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## Some Reasons Why Social Role Valorization Is Important

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It is often necessary to attempt a reckoning as to whether a set of ideas or theory is important and the degree to which this is so. One measure might be whether the ideas or theory substantially addresses matters of profound significance to human beings. Such a theory must be seen to focus on matters in the human condition which are indeed substantive. Hence, a reasonable test might be the tendency of the theoretical system to raise matters of existential or transcendental importance even if it cannot fully resolve them within its own terms.

A second aspect might be whether the theory speaks to universal or timeless realities in the human experience. It is, or is not, anchored in the particulars of a given moment of history. Instead, it speaks to matters which span the experience of many people across time and place. A theory which meets this challenge of speaking to the universality of human experience would have enduring value.

A third possible test would be whether the effects of the theory are largely beneficial no matter where it is embraced. This would signal that it is fruitful. If these effects are proportional to the rigor and steadfastness of its adherence, this too would be a sign of its potency- properly utilized.

A fourth aspect might be whether the theory continues to reliably predict and address human conduct across many generations of testing. This "robustness" in the face of dissent, challenge and critique is a further sign that there is something to the theory because it survives its attackers and still has a meaningful contribution to make. In this way its value is self-renewing because its message continually remains valid in the face of new circumstances.

It has often been remarked that social role valorization no longer makes a meaningful contribution to the issues of the day. It is conceivable that such allegations may, in time, be upheld by history. However, these suggestions should not, on the surface, be construed as particularly more authoritative than personal taste even if they are popularly held at any given point in time. One might need to look at their impact from a vantage point well past the period of their dispute. Important ideas are not necessarily convenient or enthralling to the sensibilities of a particular ethos. The measure of such ideas may rest more with what they eventually contribute to the human experience than what a particular age grants to them. It is this author's belief that social role valorization theory will continue to be important because it does address issues of profound human significance which are universal in application and which broach transcendent values and reality. The

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key issues that SRV raises promise to challenge human conduct for many years to come. What follows are selective aspects of the nature of social role valorization that acknowledge its contributions to date and also add to the likelihood that it will continue to play a substantial role for many years ahead. There is a grandness to its reach even if its grasp remains to be seen.

Previously, Wolfensberger saw normalization as a mixture of theory and ideology. As social role valorization emerged, he increasingly began to draw a distinction between SRV as a social science theory in the empirical domain and higher order value systems which transcended SRV even if they were consonant with it. This paper maintains this distinction but wishes to recognize more fully the practical historical alliance of social science theory and the social morality that has made it possible for SRV to have had impact in real time. From the premise that no idea or project is ever ideology free, Wolfensberger has often stated the importance of examining one's ideology and making it as explicit as possible. Assuredly, SRV would not have been as fruitful in an historical sense were it not for its alliance in practice with the transcendent values of western societies.

Inevitably, what follows is a highly abbreviated appreciation of the virtues of an ideology by an adherent. Many of the claims made might usefully be challenged. Still, these must certainly be elaborated as they summarize extremely depthful topics and should be given serious consideration. Consequently, it is useful to keep in mind that these are provided as food for thought for a continuing evaluative discourse on what might be true about social role valorization and what might be exaggeration, myth, distortion or falsehoods. On the other hand, what follows are assertions or observations which may well withstand ongoing scrutiny. Obviously, there must exist at least some claims which eventually prove to be closer to the truth. Still, what follows are best seen as proposals rather than established conclusions.

### **1) SRV Identifies Social Devaluation As A Critical Human Experience and Tendency**

Throughout history, one of the great commonalities in the human condition has been our propensity to devalue one another. This tendency has evidenced itself repeatedly throughout the ages and has wrought untold suffering in its wake. Whole societies have organized themselves along the division created by such devaluations. The extent to which individuals, and indeed whole societies, manage such a tendency adaptively must certainly rank as one of the enduring questions of social policy if not existential philosophy. Social role valorization (SRV) specifically speaks to and illuminates this phenomena as a crucial force in human history and character.

### **2) SRV Raises Consciousness and Concern About the Fate of Socially Devalued Persons**

Wolfensberger's SRV training materials elaborate in considerable detail the existential impact of what it means to be socially devalued within one's society. These "wounds" can be manifest in the smallest of gestures and the largest of systems. The human being is poignantly vulnerable to the regard of others for both the heights of edification and the depths of degradation. It is almost impossible to not be enlightened by this unmasking of the subtle workings of social devaluation. To the moral observer this often evokes a sense of concern and urgency. In many cases, it has led to a constructive radicalization of persons heretofore unmoved and unaware. If a tree can be judged by its fruits, then one of the recurring and beneficial effects of social role valorization is its conscience and consciousness - raising impact.

### **3) SRV Invites and Provides A Way For Individuals To Take A Stand Against Social Devaluation**

The underlying ethical value of social role valorization is dependent upon a given person's resolve that socially devalued persons are granted valued social roles. This resolve is dependent about fundamental value choices that have to be made as to whether to side with or oppose social devaluation. SRV theory does not prescribe or dictate such choices even though its moral potency is dependent upon them. SRV is a social science theory rather than a value system or ideology. Yet combined with positive value choices it can impact social devaluation constructively and with realists feasibility of result. SRV contains an "action theory" that provides ample room for individuals to make a difference. A multitude of personal actions are provided in SRV publications and trainings as illustrations of what a coherent SRV actor might do about social devaluation. In a distinct and unambiguous sense, SRV is not exclusively something that "others" are supposed to uphold but rather something accessible to any person willing to engage with the issue of social devaluation. The most fundamental unit of society is the person. The SRV strategies substantially assume the existence and the potency of this most essential actor. In an age when problems and solutions are cast in near global proportions, SRV remains remarkably accessible to the ordinary person. While SRV provides abundant room for collective and systemic remedies even at the most "macro" of levels, its primary premise is that these will only succeed if personal adherence to SRV is maintained.

### **4) SRV Specifically Enables Socially Valued Persons To Ally Themselves With Socially Devalued Persons**

Many social change strategies postulate the overthrow of the classes, regimes, structures and cultures that oppress and degrade people. Often, in a temporal sense, such negative conditions are meant to give way to more favorable ones apparently rooted in a somehow transformed humankind. While such changes come in any case with a certain inevitability, social role valorization does not postulate the need for socially devalued persons to overthrow, degrade or hate valued persons. In contrast, it is premised on the ongoing presence and potential of social devaluation that can only be rectified when socially valued persons are committed to assisting socially devalued persons to obtain

valued social roles. As such, it seeks to unite such groups and classes in an alliance that mobilizes the advantaged to address what their privilege may mean for others. As a consequence, social role valorization advocates a strategy of community building that eschews violence, class warfare, the oppression of others, and encourages the reduction of social distance, the enhancing of equality, and the taking of personal responsibility of one for another.

This alliance is accomplished within an SRV framework through a forthright recognition that individuals and society will never be without divisions and inequities. The SRV remedy does not presume that such differences can be eliminated in some sort of social homogenization. Rather, SRV seeks to unify people, build understanding, broaden acceptance of differences and encourage the coexistence of people. The principal means of actualizing this effect is through values change oriented to the tangible outcome of socially devalued persons obtaining valued social roles.

Such values change (which is intended to accompany SRV enactment) is presumed to be social and collective in nature rather than the sole or proportional responsibility of the oppressed group. The net effect is that of allowing for a constructive ability to reconcile people to each other whilst facing the deepest of divisions and conflicts without sentimentality or wishfulness about a unity between people that does not exist.

#### **5) SRV Is Largely Consonant With the Deepest And Most Enduring Religious and Civic Values of the Western World**

If there are deep roots in the soul of civilizations, they must certainly be captured in the values they hold as central. Though we certainly live in a time when the Judeo-Christian value system and western liberal democratic tradition are under unprecedented assault, these values, nonetheless, are at the core of our shared history. Social role valorization explicitly encourages the adaptive utilization of these central values to underpin efforts to assure valued social roles. It does this by continuously asserting the full application of these values on behalf of persons who might otherwise be dehumanized. While the authority of these values is seemingly in decline, their successors are not particularly apparent. The consequence is that values which have served humankind well for centuries are consciously utilized to benefit those at risk of being the outcasts of our time. Social role valorization is clearly itself not equivalent to these values and must itself "rest" on their foundations since it is a secular theory in the empirical domain.

#### **6) SRV Recognizes and Seeks the Primacy of Profound Values Change**

The reversal of social devaluation is inconceivable without the transformation of the negative valuations at its core. No amount of social engineering, restructuring or program change will matter much if negative values still govern. Social role valorization continuously emphasizes that real change must include values change and that social distress may have its origins in faulty value choices. If socially devalued persons are to be unburdened of their wounds, much will be asked of others. If in our hearts we have not

authentically changed, it is highly doubtful whether our actions will bear fruit no matter how outwardly correct they seem. The discourse of SRV is replete with the vocabulary of values because its earliest formulations explicitly provoked such preoccupations. In fact, these go back to the earliest Wolfensberger writings on the subject. The materialism and technology of this age tends to trivialize values, whereas the most ancient of scholarship on the human predicament tends to underline their importance. Social role valorization securely rests on this lengthy lineage of metaphysics and its emphasis on the consequentiality of human decision and values.

### **7) SRV Illuminates the Complicity of Societal Structures, Agencies and Systems In the Transaction of Social Devaluation**

As social scientists often point out, social phenomena do not just happen, rather they require actual people to enmesh them. Similarly, social devaluation has no collective meaning outside of the social institutions that either encourage or discourage it. SRV continuously unearths the manifold expressions of social devaluation which suffuse all of our social institutions to one degree or another.

Thus, while social devaluation arises out of human nature, it is transacted and ordered through social structures. These entities outlive persons even as they shape and are being shaped by them. Thus, a whole level of social role valorization analysis and remedial action is focused on recognizing this phenomena and taking conscious steps to reduce and reverse the effects, legitimation and potency of social devaluation. Few historical observers would deny the insidious phenomenon of institutional collusion and hegemony that eventually permits the wounding of innocent people. As is taught in SRV theory, much of this social performance is acted out unconsciously and in such a non-random way as to bring about a social order based on social devaluation(s).

### **8) SRV Proposes Positive Strategies of Program and Community Change**

Social role valorization would be significant even if it remained as simply a consciousness-raising social critique. Notably, it goes beyond this to propose what amounts to be a global or meta-strategy of change. As indicated earlier, many of these strategies manifest themselves in accessible, small scale remedial actions. Others are substantially more global, collective, and long-term in some of their elements. For example, the themes of integration, ideological change, developmental growth orientation, image enhancement, positive compensation for disadvantage, restorative justice, the protection of the rights of disabled persons, etc., represent some of these larger strategies.

While SRV theory does not propose these "remedies" to be sufficient to overcome social devaluation, they nonetheless are powerful, feasible and consequential. Since human nature is not transcend able through an action strategy, the more appropriate question is which action strategies are successful at grappling with human nature. The acquisition of

valued social roles is within the scope of human possibility and thus provides a quite testable non-utopian hope in the realm of action.

### **9) The Depiction Of Social Reality By SRV Is Substantially Consistent With Established Social Science, Research and Empiricism**

What lends SRV weight as an ideology is its rootedness in well established and researched aspects of social reality. These are as varied as the function of social images and stereotypes, role expectancies and behavior, the political economy of social devaluation, the key educational assumptions in a developmental model, the psychological processes involved in unconsciousness, and so forth. This is not to say that there may not be elements of SRV that make claims about social reality for which social science itself has not established agreement. One such area is the somewhat cursorily investigated area of death making as an outgrowth of social devaluation. Wolfensberger has tended to draw heavily on diverse domains of social science to buttress the SRV insights and ideology, thereby creating a very elaborate ideological argument woven through much social science. To date, there have been no SRV claims concerning established social science proven to be patently erroneous. It is quite significant that the social reality addressed by SRV is largely verified by independent social science. This gives SRV an "anchor," providing a powerful pathway for dialogue on the elements of SRV that are supra-empirical in character, i.e., the socially constructed value of all persons.

### **10) SRV Acts As A Safeguard Against and Inhibitor of Further or More Extreme Forms of Social Devaluations**

Ideologies are not like inanimate materials that can be placed in a fixed context. Curiously, theories need a host to animate them, i.e., they "come alive" only through their embrace by persons. Consequently it is possible to comment on the impact of SRV by close observation of the persons who are either drawn to SRV or otherwise adopt it—even if these numbers are small. One such observation is that its adoption tends to raise a person's consciousness to many aspects of social devaluation in themselves and others. From this often comes actions intended to prevent or alleviate the "wounding" of socially devalued persons. Were not such a consciousness present, it is far less likely that such safeguarding might have occurred. It is not clear whether it is that the moral possibilities of the theory moralizes the adherent or whether the adherent is already predisposed towards moral conduct and finds resonance and encouragement to this end from SRV. While SRV is not itself a morality, it is effective when enlisted by moral actors. Even so, the theory would have broad utilization and validity irrespective of the character of those who adopt it.

### **11) SRV Embraces A Highly Realistic Sense of Human Nature.**

One of the shortcomings of utopian, wishful or romantic social ideologies is that they are predicated on false premises about human nature. Human beings are, in SRV terms,

imperfect and capable of great evils even if they are occasionally saintly, heroic or simply kind. In order for an ideology to endure it must neither overestimate nor underestimate human nature. The SRV theory both speaks to the remarkably positive potentialities of human beings, even those cast into the lowliest of roles, as well as the obscene depravity of even the most advantaged when they succumb to social devaluation. All of these and endless other permutations are possible in the experience of being human. SRV seems to remain faithful to humans as they are, not as what we'd prefer them to be.

## **12) SRV Presents A Response To The Human Degradation Of Social Devaluation That Is Life-Giving If Combined With Affirmative Positive Value Choices**

SRV arises out of a direct concern with what social devaluation takes from and does to people. In many ways social devaluation literally takes life and the enjoyment of it from its victims. Such sufferings can involve the crushing of dignity, the deprivation of ordinary supports for life and growth and the persecution of the innocent. Wolfensberger sees all of these as stemming from a woefully lacking respect for life - especially in the lives of society rejected, downtrodden and powerless. If one makes the fundamental choice (in values) to side with life as a valid goal then SRV theory can help immensely to maximise this choice.

As indicated elsewhere, SRV takes aim at life and lives with the full-hearted interest in restoring to such wounded persons at least conditions of life which are normatively valued in comparison with those who have not experienced the harsh afflictions of social devaluation. In this way it seeks to enrich and defend the lives of those threatened with the loss of all that is life-giving and life affirming.

### **Some Criticisms of SRV**

It is useful in sketching proposals as to why SRV may be important to also ask why it might not be. Such thoughts have occurred to me and they are offered here as a kind of caution. All theoretical systems have thresholds and limits beyond which they can become irrelevant or even destructive. What follows are simply reminders that SRV may also have limitations as well as contributions to make.

- 1). SRV has had a life span of barely a generation even taking into account its predecessor normalization. This should give anyone pause in granting to it a substance it has not yet had time to establish.
- 2) SRV does not consistently raise consciousness and guarantee concern about socially devalued persons. Theories cannot ultimately control the character of their adherents even though they are influential. Further, their theoretical value can be nullified if used maladaptively. Not all adherents or users of SRV will do what SRV requires, i.e., one could distinguish between adaptive adherence and misuses of SRV.

- 3) Not all alliances between socially valued and devalued persons are moral, fruitful and advantageous.
- 4) People may well reject the deeper religious and value traditions in the Western world upon which SRV rests even if they embrace SRV.
- 5) People may well follow many SRV directions until the point of significant personal values change is reached and then decline this next step or subsequent steps in their degree of adherency.
- 6) Knowing how social devaluation works in society-may still leave one largely impotent against it.
- 7) Positive strategies of program and community change may have a validity at a conceptual level yet never reach the stage of commitments and actual deeds.
- 8) People who use SRV may well distort social science to meet their own ideological agenda.
- 9) SRV's societal impact, thus far, is largely confined to several narrow human service fields.
- 10) SRV is and has allays been awash in dissenters. Surely not all dissenters are misguided.

## **Conclusion**

It is not sufficient to simply adopt a theory uncritically. It is consequential to formal and social alliances and to question whether what comes of them will be largely good or bad. Also, one needs to have a sense of where a theory fits in order to have it function effectively within its limits. Finally, one needs to have some clarity as to what is important and what is trivial in ideas in order to judge what should be granted respect. This has been a first attempt to gauge the thefts of social role valorization and will happily be followed by others. Not all of SRV is important, but certainly some elements may prove to have enduring value.

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