"Wishing on a Star": The Problems & Solutions of Relying on an 'Inclusive Society' to Foster & Provide a Better Life for People

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MANY PROPONENTS FOR AN IMPROVED life for devalued people rest their hope on a set of extremely optimistic assumptions of how society *should* be and become in order to facilitate such lives. It is commonly and frequently expressed in terms of 'seeking an inclusive society' or similar phraseology. It is interesting to reflect on how widespread these hopes are amongst supporters of devalued people. Such visions typically imply placing responsibility upon the negative judgements and attitudes of a rejecting public to account for the isolated and often miserable lives which devalued people experience. Even so-called scientific conferences frequently seize hold of such themes as 'creating an inclusive society' to attract attendees searching for that elusive formula that would magically change everything.

While expectations that others must change becomes ever more widespread, we seem less aware that human behaviour is deeply affected by the physical and social environment.

In New York prior to the 1990s, the subway system was notorious for assaults and murders. George Kelling, a Transit System consultant and criminologist, was appointed to tackle the problem. He had earlier developed (with his colleague James Wilson) what they called the 'Broken Window theory'—the tendency for people to commit crime when environments look like no one cares. That is, where physical disorder existed, you would get behavioural disorder. He set about to do just two things to the New York transit system: make people pay instead of the rampant fare evasion, and clean and maintain the stations and trains, including the removal of all graffiti. The results were astounding: a 67% decrease in serious crime (Gladwell, 2000, pp. 140–145).

What type of behavioural environment does our present culture encourage, and is it likely to produce the new age of tolerance we are told to expect?

Cultures provide order and meaning to our lives, give us reasons to live and make life worth living. When cultures do this poorly, problems arise. For example, our present Western culture has created false realities constructed around marketing and consumerism which aren't at all in touch with what is most important for human beings. As such, many of our most essential needs for meaning, fulfilment, and identity are left languishing, drawing many people, especially the young, to meet their needs in very destructive ways.

Instead of providing security for many important and identity-giving roles, Western culture can leave many people famished and starving for roles—especially so if there are few incentives or positive relationships and models in place when one is young and trying to accumulate roles and

identity. A role-famished person will likely seek any role or roles, even if negative, in an effort to meet their legitimate needs for meaning, purpose, identity, and connection to others (Lemay, 1999). Descending into negative roles is quick and easy, whereas ascending into positive roles takes much time and effort (Wolfensberger, 1998). Some of these negative roles, such as drug addict or alcoholic, can take a lifetime to escape from.

But will our contemporary lifestyles invite the so-called 'tolerance' that is so frequently hoped for? Reviewing research, Roy Baumeister suggests that our cultural emphasis on acquiring high self-esteem and lessening personal restraint is a recipe for the violence that is evident everywhere. Self-absorption brings a heightened capacity for aggression. To become a less violent society, we would need *much* reduced self-esteem and significantly increased self-restraint, something the diversity specialists may not want to hear (Baumeister, 1999, p. 128).

THUS THE BEHAVIOUR OF CITIZENS is dramatically influenced by how they perceive their world. When society is peaceful, citizens are free to adopt many individual roles, like spouse, parent, worker and enthusiast; but in times of strife, group membership and group pride become uppermost. Groups strive to define themselves in distinct even if trivial ways; to claim a special and unique identity. Freud referred to this as "the narcissism of minor difference" (Freud, 1917). Such collective needs for identity give rise to "the systematic overvaluation of the [collective] self [which] results in [the] systematic devaluation of strangers and outsiders. In this way narcissistic self-regard depends upon and in turn exacerbates intolerance" (Ignatieff, 1997, pp. 51–52). One begins to realise that the conduct of people within a culture depends upon what is happening around people—for good or bad. The expectation of an 'inclusive society' would depend fundamentally on the prevailing values within a culture, and the level of perceived threat or calamity outside of the culture that could serve to fuel harmony and trust, or divisions and hatred—and which could change very quickly.

When one's collective identity is challenged (such as one's ethnic or national identity), then minor, even artificial, distinctions become transformed into major differences as markers of power and status. Power is the vector that turns minor distinctions into major differences (Ignatieff, 1997, p. 50). Parties further tend to see themselves as united, often fuelled by nationalistic fervour, and see the Other (party) as homogenous and lacking individuality (cf. Ignatieff, 1997; Waller, 2002).

Stanley Cohen (Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics) writes:

> *People highly endowed with positive illusions—notably about their own omnipotence—commit the most appalling atrocities. The admired qualities of high self esteem, a sense of mastery, faith in their capacity to bring about desired events and unrealistic optimism were possessed in abundance by Mussolini, Pol Pot, Ceausescu, Idi Amin and Mobuto (Cohen, 2001, p. 58).*

Of course these dynamics magnify and exacerbate the process of social devaluation that Social Role Valorisation (Wolfensberger, 1998; Race, 1999; Osburn, 2006) seeks to counteract.

But in a modernistic society how much can we expect? Could our expectations for an 'inclusive society' be too exaggerated? Could our "expectations be extravagant in the precise dictionary sense of the word — 'going beyond the limits of reason or moderation'?" (Boorstin, 1961, p. 15). It is not uncommon for agencies small and large to claim this wish *as their vision*.

Inclusion rhetoric, too, plays into the drive for high self-esteem to celebrate and extoll freedom from restraint under the rubric of diversity—where artistic expression (especially at workshops

and conferences) is a common and frequently played-out metaphor. Yet ordinary observation ought to tell us that people come together through what they have in common, not through what they don't.

As mentioned above, social context plays a massive role in mediating human behaviour, yet as observers of other people's behaviour, we tend to underestimate its importance. Observers are likely to exaggerate the importance of a personal disposition to explain why people do the things they do, rather than to appreciate the part social context plays in influencing behaviour. This has been referred to as the *Fundamental Attribution Error*.

This is the "tendency of people to over-emphasize dispositional or personality based explanations for behaviours observed in others while under-emphasizing the nature and power of situational influences on the same behaviour" (Nisbett & Ross, 1991).

According to this framework, we as family, human service workers or citizens excuse our own behaviour as we read the context, but tend to blame other people *themselves* for the behaviour they exhibit. No wonder it is so easy to ascribe deviancy roles to *people,* but miss the point that the cues for these roles have been set up by the physical and social *environment* often created by other parties, including ourselves. It is also these factors that influence how others behave toward devalued people: are they sick; are they dangerous; should we love them; should we get rid of them? In other words, every one of us is affected by the physical and social environment we are thrust into and behave accordingly, but likely blame each other for the behaviour; e.g. "she's up to her old tricks again," or "he's putting on his behaviours again!"

I F WE APPLY THE LESSONS of the Fundamental Attribution Error to our expectation for an 'Inclusive Society,' it suggests we place too much emphasis on people's innate capacities to devalue others, and give insufficient attention to the contextual conditions that mediate devaluation—such as how we portray people to others via their roles. The contextual information observed about devalued people typically suggests that people *deserve* their condition; if they are poor or uneducated or sick or captive, they must have done something to bring it on themselves. One researcher refers to this as the 'Just World Phenomenon' (Lerner, 1980), where observers assume that people get what they deserve and deserve what they get.

Given that our perceptions of others and their behaviour can suffer these distortions, how might this affect the development of appropriate solutions for the widespread devaluation of so many people?

The capacity to see and simultaneously *not* see may be a unique human characteristic, so much so that a whole language exists to describe how easy it is to ignore and deny reality. For example, 'turning a blind eye,' 'burying your head in the sand,' 'living a lie,' 'don't make waves,' 'there's nothing I can do about it,' 'I don't want to know/hear/see anymore,' 'wearing blinkers,' 'she looked the other way,' 'surely it can't be that bad,' to name just a few. This helps explain why most people are clearly not conscious of or concerned by their own capacity to devalue others. Problems are predictable whenever we place the problem of devaluation exclusively upon the actions of *other* people, when in fact the problem is in all of us.

While context sets the scene for our behaviour, including devaluation, we also know that we all come with inbuilt capacities. We know, for instance, that certain orientations to our environment are virtually hard-wired. Very young children universally distinguish who is beautiful from who is average, and exhibit anxiety when confronted with strangers, even though they can be taught to defeat this tendency. We naturally favour our own race, colour, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, and our own cultural perspectives on beauty and perfection. Inbuilt capacities like unconscious devaluation are hard enough to defeat under ideal conditions, let alone when living in cultures that invite and support numerous daily expressions of it.

For example, many studies and anecdotal experiences show how reluctant people are to intervene in helping other people—especially when other people are around. Whether it is the infamous examples of Jamie Bulger (the two–year old pulled away from his mother by two ten–year olds in a crowded shopping centre, seen being kicked, pushed, and thrown into the air before being killed on a railway track), or Kitty Genovese (assaulted and raped for 45 minutes within the hearing of 38 people, who did nothing, as she screamed trying to reach her apartment), too many people stand aside as unresponsive and passive witnesses. Even in human services, it is too common to discover that people have not responded to observed neglect and even direct harm, even over extensive periods—and we wonder how this can be. The context formidably shapes this response, and the conscience of the observer will also be eroded: externalities affect and damage internalities.

Ervin Staub (2003) notes:

> *Remaining passive bystanders in the face of others' suffering can create callousness. It is nearly impossible to see great suffering, to do nothing, and continue to feel caring and empathy. To protect themselves from guilt and empathic suffering, individuals and groups that remain passive need to distance themselves from victims. As a result, their passivity may reduce the likelihood of later action by them (p. 367).*

With modernism promoting and inviting self esteem and lowered restraint (cf. Wolfensberger, 2005, pp. 20-26), might individualism go on to promote detachment and a lack of identification with others, as illustrated above? The attraction to Social Role Valorization (SRV) for some was the discovery of this potential in us, and the need to address this tendency with high consciousness and resistance to the lure of denial. We may have been transformed by a PASSING (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2007) workshop experience that brought us face to face with our own devaluations for the very first time. Yet so quickly we can take the heat off ourselves and start talking about creating an 'inclusive society,' and never realise the profound contradiction in these two positions. How is that?

Several possibilities might be considered:

- In recent history, most problems have been approached from a legal rights perspective, though the many rights being claimed are not necessarily legal or even rights. The history of 'inclusion' has mostly been contested from a rights perspective, i.e. 'my/our right to be included.' As such, 'inclusion' is strongly connected to ideology rather than to empiricism; it defines what *should* take place, not what *does* take place nor *how* it could take place.

- Relatedly, western culture since the US Constitution, ratified in 1788, has elevated the importance of individual rights over collective, just as it has affected so many identities beyond those probably envisaged by the constitutional founders. But since then, more and more isolated identities and classes have appealed to the concept of universal rights. 'Inclusion' thus attracts as another pseudo-universal ideal.

- Modernism defines an ideal that appeals to modernistic mind-sets that seek comfort, acceptance, and freedom to indulge any desire. One can seek whatever one wants. In this context, demanding things from other people is clearly allowable—even if only granted under precise conditions.

- Human nature is neither well understood nor assessed by modernistic culture. People and institutions frequently underestimate the potency of human nature and overestimate their capacity to defeat its tendencies.

- A materialistic mind-set disconnected from cosmic sources of hopefulness may still need to put its hope in certain ideals, especially when doing so fits in with

widely held (although non-cosmic) beliefs, as discussed above. Humans seem to *need* to believe in something better, irrespective of the likelihood of the hope succeeding.

- Inclusion thus represents another expectation of perfection—in this case the perfection of whole societies. It is therefore essentially a 'religious' pursuit, because at the societal level it has little to do with empirical reality—but we *believe* that it does.

Humans have always formed groups. We identify with people like ourselves, our interests and backgrounds, our intrinsic identities. We deepen the significance of these identities whenever they are challenged or brought into question. In most societies, including our own, there are whole conventions about when certain parties become and remain exclusive. Very young children may use the bathroom facilities of either gender, but once sufficiently independent are expected to *exclusively* use the facilities of their own gender.

But in other contexts, demarcations are not so rigid. Ethnically-based clubs (an Italian club for example) might not just allow but even invite membership from non-Italians as well as Italians, but still insist on the right to project 'Italianness' within their club. If you don't like this policy, then join another club!

Thus, many formal and informal structures within society are naturally exclusive in the sense that they define the nature of membership (e.g., Kiwanis, Women's Netball Association), and the purpose of their cause (e.g., Amnesty International). Their identity naturally indicates not only what they are, but, by implication, what they are *not*. The call for an 'inclusive society' fails to recognise such long-held societal structures and conventions.

Some devalued classes of people form collectivities, or less formally identify themselves as part of a larger collective of people, for example, as the class of people with Cerebral Palsy. But what is unusual is, if and when a member insists that the members of *their* collectivity be embraced within *another* collectivity, while emphasising the identity of their former collectivity. This is somewhat like promoting oneself as a Catholic, joining a Protestant church, and then insisting you be given full recognition and rights while remaining a Catholic. That is, you (and your self-declared label) must be 'included,' irrespective of the identity of the group one is adamant about 'joining.'

A recent example in Australia was a young woman who insisted on being able to bowl within a men's lawn-bowls league. She hardly could become a biological man, but insisted on the 'right' to play within whatever league she wanted. Her appeal on the grounds of discrimination actually won—and the men's league had to 'include' her. The more someone accentuates even a small feature of their identity and then enlarges it—gender, sexuality, ethnicity, having some unique feature, being a 'self advocate,' etc.—the more difficulty others have in relating to the person. Yet, when they occupy a valued role, their 'difference' is immediately absorbed and accepted, because it is their larger role people can identify with.

Of course the ethic of 'choice' is at work here. Whatever I choose or want, I have a right to obtain. Such is the nature of radical individualism. But it doesn't build community. Rather, it tends to divide people: there is my 'right' to have whatever I choose and there is your obligation to meet it! This is hardly an attractive proposition for most communities.

For sure, there are circumstances where people are pre-judged about their suitability to belong or be eligible for certain rights and privileges. Much like women being able to vote, there are times where it makes sense to appeal for access to rights generally available to others. Sometimes this effort to receive the same rights as other people can take many generations. In 2006, there were riots in New Delhi because students who were 'Untouchables' were given access to university medical courses for the first time. Or how long did William Wilberforce have to fight to outlaw the slave trade by the English?

THERE IS MUCH EMOTIONALITY ASSOCIATED with inclusion. Fantasy is like that—it appeals to the emotions. Do you remember Jiminy Cricket? When he sang "When you wish upon a star"—as a child I thought it sounded lovely—"makes no difference who you are!" It could be an inclusion anthem, but I discovered as I grew up that it was true only in Fantasyland. There is that part of us that would so love it to be real. It is so nice to go to these 'imaginary places' as a form of respite from the ugliness and frustration of distasteful human behaviour. But to dwell there, especially as a form of problem-solving, will result in serious errors and misjudgements. There is a tussle between our perception of how things really are and how we wish they could be. Some writers refer to this as the *tension between the idyllic and moral imagination*:

> *The moral imagination holds up an ideal that is attainable—but only through hard work; the idyllic imagination holds up an ideal that can never be attained in reality, but can easily be attained in fantasy and feeling. It follows mood, rather than conscience, and rejects conventional morality in favour of a natural morality that will it believes emerge spontaneously in the absence of cultural restraints (Kirkpatrick, 1992, p. 208).*

Some people say, "But, you have to have a hope." Yes, but what type of hope can it be if it can never come true? Otherwise, seeking an inclusive society is like hoping the Nigerian Internet Hoax will answer all our financial problems.

The last thing leaders in the lives of devalued people need is delusion. Devalued people live in exceedingly heightened vulnerability and marginality—and in an increasingly materialistic and hedonistic society it is only likely to grow worse, not better. Mandating that *everyone else* become 'inclusive' will not change this.

But what can we put our hope in? If an inclusive society is an unattainable ideal, as I have argued,

what is a *reasonable* hope, an optimistic ideal? Under what conditions might socially devalued people experience a better life? What would be needed if they were to be seen more favourably and treated accordingly?

Recently, an experiment involving the world famous musician Joshua Bell was conducted in the Washington Metro's l'Enfant Plaza. On Friday morning, January 12, 2007, in the middle of morning peak hour, one of the world's greatest players played one of the world's most perfect instruments and some of the world's most beautiful music—but was completely ignored by 1,097 people. In his 43 minutes of continuous playing, 27 people paused to give him a total of $32. He normally makes a $1,000 a minute and people don't ignore him! Dressed in jeans, a long sleeved T-shirt and a baseball cap, he was responded to as a *busker*, and even his virtuosity was not enough to defeat the expectations of harried passers by. *Maybe, had he been referred to as "a man, who is a busker" it would have made a difference?*

He had in fact been negatively role-cast (relative to his role as a virtuoso) and had therefore received the *appropriate* response. Yet the hundreds of emails to the Washington Post this article provoked were mainly concerned with how to change the commuters—the Fundamental Attribution Error again, the same mistake 'inclusionists' regularly make in blaming the behaviour on the people rather than on the context they are in. Notice how the language of much inclusion training talks about 'making communities inclusive.' Again, it is everyone else who has to change. You rarely see a workshop entitled "helping people to be more acceptable to others," although really, that is what SRV is about.

One of the strengths of a valued role is that it is wholly compelling, and it is this strength that regulates the behaviour of others. It is the role and role context—setting, others present, activities, personal appearance, language, other symbols—that mediates everyone's behaviour (Wolfensberger, 1998). If the role context conforms to long-

held popular stereotypes, then the role messages will be irresistible to the observer. In this case, positive role messages and expectations about (devalued) people would be conveyed so powerfully and repeatedly as to defeat pre-existing mind-sets. Wishing people to perceive differently while doing nothing about the social context people are presented in simply cannot work. Even 'good' people are drawn to conform to what they perceive and affirm.

Thus, valued roles provide a chance for observers to be at their best. It seems that only a very few internally-driven people are able to withstand the enticement to devalue, neglect and abuse people *when conditions invite it*. Even some citizen advocates (cf. O'Brien *&* Wolfensberger, 1979) I know have responded to the protégé's terrible living conditions as though it accurately reflected the protégé's actual identity. Inclusion theory believes whole populations should behave correctly irrespective of what the social conditions dictate. I have not yet found a single instance in history of such behaviour.

SRV uses what we know about how devalued people are perceived, and thoughtfully and meticulously utilises that knowledge to attract observers to see and treat people better; even to the extent that people may experience a better life. But it takes hard work and an unrelenting determination to discard anything in our vision of human nature (including our own personal proclivities) that is not true.

A useful way to capture this vision is that of 'The Good Life'—those experiences people universally seek: to have many positive roles, to have a real home, to have a positive image and reputation, to grow and learn, to have meaningful activity and to contribute to others, etc. (Wolfensberger *et al*, 1996). What we know is that one gets access to these things only after obtaining valued social roles. The more roles one has and the more valued are those roles, the more one's chances are of experiencing 'The Good Life' (Wolfensberger, 1998, pp. 44–45).

But we know that SRV has limits too; let's not overextend its possibilities. Even very valued social roles won't protect you at present in Iraq; quite the contrary, as Prince Harry and the UK government well know.

Michael Ignatieff (1997) notes:

> *Each individual in the Ethiopian camps was a son, a daughter, a father, a mother, a tribesman, a citizen, a believer, a neighbour. But none of these social relations will sustain an appeal for help in a time of distress. Famine, like genocide, destroys the capillary system of social relations that sustains each individual's system of entitlements. In so doing, genocide and famine create a new human subject—the pure victim stripped of social identity, and thus bereft of the specific moral audience that would in normal times be there to hear his cry. The family, the tribe, the faith, the nation no longer exist as a moral audience for these people. If they are to be saved at all, they must put their faith in that most fearful of dependency relations: the charity of strangers (pp. 19–20).*

When there are no roles, there are no relationships to protect you. All relationships occur in the context of a role. When people lose their roles or have few, they lose the potential for having and maintaining relationships. In our Western world, we have many devalued people whose well-being depends upon the relationship of paid strangers. Some are loving people and some are not—a fearful dependency.

The expectation of creating an 'Inclusive Society' allows us to focus on the dismissive actions of other parties while painting a utopian picture of the world as *we* might wish it. We can assume the noble high ground (as most groups do) railing against the recalcitrant actions of others. When will *they* get it right? What an attractive and persuasive line of reasoning!

The 'Good Life' is an idealistic yet realistic construct that utilises the role implications for mediating people's perceptions and resultant actions, for better or worse. Using it well increases the chances that as people occupy valued roles relevant to the context they are in, they will be well received and treated in a manner consistent with the positiveness of the role(s) they are seen in.

Wishing that other people were better than what they are will not change that.

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