

SRV as a resource for seeking and shaping the Good Life

Michael Kendrick

The theory of Social Role Valorisation (SRV) is not one that families and most ordinary citizens will have come across, quite apart from seeing its usefulness and applying it. In fact, even a majority of professionals in the sector may have only heard about it and may themselves lack any meaningful comprehension of or competence with it. However, those that have had the good fortune to have been able to immerse themselves in it, typically find it to be hugely helpful to their efforts in regard to assisting people with disability to create and obtain a good life for themselves. In the interests of helping curious people gain the beginnings of an appreciation for what SRV can do to help with 'life building', a series of brief descriptions of the ways that SRV theory can help people make progress are offered. Each of these draws upon specific elements of the theory of SRV and illustrates how it can help impact on 'life-making' in practical ways. Nonetheless, what is offered here is a description of its potentially positive impacts, not a description of the theory itself.

The Importance of Acquiring and Being Supported In Valued Social Roles

The world is full of experiences, opportunities and possibilities that, if they are properly tapped into, can mean that a person gets to enjoy life more richly and to fulfil their greater potential. However, if they cannot get to these experiences, then all of this will be lost. The means to get to these life giving experiences and opportunities are valued social roles. Roles are the vehicle through which a person gets to be part of community life and enjoy what community life might offer. These roles can include, for example, friend, neighbour, club member, employee, sports fan, adventurer, athlete, relative, companion, travel mate and so on. These roles are usually not available, or in extremely short supply, in segregated settings for people who have disability. Consequently, a person who is segregated will never have the extent of life opportunities that one who is out and about in the larger community will have. Such roles can be consciously created for a given person even if they do not exist at present, as long as there are people who are supportive of this happening. The more one has a diversity of valued social roles, the more of life they can taste, embrace and reject depending upon whether these experiences are to their liking.

Being Granted Full Humanity and Personhood

One of the ways that people with disability get cheated out of a good life is that we act as if they do not deserve nor want as full a life as their non-disabled peers. Though we may be unaware of it, we extinguish countless life possibilities for people when we set our expectations for them too low because this conveys and confirms the message that 'less than' will have to do for them because, after all, they have a disability and the bottom line is that they should settle for less. This constitutes a profound and damaging mistake because it crushes a person's life and possibilities. On the other hand, if one starts from the assumption that, irrespective of the person having disability, this person is as fully human.... in all ways..... As anyone alive today, then we can properly appreciate all of the hope and possibility that comes when the fullest potential of all of life waits to be tasted.

It is important to not forget that being fully a person is a great gift, because it means that it is always possible to conceivably enjoy and appreciate any aspect of life providing that the appropriate support to do so is present. Taking up this view, that a person with disability is fully capable of enjoying any aspect of life that suits them, is much better than to take the opposite view that they should give up on life and settle for less. One road leads to a narrow diminished life and the other leads to the hope of a daily richness in living.

Proactively Pursuing Life Possibilities; Not Over-Fixating on the Person's Impairments

When we focus on what people are not, or on what they cannot do, it blinds us to who they are and, even more importantly, who they might yet be. Most impairments that people live with can be offset to a large degree by good supports that take care of the things that the person cannot do for themselves. So, while people may be constrained to some extent by their disability, it is important to not become overly focused on this, as it will make it hard to concentrate on what could be possible in life for the person, particularly if the person gets the support they need. By focusing on a person's gifts, assets, potentials, capacity to enjoy life and their many passions and interests, it is only a matter of time and diligence before some kind of lifestyle will begin to emerge for the person. On the other hand, by constantly using the presence of disability as an excuse for not having or expecting a good life, we will talk yourself and others into a self-defeating hopelessness. This is why it must become a habit with us to not give undue energy to the ways that disability creates limits for a person and instead shift our focus and energy towards what is still possible in the person's life

and what we can do about realising that potential. By doing so, life and its many enjoyments become closer rather than farther away.

Seeing And Meeting the Person's Needs in Typical Ways

A great danger exists when we make the mistake of believing that people with disability cannot get their needs met in largely the same way that other people do. This is because it leads to us setting people with disability aside from others in so called 'special I' places and programs, as if these are the only way that they will get what they need in life. More often than not, they will get much less. Further, they will be harmed if they are denied the chance to get the 'real thing'. Why we must look to using the same resources as people without disability is that these actually do meet the needs of countless ordinary people. It is true that people with disability may require some support to take advantage of these, but this should not be a reason not to take advantage of them. For instance, we do not need special clothing stores for people with disability when we have perfectly good shops already. The same could be said about 'regular' gyms, choirs, sports leagues, knitting groups, churches, airlines, homes, jobs and all manner of other 'regular' solutions to our needs and that of millions of others. This is because they can actually meet our needs and so, therefore, it is crucial that people with disability get to take full advantage of these.

Undoubtedly some of these regular and normal ways of meeting one's needs will lead us to some people who are less accepting and welcoming of people with disability, but these kinds of people can change in time as they relax and come to be more comfortable with the newcomer who happens to have disability.

Sharing Life with All People

There is a theory that claims that people with disability could only be comfortable and secure if they lived out their lives 'with their own kind'. This overlooks the fact that most people with lifelong disability actually grow up and live quite comfortably within families in which they are the only person with disability. They most certainly can and do enjoy their lives and relationships not only with family, but also with all manner of people that they like and feel comfortable with. So, the real issue in whether people can get along with others is not disability, but rather compatibility. People with disability are people like everyone else and so will quite naturally feel comfortable with and enjoy people that they find likeable and good company.

The more we emphasise this, the more we will begin to realise that it is the qualities of people that matter in congenial relationships, not whether they have or do not

have disability. Whether these relationships occur in work, leisure, home or community groups may not matter as long as the time spent with people is pleasant and supportive. In fact, there are all sorts of instances where people with disability do not get along with other people with disability. This is not because of their disability at all, but rather their lack of compatibility. So, when we focus on this, we will see that congenial and friendly people of all kinds are actually 'their own kind' if they end up getting along well. Since there is obviously a wealth of lovely people in this world, it is important to be sure that people with disability get all the chances possible to meet people whose company they enjoy.

Belonging To Groups That Share One's Interests And Passions

People with disability can usually have and enjoy any life interest that others also are attracted to. Similarly, when people share in a common passion or interest, they naturally gravitate to groups that are engaged in that interest. In the process, they not only get to share a passion, they also form bonds of friendship and comradeship stemming from the things they love and place considerable personal importance on. In this way, they find a place of belonging amongst others and the ability to say that they are a member and one of many. This helps form identity, can often provide status and typically, leads to various valued social roles within the group - and possibly in relation to others who are not part of the group. Further, others will also get to know and appreciate them and this will provide for all manner of relationship ties, including many lasting friends. It is true that facilitating such opportunities has its challenges, particularly in regard to groups that are wary of newcomers and slow to welcome them, but these are natural enough inhibitions that may be overcome with time and dedicated facilitation.

Contributing To Life

Life need not only be about what others may do or not do. It can also be about discovering within yourself ways that you can give back to life and to the people and communities with whom you live. When we concentrate upon the gifts of people, we enable these to be noticed and to find expression in everyday life. All people have qualities and capacities that can add value and enrichment to the lives of others. When these gifts of people with disability are overlooked or remain undernourished and underdeveloped, we will be the poorer for it. So, it is important that we focus on people with disability and the contributions that they both want to and can make to life.

Having a Unique Life, Well Suited To the Person

It is a paradox that we are all so similar as human beings and yet, at the same time, we are all distinctly unique people. People with disability are every bit as unique and diverse and when their uniqueness is fostered and allowed its natural expression, then it becomes possible for a person to seek out and embrace a life and lifestyle that most optimally suits them as a person. Of course, the better the fit of one's lifestyle to one's personality and preferences, the happier most people will be. It is important to most people to be the designers and decision-makers of their own lives and to be able to pursue the directions in life that most closely align with one's ultimate purposes in life. It is no different if you have disability and the satisfactions are exactly the same when you can be your own person.

Not Allowing Vulnerabilities to Be the Reason to Deny a Person a Good Life

It is true that many people with disability may live with vulnerabilities that are more intense and worrisome than others might face. It would also be irresponsible to neglect these vulnerabilities. Fortunately, it is also possible to constructively offset such vulnerabilities with intentional safeguards that are well matched to the precise concerns that are present. Should this happen, then most of normal life can and should go on for the person much as it does for others. However, if such vulnerabilities are ignored, supported poorly or are overly emphasised, there is a risk that the healthy, satisfying and vibrant lifestyles that can be lived, even if one lives with serious vulnerabilities, will be threatened. Vulnerability is not a reason to not pursue a full life, as the enjoyment of life is the same in its essence whether you have or do not have vulnerabilities to contend with.

SRV Theory as a Guide to Assembling a Good Life

SRV theory is not a panacea, nor was it ever said to be. Life will be a challenge whether one has disability or not. However, if one is poorly advised on what it takes to make a good life, then it is possible to miss many of the real opportunities that exist to do this. So, the best way to see the role of SRV is as a body of advice about how people with disability can obtain fulfilling lives and address their diverse and unique potentials as human beings. In this, SRV theory has much to offer, as can be seen in the results it can lead to if employed properly. In this way, SRV theory is wise counsel.

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