services since these were already models of service quality. This is when I first heard the religious dictum "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" Far from being deterred by these obstacles, I was spurred to learn more about how to help services change. It was hard going at first, and when I eventually did begin to gain a foothold, it led to one of the major turning points of my life.

What happened was that in 1973 a friend, Rex Kerr, and I got "promoted" to a human service job for which neither of us was trained or experienced, nor could we turn to anyone around us who knew any more about it than we did. Our new job title was "Planning Associate," and we were to plan and evaluate certain categories of human services in an eight-county urban region in Indiana.

The whole idea of evaluation was just beginning to emerge on the human service scene at about that time, primarily as an accountability mechanism following the huge increases in public funds that were allocated to human services in the 1960s and 1970s, such as during the so-called "War on Poverty" in the US. There was hardly anything written on the subject of service evaluation. There were virtually no formal courses on the topic anywhere in the undergraduate, graduate, or postgraduate realms of academia. There were no professional workshops or training events. There were no objectified broadly accepted standards of program or overall service quality. There were no recognized formal instruments for program or service evaluation. There was no language to describe a good service or, for that matter, a bad service. As Dr. Wolfensberger used to point out during PASS training events, "People often assumed that services were good simply because they existed." What little credible information did exist on the topic of evaluation tended to be particularistic to specific types of service models or clinical interventions. Even most of this was oriented to individualized assessments of persons.

But in spite of this void, we both took our new job seriously, and tried hard on our own to educate ourselves about how to do it. We spent a lot of time looking in libraries, talking with people, and so on, but had very little success finding anything that was helpful. We were about to give up looking and had decided to try to make up our own service evaluation instrument when providence struck.

We had been interviewing the director of a large mental retardation service agency with the hope of incorporating his ideas into the evaluation instrument we planned to develop. He said he really did not have any ideas and did not know of anything written on the subject. But, as we were leaving his office, a thought crossed his mind. He may have once gotten something in the mail, he said, that might pertain to our concerns, but he was not sure because he had not really looked at whatever it was. Still, we were welcome to it if he could find it. He shuffled through the papers on his desk, then the drawers, the file cabinets, and finally his bookshelf, but couldn't find what he was looking for. On our way out, I happened to notice and pointed out to him a large manila envelope that had fallen down on the floor behind his bookshelf. He looked and said that just might be the piece of mail he had in mind, so we helped him move the bookshelf and, sure enough, it was. He handed the envelope to Rex, who happened to be standing nearest, but Rex handed it on to me because he had several other articles to review that night. Lives turn on such little moments! I took it home, and later that night I opened it up. It was a little orange, magazine-sized book that turned out to be *PASS 2*, the first published edition of *PASS*. I started to read it.

I identify that as my "moment of first impact." From the very first moment I started to read *PASS*, I was hooked. I couldn't put it down. I read it from cover to cover in one sitting. It was the best thing I had ever read—not just on service evaluation, but on human services, period. I read it again the next morning. It just all made perfect sense to me. It rang true. It was powerful. It was lucidly written, not mushy like so much other writing in the field. It stood in such contrast because it took a stance on what should and shouldn't be—on what was good and desirable, and what was bad and hurtful. I was impressed (actually stunned) not only by its intellectual and technical quality, but even more by its moral rigor and its "realness." It did not try to be "value-free." It did not aspire to moral neutrality. It was very radical and quite revolutionary in this regard.

Well, I have to tell you, I loved *PASS*. It changed me indelibly, instantaneously, as people do get changed when the scales are removed from their eyes. And all this was just from reading the book. I had not even met Dr. Wolfensberger yet! You can imagine the

impact on me when, just a few weeks later, in early 1974, I went to the first PASS workshop that was being held in Syracuse, New York, and *guess who* was my team leader there! The man himself! I've never been the same since. In fact, I really cannot make a distinction between the impact on me of Normalization/SRV training, and the personal and intellectual influence of Dr. Wolfensberger. That was the starting point for me in terms of what has since become my life's work and identity.

From that beginning, I wanted to learn as much as I could about all of this, and so basically started going to every training event that Dr. Wolfensberger and the Training Institute offered. After the first couple of these, the agency I was working for stopped paying my way, especially when it dawned on them that I was actually serious about evaluating services rather than merely endorsing them, and that what I was learning in these workshops threatened the established order they had been duly hired to preserve. After the third workshop, I had to take unpaid leave and vacation time and also pay my own way to all the many other training events I attended. Of course, it was all worth it, and usually Dr. Wolfensberger waived the fee anyway.

After a while, Dr. Wolfensberger invited me to make a presentation at a workshop, then to team-lead at a PASS workshop for the first time, and then again, and again, and so on. In 1975, he came to Indianapolis to conduct a PASS workshop, which was a major event for us. I was a "floater" over several teams at that workshop; and so it went. In 1977, I went to work for Dr. Wolfensberger at the Training Institute in Syracuse. That is when my education *really* began! (If ever there was anyone who personified intensity, high demands, and positive expectations for others, it is Dr. Wolfensberger.) There, I was blessed with many wonderful opportunities, especially getting to know and work closely with some extremely talented people who have had a deep and lasting influence on my life. Besides Dr. Wolfensberger, these included Susan Thomas, Guy Caruso, Darcy (Miller) Elks, Lynn Breedlove, and Steve Tullman, when we all worked together at the Training Institute.

Something that had almost as much impact on me as reading PASS and attending all those early training events was hearing for the very first time Dr. Wolfensberger's presentation of the most common

"wounds" of societally devalued people. It was clearly the most eloquent statement about the life experiences of devalued people that I had ever heard. To me, it had all the power of stark indisputable truth. I was deeply moved. I felt as if I had just been given some *key illumination* of my feelings about what happens to poor and handicapped people. It was for me an astounding insight. It strengthened my commitment and helped provide a sense of real priority and even urgency in my work. After hearing that presentation, I came to believe that one of the most important things I could do for wounded people was to help others to see and understand their wounds and how they were struck. It gave me a way to clarify my own thinking about why I thought it was important to try to help devalued people. After all, what could be more important than to try to address these awful things that happen to them?

The first time Dr. Wolfensberger presented his formulation of the "wounds," there were (I think) only six. However, even more important to me than the specific number and types of wounds themselves was the fact that I had just been given an entirely new, existential *way of thinking* about the lives of devalued people. That insight penetrated deeply and was so powerful that it caused my own eyes (and those of many others) to be opened to a whole new level of consciousness, not just about devalued people, but even about humanity itself and life in general. It also enabled the realization of all sorts of other wounds. And so, almost each of the early presentations of the common wounds discovered still more wounds that had to be added to the presentation because our understanding had been so deepened. Soon there were nine wounds, then 12, then 16. And now, we talk about 21 common negative life experiences of devalued people. Like Normalization/SRV, the wounds insight was unequivocal in taking the side of the devalued person. It was a tremendous insight that I believe could only have been achieved within the context of an unshakable belief in the inherent dignity and infinite worth of all people. This whole perspective on the lives of devalued people was (and is) for me part of the essential wisdom for human service, without which—no matter how much else is known or done—a service or server will be totally misdirected with regard to the realities of life for devalued people, do no good, and probably much harm.

The personal impact of this whole pattern of experiences related to Normalization/SRV went beyond just my work. It deeply affected how I lived, mainly by returning me to a renewed conviction about my earlier service ideals and especially my Catholic religious heritage and basic Christian beliefs. It caused and helped me to reaffirm and rethink my outlook on many things. It gave me direction and also an anchor in something real. It opened the door to a better understanding of many other realities, that is, human nature, the fallenness of the world and all of its creatures, the imperial nature of all worldly structures—including of human services—the need for both direct voluntary personal engagement with devalued people and for communality with them and with like-minded people, and much more.

In addition to the profound initial impact of Normalization/SRV training, I have also been deeply affected by my long involvement with it. Earlier, I mentioned that I have been involved in Normalization/SRV training for over 20 years. For example, the book *The Principle of Normalization in Human Services* was published in 1972, and I first learned about it in 1973. The socialpolitical atmosphere that existed at that time, when Normalization and PASS were first being introduced, was much different than that of today in terms of the number and vehemency of its antagonists. Many hostile and resistant elements came to the training and fought it tooth and nail. They did not like what they were seeing and hearing, mainly, I think, because Normalization/PASS meant they would have to stop doing what they were doing as well as making a good living at it. Change was in the wind. They felt threatened by Normalization/PASS and wanted to stop it. Normalization/PASS espoused fundamental changes that stood in sharp contrast to the prevailing service thinking, service structures, practices, and attitudes of the day. I remember Dr. Wolfensberger used to show an overhead that was a picture of a wall with the handwritten words “Mene, mene, Tekel, upharsin!” (Dan. 5:25), presumably to help certain participants know that the handwriting was already on the wall. This revolutionary stature of Normalization certainly added to the impact it had on me 20 years ago, which undoubtedly is different that its impact on those encountering Normalization/SRV for the first time today, when there is much wider assent to

Normalization/SRV ideas and many obvious advances in service practices, even though vast shortcomings still persist and the expressions are often far more subtle.

Nevertheless, I think there is a general consistency in the way people talk about how Normalization/SRV training has affected them. One thing that seems almost universally true about such training is that it *does* have an impact on the persons who receive it.

Relatedly, the impact of Normalization/SRV training on individuals is usually significant: Hardly anyone feels neutral about it. The extent of the impact, and responses to it, may vary from person to person, but it always seems to be definite and long-lasting. This point is worth noting: The fact that Normalization/SRV training does indeed have an impact on its recipients clearly distinguishes it from all sorts of other human service-related training experiences that are so ephemeral they leave no real mark.

Further, I know many people like myself whose life course has been largely shaped by their Normalization/SRV training. In other words, such training was the essential determinant of their lifetime Normalization/SRV-consistent service involvements. The longer the connection is sustained over time, the more powerful the initial impact is likely to have been; and, conversely, the longer a person stays involved with activities related to Normalization/SRV, the deeper and more pervasive its influence is likely to be on that person.

Finally, I believe that, in general, the overall impact of Normalization/SRV training on those who have received it has been positive, and, indeed, very much so. This is not to deny that many individuals have also been very discomfited and even downright disturbed by it. However, I know many people who at first hated Normalization/SRV but have since come around to being among its staunchest defenders and promoters. I do not know anyone who has actually been harmed by Normalization/SRV training itself, although I do know some who have been distressed and even eventually turned off by how their concerns about Normalization/SRV training, and particularly its implementation, have or have not been responded to. I also know many people who have been distressed by the implications of Normalization/SRV for their own personal vested interests. Furthermore, I know of many

people, including myself, who have been brought to some degree of frustration or hurt as a result of their efforts to *act* on their Normalization/SRV beliefs. Such frustrations and hurts are inevitable. And finally, I realize that there are shortcomings in Normalization/SRV training, and in Normalization/SRV trainers, again including myself, in spite of ongoing efforts to address them, and that such shortcomings certainly color people's perception of their Normalization/SRV training experiences.

In preparation for this paper, several of my friends in Indiana (Mike Morton, Deb McCarty, and Sherry Kurtz) met with me and talked about the impact of Normalization/SRV training on them. The act of sharing our personal experience of this training was very helpful and strongly illustrated how much we had in common with many other people in this regard. I would like to conclude with a list of reflections that these friends and others have shared with me about the impact Normalization/SRV training has had on them. No doubt some of you will find some of your own experiences expressed in these statements as well.

- "There was power in the logic and internal coherency of Normalization."
- "The ideas clicked for me."
- "They were useful and practical. They were overarching. They were intellectually profound, accurate, and truthful."
- "I could not help but see things differently, especially the things being done to devalued people. It made real what was really happening in people's lives."
- "These were ideas and values I wanted to and could incorporate with my personal life."
- "Normalization provided something to aspire to."
- "It gave a clear sense of how important it is to share these beliefs and ideas with others. It enables me to be useful to others."
- "I had seen and worked in places that did not seem in touch with the people they served. Normalization training gave me words and ideas to explain these things."
- "I had a sense of the scales falling off my eyes. It gave definition to things I felt."
- "The first time I went to SRV/PASSING training, I had a sense of seeing life in perspective, a brief sense of total clarity."
- "It permanently changed the way I looked at society."
- "I've given up the belief that things are always going to get better. There is a certain freedom in giving up such false hopes."
- "It increased my own personal sense of accountability—complacency is not okay anymore."

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