

Some Helpful Points to Keep in Mind in the Presence of People Who Cannot or Do not Talk

Joe Osburn & Jo Massarelli

AUTHORS' NOTE: *We wish to acknowledge Darcy Elks for her contribution to this article.*

Introduction

ONE OF THE KEY ELEMENTS of Social Role Valorization (SRV) theory is the importance of interpersonal identification between societally valued and devalued people. Yet, there are certain devalued groups or individuals with whom interpersonal identification is a major challenge to others. There can be many reasons for this; one reason, the focus of this article, is when the people in question cannot or do not communicate in the ordinary ways, such as those who do not speak or whose speech is so idiolectal or peculiar to the person that most others have great difficulty comprehending it.

Many people, even very gregarious ones, often feel quite awkward when in the presence of non-communicating people, and sometimes excruciatingly so, to the point that they may actively avoid such social contact or seek to remove themselves from it as quickly as possible. Having such feelings is an understandable response, especially when people are not accustomed to being in these kinds of situations, but it can also happen even when they are. In other words, people can still experience discomfort being with non-communicating people with whom they live or work or have other regular contact, as well as with those whom they do not know.

These facts are important to SRV promoters and implementers for at least two reasons. First, as a result of these difficulties, people who cannot or do not talk, or whose speech/communication is exceedingly difficult for most others to understand, are inevitably in great need of role-valorizing actions on their behalf. The less a person can speak or communicate, the more rejected, segregated, lonely, and abandoned that person is apt to be, the more that person is likely to be further extruded from society, harmed, and even made dead, and the more difficult it is for others to imagine that person holding valued social roles. A second reason is that because SRV is oriented to devalued people, and because non-communicating people are often devalued, SRV practitioners are highly likely to encounter at least some, and perhaps many, people who cannot or do not talk, and on perhaps many occasions. (For example, for some people, the first -- and possibly only -- such encounters may occur during SRV/PASSING training if they are on teams that conduct practicum assessments of settings that serve non-communicating people.)

It can be a challenge to those who take SRV seriously to "rise above themselves," at least temporarily and on some occasions, and to come to grips with any affective impediments or other distancing inclinations they may have to encounters with people who do not communicate in typical ways. Following are some general considerations and actions intended to facilitate positive interactions be-

tween people on such occasions by (a) helping to raise consciousness about the potential difficulties of being with people who cannot speak or otherwise communicate; and (b) encouraging people to think more about their own strengths/weaknesses, or levels of comfort/discomfort, in this regard.

General Considerations

1. Human communication is imperfect and limited, even when it takes place between competent people; this is true of human language as well, whether spoken or written, and in spite of its great power to convey meaning.

2. Communication is virtually universal among human beings. Thus, when people encounter another human being, they are highly likely to assume automatically that the other person has a capacity for reciprocal communication with others, even where that may not be the case.

3. People who cannot or do not talk are often the ones who are *most* in need of having others strive to communicate with them and/or for them.

4. Some people do not speak because they are physically or mentally impaired in their ability to do so. When this is the case, two opposite dangers must be acknowledged.

a) One danger is to *wrongly assume* -- as we have seen over and over again historically -- that an impaired person cannot communicate who actually can, but perhaps only with great difficulty or very slowly or in a way that is difficult for others to discern, or only about a limited range of topics.

(b) A second danger is to fall into a *triple pretense* about a person who may not be able to communicate at all -- as may be the case if mental competence is very severely impaired --

that (i) the person can communicate, or (ii) is communicating what he or she in fact cannot, and (iii) what others interpret about that person's communication is real.

5. Lack of speech is not the same as inability to communicate.

6. Talking is only one form of direct personal communication. Other forms include:

- gestures
- emotions and moods
- behaviors
- facial expressions
- signs, signing, signals
- sounds
- reading and writing
- use of pictures, drawings, and other/visual aids.

7. Communication almost always gets "easier" with effort and time, mainly because (as with anyone) the more one gets to know a person, the better one usually understands that person. (Another way to say this is that one's comprehension goes up the better one knows the person.)

8. Human presence is a gift: giving and receiving it is a good that can be realized without talk.

Actions That May Facilitate Communication

1. Unless one knows for sure that another person possesses no ability to communicate, one should probably assume that the person can rather than cannot communicate. Such a positive assumption is congruent with the developmental model component of SRV, and presumes that communication is much more likely to happen than if one holds a less positive assumption.

2. In like manner, it is probably better to as-

sume that people who cannot or do not talk may nevertheless (perhaps deeply) *want* to communicate rather than that they do not want to. Of course, this is not always the case; certain people may not want to communicate -- at least not at the moment, or with a particular person -- whether or not they can speak.

3. Keep in mind that simply getting started is often the hardest part of any conversation with someone else who cannot/does not speak, and with whom one is not well-acquainted. For example, as noted above, initial feelings of awkwardness, self-consciousness, uncertainty about what to expect, and so on are normal. Thus, one elementary action measure is to acknowledge such feelings, recognize that having them is not "wrong," resolve to overcome them, and then go ahead. Such mental preparation is both facilitative of communication and considerate of others.

4. People need a *reason* to communicate, i.e., things to communicate about -- and finding or providing these can be greatly facilitative to the other person. For example, typical communication may rely, consciously or unconsciously, on such things as common experiences, backgrounds, interests, and goals shared by the communicators, the physical and social contexts in which their communication takes place, and any associated or co-occurring activities. Bringing these supportive elements to consciousness, and engaging them as topics of communication, can often help to facilitate additional and/or otherwise difficult communication.

5. Relatedly, when one anticipates or actually does encounter difficulties in conversing with another person, it is often helpful to change or modify the context in which the conversation takes place, such as by moving from a large or crowded room to a smaller, more intimate space, or by minimizing external distractions

(e.g., turning off the television). Helpful, too, may be engaging in some type of activity with the person where the focus is not so much on "talking" as on "doing," and where the "doing" prompts or even "demands" at least some degree of mutual communication. (Examples of the latter abound: going somewhere together, preparing and sharing a meal, playing a game, working on a common task, assisting the person in some way, etc.)

6. Requesting help from others is certainly appropriate in many instances. It is okay and sometimes necessary to ask others for cues, signals, and other assistance in understanding another person.

7. Relatedly, people who might not be able to converse with each other very well, or even at all, by themselves can very often communicate together quite well when their conversation is mediated by someone else who can communicate with both of them, i.e., an interpreter, interlocutor, or mediator. Sometimes such mediation involves little more than just a third person helping people "get started" and then leaving after they are able to carry on by themselves. However, sometimes a third person has to remain present as an out-and-out interpreter for and with the person, and this situation does not change over time; in other words, there are some people whom very few others can understand without the on-going aid of an interpreter, and where this will always continue to be the case.

8. It is very important to take time to listen, and persevere in one's efforts to understand. Related to the earlier point about the value of human presence, simply spending time in silence with someone who does not communicate can be edifying to the parties involved.

9. Even "talking" with a person about the situation of one's having difficulty understanding him/her is okay and helpful.

10. It is usually far better to ask a person to repeat him/herself, even several times, than to “fake it.”

11. When one does understand what a person is communicating, it is important to confirm to the person that one has gotten the message.

Conclusion

AS STATED ABOVE, this brief article is intended primarily as a consciousness-raising item. It covers only a very narrow topic, and does not address many other and much more important concerns related to this issue. For example, these few suggestions do not necessarily address how to help other parties to fully relate to a person who cannot talk or otherwise communicate; nor do they tell how to determine what potential capacity, if any, a person has for communicating when that capacity is not now being recognized or realized; nor do they tell how to discover and nurture the hidden and possibly very unique mode by

which a non-speaking person may, indeed, be able to communicate, if at all; nor, lastly, do they provide guidelines for understanding and interpreting correctly what a person may be trying to communicate who does not do so in the normal manner. Thus, one should take caution against oversimplifying the needs of people who cannot or do not talk, or the requirements of adaptively serving or being with them, and while it is hoped that these few suggestions are useful, it is also clear that they are only a very small part of helping people who cannot talk or otherwise communicate to experience the good things in life.

JOE OSBURN is director of the Safeguards Initiative, Bardstown, KY, USA; JO MASSARELLI is director of the SRV Implementation Project, Worcester, MA, USA. Both are members of the North American SRV Council.

The citation for this article is:

Osburn, J. & Massarelli, J. (2006). Some helpful points to keep in mind in the presence of people who cannot or do not talk. *The SRV Journal*, 1(1), 26-29.