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A Quarter-Century of Normalization and Social Role Valorization

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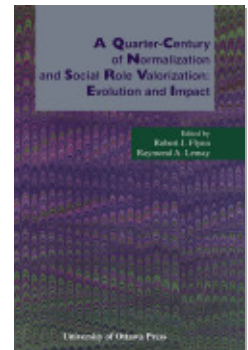
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The impact of Normalization and Social Role Valorization on a state-level practitioner from the USA

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I am not a scholar of Normalization or Social Role Valorization (SRV). Nor am I a trainer with knowledge of the enormous variation in awareness of Normalization or SRV in the various states of the United States. I can speak only as a practitioner, and a practitioner in one particular place, the State of Pennsylvania. Yet since a microcosm often can tell us about the macrocosm, I hope that what I have to say may be relevant to the issues that we are considering here.

Many of us seem to share a concern with people whom we term, in our nomenclature, “devalued.” In our concern, we are not solely focused on the individual, but upon the subtle interrelationships between the individual and what one might term “health and well-being of the society.”

What are the subtle laws governing the situation of the poor and vulnerable? How might their lives be improved through what might be called, in its original sense, “social work”?

For many of us, Normalization and, later, SRV appeared as a lens illuminating the incredible ordered complexity of social processes. For me, setting into practice without this lens would have been akin to setting into medical practice without a microscope. With this microscope, I set off 10 years ago to a new state—Pennsylvania—a place in which I knew no one.

Many of us here have embarked upon similar journeys.

I might say as an aside that I also took with me certain realistic expectations about the work of social change from study with Wolf Wolfensberger, which might be most succinctly summarized in a quote by Oscar Wilde that I have kept on a card over my desk for all these years, which notes “No good deed goes unpunished.” This turned out to be true.

When I arrived in Pennsylvania, an incident took place that engraved itself upon my attention and memory. A group of parents of adult children with a rare form of mental retardation asked to meet with key local and state officials about starting a group home. When the parents met with all of us, they said “we really usually want a group home of about 40 people, but we know that you like things smaller in Pennsylvania, so we’re willing to have one for only 16.” All of the state and county bureaucrats shook their heads. “If you want to have one for three people,” they responded, “you can have one right away. If you want one for four people, it will take a bit longer.”

I was astonished. After all, I had come across the border from New York State, where at that time the conversation would be exactly reversed. Parents would want places that tended to be smaller, and state officials would tell them how large they had to be in order to be “cost effective” and to qualify for funding.

But here all of the representatives of the bureaucracy not only *knew* that “small was beautiful,” but they could tell you *why*.

I searched around for a reason why my new state should be so different. Finding the cause didn’t take long at all—almost anyone could tell me why. In the early 1970s a fellow named Mel Knowlton came to Pennsylvania after working with Dr. Wolfensberger and set up the state community services system. He erected all of these community living arrangements based entirely upon Normalization training, mainly PASS. There were at that time no regulations—Mel used only training.

The effects of this effort were twofold. In the first place, an understanding of some of the key tenets of Normalization had “percolated,” to use Michael Kendrick’s phrase, into the understanding of significant portions of the society in general. This is what I had observed at the meeting. In the second place, this training effort had precipitated the existence of key leaders with common conviction and ideology. In Kristjana Kristiansen’s phrase, Normalization had served as a “magnet for alliances.” The immediate effect was that I found that I was not alone after all—that there were throughout the state a number of other people who were the products of a similar education. From this base, a core group formed. This group of us attempted to generate a “second stage” of social activism based upon Normalization and SRV.

In this second stage we didn’t need to worry about persuading people that community living was better than institutions, or that small group homes were better than large ones. These convictions were already firmly established. Instead, we had the opportunity to pursue further ramifications of what was by then Social Role Valorization. Instead of being concerned about group homes, we pursued policies and funding to promote citizen-owned homes for adults, and real adoptive homes instead of foster care for children. We promoted real jobs through supported employment and similar options rather than sheltered workshops. We pursued real education. And, among other things, we funded and promoted citizen advocacy and a number of other citizen advocacy-inspired approaches to personal relationships and mutuality. Finally, we created a training institute that was funded for 8 years for about \$1 million to serve as a philosophical “spark plug” for the entire effort. After 8 years, the increasing

understanding behind actions such as these culminated in a vision statement for the Developmental Disabilities Planning Council that explicitly included SRV language: “We envision a Commonwealth in which all citizens have valued roles, are appreciated for their contributions, and are linked together in mutuality and interdependence.”

Others can judge how coherent the council’s actions have been with this statement.

What have been the effects of this second stage of Normalization- and SRV-inspired work? There have been, I believe, four: First, ideas that were divisive when introduced are now generally accepted and have perhaps “percolated deeper” into social consciousness. For instance, an originally somewhat bitterly disputed policy to reduce the importance of sheltered workshops in favor of supported work has now become a more acknowledged policy. Council efforts to promote recognition of informal safeguards such as relationships as opposed to formal regulations and laws have also seemed to enter general conversations and actions to some degree.

Second, a new generation of leaders has emerged. This is important because a number of us felt a responsibility to pass on the opportunities that we had to another generation of people, and this seems to some degree to have happened.

Third, we seem to be witnessing a kind of metamorphosis in the inspiring philosophy. This effect was quite unexpected to me. Any explicit interest in Normalization and SRV seems to have faded, being succeeded by a driving interest in personal relationships and associational life.

Fourth, this has been accompanied by the fading of support for SRV training that once existed. I find it very curious to see this taking place at the same time that social activism and passionate action seem undiminished and perhaps even increasing.

I can only speculate on what this apparent fading of SRV from discussions might mean. Various possibilities have been proposed, if indeed history shows this to be a true phenomenon at all.

The first is a point that is frequently raised and that has to do with the question of training method, or what might be termed the “hidden curriculum” of Normalization and SRV training. The question seems to be increasingly raised whether curricularization is synonymous with effective learning. An earlier

comment from the floor here criticizing the lack of diversity of instructors may relate to this point; this caused us considerable difficulty with our constituency in Pennsylvania.

Second, there is a certain tendency, common in social movements, to fundamentalism at the extreme, perhaps leading to what Jacques Pelletier noted as dogmatism, or elitism, and to promoting a misconceived "social engineering" approach to social improvement.

Finally, there are those who ask whether a social philosophy must be systematic in order to be vigorous, truthful, and useful.

I mentioned metamorphosis. Is it possible that the first two stages of Normalization and SRV in Pennsylvania are currently turning into a third stage that differs in significant ways from the two stages preceding it? Is it possible that a change occurs once the limits of social services as a basis for action are touched? Might this have to do with rediscovering hospitable traditions in culture, upon which theories of Normalization and SRV are predicated, as mentioned by Michael Kendrick in citing Wolfensberger?

Philosophies, like microscopes, are tools. Having brought us this far, how far will this philosophy yet take us? Might it emerge, like a yogic mantra, as something that becomes transformed through intense concentration and repetition? Intense study of any subject can lead to surprising changes in the student.

Perhaps Pennsylvania, and other states in the United States, may usefully serve as settings in which whatever path this may lead can be observed. Part of the Jeffersonian ideal of American government, after all, had to do with the importance of diversity, of states as social laboratories. For anyone working in such a social laboratory, it is well known that the work required can often be isolating and lonely. Further evolution in guiding philosophy may also be divisive in itself. Yet, in all of this, there is something that sustains us. In the words of the great Goethe: "To know that there are people with whom we are in accord, and who are living along with us, even in silence, makes this lonely planet into a peopled garden."

Our presence together at this gathering seems to me a moving reminder of this fact.

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