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The Recognition That Values Are Real And Matter

It is important to understand what it is we do to hurt each other and what we can do about this. There is an old saying that is often used in regards to children that goes something like this. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me!” It is perhaps unusual to think of human beings as being creatures that might be hurt by words, or thoughts or feelings, but the truth is that these can indeed hurt us. That is because such thoughts are deeply “values laden”, and when the judgment contained in the abstract intention is significantly negative towards us, we do feel it, as remarkable as this may seem. We may pretend that words do not matter, but when they are applied to us in a way that diminishes us in front of our peers, the pain is all too real. There is pain in stigmatization due to the meaning and value assigned to people. (Falk, 2001).

In a quite remarkable way, we are all exquisitely vulnerable to the depredations and valuations of others. Even the slightest shading of comments about us, in the negative direction, can leave a sensitive person slain and wounded. Like it or not, abstractions that are devaluing do hurt, just as much as if they were physical wounds. Apparently, anything that lowers our social value can be quite injurious. Whether this can be acknowledged without a loss of face may not matter, since the hurt is real whether acknowledged or not. Equally, hurtful thoughts can quickly lead to hurtful deeds once it becomes possible to treat others as outsiders, aliens, sub-human or simply “other”. (Mielnicki, Munro 2000)

We are not merely material beings, or these abstractions that reduce or increase our value in the eyes of others would be immaterial. On the contrary, we are deeply attuned to being personally valued or not, and prolonged states of being devalued by others cannot help but leave their scars on our experience. In most cases, such experiences of being devalued will define us not only to others, but perhaps even more deeply to ourselves. Whether we like it or not, we are acutely “values vulnerable” and our fate psychologically, socially, and even politically will quite readily follow from the way we are perceived and valued by others. Apparently, (Deveson, 2003), there are resilient people amongst us who are able to somehow to rise above brutal misjudgment or mistreatment, but this cannot possibly be described as being the norm for most human beings. Most of us are much more vulnerable on this level than we can easily admit.

People with disabilities, like many other groups in society that may be perceived as being different enough from others, most certainly run the risk of being the target of quite specific judgments as to their value in the eyes of others. In the case of expectant parents in most western societies, the message that the child to be born will live with a disability will most certainly be conveyed by many people in authority as somehow being catastrophic and tragic. This is actually quite strange on one level, as such children are not at all an aberration or anomaly, as living with a disability has been part of the ongoing experience of all peoples and societies throughout history. Nonetheless, the value judgment that casts them into the role of being unwanted and perverse exceptions to the

“normal” expected state of humanity, does do its damage to both the people themselves and those close to them.

So, if the preceding is taken into account, it becomes clear that the social devaluation of people with disabilities is no trivial matter, considering that the experience of such actual or imminent devaluations may lead many parents to abort or otherwise reject such a child. Clearly, the voluntary rejection, and even killing, of ones own offspring cannot be considered an anomalous and insignificant act. Obviously, the people involved must deeply believe that such person with disabilities ought not to exist. “Not existing” profoundly interferes with the worth and potential of such lives.

The Role Of Values And Culture In The Degradation Of One’s Humanity

It may not be apparent on all occasions that the worth of the humanity of some people is at risk. Yet our social history, as a society, is full of examples of people being routinely mistreated as a normative part of how our culture has operated. Many times this has proceeded with the tacit sanction of law (Robertson, 1999), and professional and scientific leadership (Stepan, 1991). The afflicted groups are many, and have included minorities, immigrants, poor people, law breakers, women, people with disabilities, homosexuals, racial, religious and ethnic groups and so on. This kind of routine and sanctioned poor treatment of people may be more than simple acts of human indifference, as they may be part of patterns of living that the culture as a whole embraces. This more collective aspect of social devaluation may be so pervasive and so deeply imbued in our way of life and social institutions, that we do not see it, and appreciate its meaning.

Thus, when people are driven out of communities, sterilized against their will, denied jobs and housing, accused of being malevolent and perverse, rejected by valued citizens and so on, explanations focusing on personal ethical or values depravity may account for some of what transpired, but a great deal more responsibility will eventually have to rest on the community that witnessed such conduct, did not intervene, or even facilitated its spread and intensity. Social devaluation is most certainly a feature of the attitude set of individuals, but its more significant dimension and power rest in its collective and societal character, as it is this culture (Harrison, Huntington, 2000) that shapes and sanctions individual conduct. Cultures, including ones with impressively malevolent effects, are not beyond alteration, but they do pose a challenge as to what theories and practices can hope to be effective in making them change in a positive direction.

Confronting Social Devaluation Consciously; The Instance Of Social Role Valorization Theory

Social role valorization theory is a proposed antidote to social devaluation that has gained prominence in the field of disability. Exposure to the theory of social role valorization (SRV) theory as outlined by Wolfensberger (1985, 1995, 1998, and 2000) can raise consciousness as to the reality and causes of social devaluation. Perhaps more importantly, strategies derived from SRV theory can be applied at the individual and

broader societal level to address social devaluation. Peter Park, Past -President , People First Canada, and Co-founder of People First of Ontario relates how SRV raised his awareness of how badly he had been treated, giving him the insights and motivation to advocate on behalf of other people with intellectual disability (2004).

The theoretical basis of social role valorization has been refined considerably since Wolfensberger first proposed a name change from 'normalization' to 'social role valorization' (1983). Ideas that had previously been articulated as the principle of normalization (Wolfensberger, 1972) were superseded and replaced by SRV theory (Wolfensberger, 1985). A recent definition of social role valorization is "the application of what science has to tell us about the enablement, establishment, enhancement, maintenance and/or defense of valued social roles for people" p125 (Thomas and Wolfensberger, 1999).

SRV theory is based on the premise that the most effective way to counteract social devaluation is for individuals or groups at risk of devaluation to achieve valued social roles. According to Wolfensberger, SRV theory is grounded in empiricism, particularly in the fields of psychology and sociology. SRV is probabilistic in that it proposes that if a particular action is taken, a particular set of consequences is likely to occur (Wolfensberger, 1995). The theoretical basis of SRV can be summarised into two classes of empirical propositions relating to human perceptual processes and role theory (Wolfensberger, 1999).

Returning to the saying "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me", it is clear that the anti-Semitic literature promulgated in Germany prior to 1939 did hurt the Jewish people. (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Nevitt Sandard, 2001). This propaganda created an image of Jews as a 'problem' that needed a 'solution'. Such messages created a context where many Germans, other Europeans and even the Allies, were prepared to remain selectively silent, justify and even collude with the Nazis' extermination of six million Jewish people. SRV theory hypothesises that if Group A communicates relentlessly bad things about a particular class of people in society to Group B, then it is highly likely that Group B will begin to believe what is said and therefore be predisposed to treating the subjects of the denigration badly as happened in Germany.

Human Perceptual Processes And Social Devaluation

Wolfensberger (1999) argues that evaluation is an intrinsic part of each human being's perceptual processes. Humans are 'hardwired' to notice differences in each other and to evaluate these differences. Some differences are perceived as positive, others are perceived as negative. Usually humans value those whom they perceived positively and devalue those whom they perceive negatively. Such judgments are made in a complex environment influenced by individual belief systems, prevailing societal perceptions and culture. (Wolfensberger, 1999). The real risk of social devaluation arises when a majority in a culture perceives particular characteristics of a group as negative.

An exploration of the most highly valued characteristics in Western societies at the beginning of the 21st century would probably include wealth, youth, success, intelligence, physical attractiveness, sporting prowess and health. Weekly television features programmes where people who are prepared to undergo 'extreme makeovers' to improve their physical appearance, are publicly humiliated in a quest to become an apprentice to a billionaire, and are subjected to extreme physical and emotional duress to win large sums of money.

In 2005, a 34 year old New Zealand father killed his five month old baby daughter and was acquitted by a jury of a murder charge and also of the lesser charge of manslaughter. (Devereux, 2005). The father(whose name was suppressed admitted deliberately killing the child after being told that she had a condition called lissencephaly where the child's brain had stopped growing in utero at 13 weeks. There were a number of public expressions of sympathy for the father although the ethical implications of the verdict were also raised in the media by individuals and child advocacy groups. (Langley, 2005). Had the child been un-impaired the father, would probably have received no such public sympathy, would probably have been found guilty of murder and received a custodial sentence. A jury of the man's peers did not perceive the life of a child with profound intellectual disability as being as valuable as the life of a child without impairment.

Role Theory And Social Devaluation

Wolfensberger argues that the social roles filled by a person are extremely powerful determinants of how a person will be perceived, valued and treated; in fact they can be 'life defining'. Wolfensberger states that in any society there will be a range of social roles from highly valued to highly devalued. Most individuals hold multiple roles, some valued, some not. Images or mental pictures are associated with a particular social role. Wolfensberger argues that holding valued social roles is so important because 'the good things in life' will then most likely be accorded to that person or group. (Wolfensberger, Thomas and Caruso, 1996).

In January 2005, publicity was given to the case of a 39 year old New Zealander who is starving himself to death because he has motor neuron disease and does not want to let the condition take its natural course. He is supported in his case by pro euthanasia advocates and many members of the public who are advocating for his 'right to die'. On hearing of the diagnosis of motor neurone disease, the man commented that he "was a walking dead man" (Walsh, 2005). It could be stated that this young man has accepted the negative role into which society has cast him, of being "better off dead" than continuing life with impairment.

Wolfensberger (1998) refers to the 'wounds' that society inflicts on people who are perceived negatively, wounds that could make it preferable to kill one's child or oneself because to live with an impairment is to be so devalued by others. According to SRV theory people with impairments have historically been cast into a number of negative social roles, each with their associated negative images. Such negative

valuations of impairment have been articulated and reinforced for centuries in many cultures. Sullivan (1995) describes how Dr Truby King, founder of the New Zealand Plunket movement and pre-eminent influence in child rearing practices in New Zealand, reinforced these negative perceptions of children who were born with impairments.

Social Role Valorization Theory As An Antidote To Social Devaluation

Social Role Valorization theory suggests a wide range of actions that can be taken to redress social devaluation. However, any decision to take such action will be made on the basis of an individual's value system rather than SRV theory alone.(Wolfensberger, 2002). There is an extensive body of literature on the application of SRV and training is available in many countries throughout the world.(Wolfenberger and Thomas, 1983, Wolfensberger, 1998). SRV theory proposes that there are two main strategies for achieving valued social roles namely, enhancement of social image and enhancement of competence. Actions can be taken to enhance social image and competence in a number of areas relating to physical settings, relationships and groupings, activities and language. (Wolfensberger, cited in Race, 2003). Negative societal perceptions are capable of being influenced and changed, though SRV theory does not imply that this will be an easy or quick process. People with impairments can achieve or retain valued social roles. Again this will not be easy or quick.

Wolfensberger, while believing that change can occur in principle, has remained pessimistic about changes in formal human services that do not fundamentally confront social devaluation. Recent findings by Stancliffe (2004) provide evidence for Wolfensberger's pessimism about human services. Stancliffe reported that despite the rhetoric around about self-determination the choice of where and with whom to live were still missing in the lives of the people with intellectual disability whom he studied. A New Zealand study *An Ordinary life* adds further weight to Stancliffe's finding that people with intellectual disability are far from happy with the human services they are receiving. Even an 'ordinary life' is far from the reach of many. (National Advisory Committee on Health and Disability, 2003)

Some Illustrative Examples Of Common Strategies For Overcoming Social Devaluation That Emphasize Values Engagement And Choice

It is useful to look at five very common ways that values are changed such that patterns of social devaluation are eroded or transformed. These include the creation of social movements, advocacy and consciousness raising, inspired and possibly small scale examples of valuing people, personal actions and political and moral dissent. Different change strategies can be expected to have differing yields, so it is important to recognize that overall change may be due to the aggregating of specific change initiatives. There are naturally more change strategies than these, but they are included as illustrations that social devaluation is not impregnable and can be influenced constructively. The key point is that values matter and choosing them consciously to lead action is very important.

Social Movements As Rebellions Against Prejudicial Values

It has been this recognition that values can enliven or diminish a life that has been at the core of so many of the social movements that have arisen to deal with the mistreatment of people. Social movements arise because the normal institutionally sanctioned routes to change are blocked. A key component of how they work is in their expression of a “counter ideology” that acts to both question the values of the current order and offer an alternative. This may not be an abstract exercise at all, as the vested interests at stake in social movements can be overturned or radically reshaped if the movement is successful.

The example of the person centered services movement as a values led counter cultural movement is instructive. The movement to have people served in more personalized ways is, on a superficial level, a kind of “in-house” debate about the efficacy of differing methods of providing services. Yet, on another “values” level, it represents a very important struggle to assert a view of human service clients as being people like everyone else and thus deserving of a quite different set of life options than those presently available (Kendrick, 2000). The essence of the changes being sought can be seen in regards to these six key values as they relate to the person;

- The person should direct their own life as much as possible
- The person has life potential
- The person’s dreams for their own life should be defining
- The person is unique irrespective of their disability
- The person needs to “get a real life”
- The person has rights

In regard to the service system and its orthodoxies, the person centered service movement has also offered some contrarian values to those of the “conventional” service system (Kendrick, 2001). These are six illustrative key values that are commonly at the heart of the dispute about service practice and operation.

- Standardized service models are antithetical to having unique solutions emerge for people
- Service users have the ability to be decision-makers in designing their services
- Human service mediated lifestyles are contrived and artificial
- Service models can be fundamentally modified to be suit people’s actual needs
- Professionals/managers should not have the final say or power
- Informal community resources ought to be as significant as paid resources

Proponents typically believe that people are being fitted to the system rather than the system responding to the person. Hence, the phrase “person centered services”. This movement had its origin in the larger and longer historical struggle towards supported community living as the preferred alternative to segregated institutions. However, as

people quickly discovered, community life was not without its challenges, the least of which was to not become institutionalized in new ways in the community. Nonetheless, “mini-institutionalization” is now quite normative, as is the dominance of services in shaping many crucial aspects of the lives of people, particularly with those people who cannot easily escape its control. They believe that their lives are much too defined by the system’s prescriptions for “clienthood” rather than what the person would see as a more “real” life for themselves. The person centered service movement has largely rejected such professional/systems dominance in favour of approaches that place the service user in the role of a decision-maker in their own life.

Advocacy And Consciousness Raising Towards Valuing People

Values that are negative will need to be challenged in order to be changed, and positive and valuing outlooks will need affirmation and nurturing in order to come into force. All of this will require adherents willing to raise these issues into consciousness so that they can be resolved advantageously. Not all advocacy or consciousness raising does this effectively, but that is different from whether these would be helpful if done well and repeatedly (Kidd, 1997). Naturally, the more systematic, enduring and relentless the efforts to do this are, the greater will be the probable impact. The process of engaging minds and attitudes is unavoidable if the mental patterns underlying conduct are to be transformed from habits to more consciously controlled behavior. It is quite doubtful if the civil rights movement would have succeeded without “creating a dream”.

The Creating Or Highlighting Of Inspiring And Positive Examples

To begin to believe in a way of life in which people are not devalued it is often necessary for many people to experience in a concrete way a way of life that has a quite different moral nature and identity, otherwise their imaginations may be trapped in the grim realities of a world that does not permit the decent treatment of people (Collins, 2004). Many victims and victimizers may be limited by the belief that social devaluation is all there is and will need to be deeply convinced if there is indeed an alternative. This is the power that is present when one can demonstrate in concrete and persuasive ways, through actual examples the very truths that words alone may not quite convey. Seeing is believing, and the role of women being successful in the walks of life that had been heretofore denied to them, has undoubtedly gone a long way to building momentum towards a more appreciative society in terms of the roles available to women in many countries. These examples further serve to inspire people in other societies who have yet to undergo such transformations.

Personal Actions

In the case of Citizen Advocacy, in the field of disability programs, we often see that ordinary people will voluntarily elect to get to know, have a relationship with, and act in defense of a person who is struggling against the devalued roles that society has imposed on him or her. Apart from the modeling that this represents for others, it also is indicative that individuals can often fundamentally change long before the society around

them has done so (Sen,1999). In this fact there is the power that individuals may choose to pursue a path that is not sanctioned by their community due to their own “higher” call to values that they believe are more befitting how people should treat each other. While such persons always seem to begin as a marginal minority, it is surprising how often their conduct can becomes commonplace once the reasons for it are understood by others. This is what we have witnessed in the disability field where countless ordinary citizens have learned and love the fact that people with disabilities can be more fully part of their communities.

Political And Moral Dissent

The act of withholding support and legitimacy to acts or conditions that one does not favor is most decidedly both a moral and political act, as has been seen in many of the uprisings of disenfranchised people against the systems that have dominated and exploited them. This dissent is not always successful, as the interests to be opposed may be too entrenched. Nonetheless, these actions do wound such system by challenging their moral authority, encouraging others to dissent and offering a quite different political and moral message. It is doubtful that torture would ever have been quite as discredited were it not for the dissent represented by Amnesty International (Power, 2000).

Conclusion

What has been said here opens up a door that has been often opened by people trying to find a way for people to live well together. It is a door which could lead us into actions which make a difference or into a path of simply tuning out the issues. It brings with it choices and commitments which we are free to take up or ignore. There are no sureties, but there is always the hope that one can make a difference.

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