

# Almost, But Not Quite There: Failing to Fully Develop Culturally Valued Analogues

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## Introduction

**M**ARIA DID NOT WANT to leave her job as a cook's helper at a recreational dinner-time program for adults with mental retardation. Helping to prepare meals at this program, she loved working in the kitchen, and she was skilled at it. She made sure that everything was done on time; she worried that those attending the program would get upset otherwise. She was extremely efficient, almost to a fault. When the cook strayed even a little from the task at hand, Maria sharply reminded her of the time. She made sure that none of the various and ever-changing staff forgot who was diabetic and who had an allergy to this and to that.

One day when the cook was unable to make it to the program and another staff member stepped in to take her place, Maria became very concerned because the routine was disrupted. Contributing to her distress was the absence of a regular staff person who valued her help, as well as her dedication to the job and to the people being served. By the time the top supervisor came in that evening, Maria was distraught about the chaos that had erupted in the program due to the staff change. She was screaming and crying, and was completely unable to calm down. The supervisor sent her out of the kitchen, saying that she needed to calm down before she could return. When she returned a few moments later still very upset, the supervisor ordered her to leave. At this point, Maria threw

some dishes on the floor, began yelling and then pushed the supervisor. Due to the unpredictability of the situation, Maria's difficulty in dealing with change, and staff unwillingness or inability to understand how hard all of this was for her, Maria was cast into what Social Role Valorization (SRV) theory calls the menace role (Wolfensberger, 1998). And just like that, Maria lost yet another job.

## Reflection

**A**S WE ATE DINNER TOGETHER a few weeks later, Maria recounted some of the jobs she had had over the years; ultimately she was dismissed from all of them. She worked at a restaurant in a prestigious downtown hotel, at a daycare helping to cook meals and at a sheltered workshop assembling various objects. She worked at an animal shelter for a few days but was fired because, she was told, her arms were too short to reach the backs of the cages, and she was too big to squeeze into them to clean them out. Maria had average-length arms. I pointed out that this job did not sound like a very good one anyway, though she was not so concerned about the quality of the job but more that she had a job. She was the kind of person who always wanted to be busy, she hated having nothing to do, and put a lot of others to shame with her industriousness. I suspect that this was one of the reasons that she went through so many jobs; she completed tasks faster than those around her, which likely annoyed oth-

ers who would have liked to believe that they were more efficient and smarter than she was. She certainly put me to shame, calling me out when I arrived a few minutes late to work—something she never did.

### The Culturally Valued Analogue

**I**N EXAMINING AND WRITING ABOUT several of Maria's life experiences, I want to explore the SRV concept of the culturally valued analogue (CVA). According to the PASSING manual, a culturally valued analogue is defined as "a societal practice (a) which can be encountered with at least regular frequency in the valued sector of society, (b) with which most members of the society would be familiar, (c) of which most members of the society would hold positive expectations and images, (d) which constitutes a valued parallel to a practice performed by or with devalued people" (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2007, 30). The CVA is a useful way to think about what might be appropriate for a person in any given situation based on what is done by socially valued people in a similar context. It can be used as a tool to help service agencies structure their support for someone in such a way that it is most likely to be in accord with a normative practice, e.g., developing culturally valued roles, supporting image and competency enhancement, etc.

The CVA is an important component of a number of the ten themes of Social Role Valorization. For example, if one considers the SRV theme of Interpersonal Identification, it is clear that there is an increased likelihood that valued people will identify with a person whose circumstances most closely resemble the culturally valued analogue, and thus will consequently want, and hopefully help to achieve, the good things in life for that person (Wolfensberger, Thomas & Caruso, 1996). It is crucial for those who are attempting to create or provide a normative experience for a devalued person to understand just how nuanced culturally valued analogues are. So many components come together to

make an experience whole and genuine, and thus a failure to truly appreciate the various elements will likely lead to phony practice. Being surrounded by such illegitimate life experiences exemplifies the wound not only of impoverishment of experience, but also that of having one's life wasted, because that person is not given the opportunity to develop and create a meaningful existence based on practices we all share.

At SRV workshops, participants learn that one could use SRV effectively to cast someone into more *devalued* roles, which would most likely be easier than applying SRV to help enhance or acquire *valued* roles for a devalued person. This could be done consciously, but as we also learn in longer SRV workshops, most often such things happen more unconsciously. For the purposes of this paper I wish to explore this idea in greater detail, using Maria's story to illustrate how roles become convoluted and perverted when the concept of the CVA is not adequately understood and implemented. An agency that does not understand or acknowledge the principle of SRV may, even with good intentions, attempt to develop positively valued roles for their clients, but when crucial aspects of a particular role or of significant role communicators (such as setting, grouping, activity, personal presentation, etc.) are missing, the role itself and others' perceptions of that role can be perverted. When this happens, a potentially valued role will not lead to the good things in life, as the role does not conform to what members of valued society recognize to be the privileges and responsibilities of a given role.

### Maria's Background

**A**CCORDING TO SRV THEORY, societal devaluation is "devastating because it creates and maintains societally devalued classes who systematically receive poor treatment at the hands of their fellows in society and at the hands of social structures—including formal, organized human services" (Wolfensberger, 1998, 4-5). The vast majority of Maria's life was controlled by sev-

eral social workers and a few long-distance family members. Despite having a significant wound, that of the functional impairment of mental retardation, Maria grew up living with her family, attending both the neighbourhood elementary school as well as the high school, and was proud of the fact that she and her two sisters all graduated from the same schools. Maria lived with her parents until they were institutionalized when they were quite elderly. At this point, a human service agency for people with mental retardation became more heavily involved in Maria's life. Previously this agency provided certain respite services and supplied the family with a social worker. With the increasing needs and dependence of Maria's aging parents on human services for their own needs, Maria became more deeply entrenched in this agency. While she had siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews scattered throughout Canada, the United States and further, none of them gave Maria the support that she needed at that point. This exemplifies the wounds of distanciation, of a loss of natural or freely-given relationships, and to a certain degree, of abandonment.

Maria's sister continued to manage her financial matters despite her physical distance (eight hours drive), and some members of her family visited a few times a year, yet Maria was not always considered an integral part of the family. Three years ago, one of Maria's sisters died suddenly in Israel. Because of the suddenness of her death, only a few family members traveled to Israel at the time. A year later, according to the Jewish religion, more family traveled to Israel to participate in an unveiling ceremony honouring this woman's life. Maria was not invited to either of these events, despite having a close relationship with this sister. This represented a further wound of rejection by family members. Because of her distanciated relationships with her family, particularly after she stopped living with her parents, Maria was at a greater risk of being cast into devalued roles and was left almost solely in the hands of a large and chaotic human services agency.

### Attempts at Attaining Culturally Valued Analogues

SRV THEORY EXPLAINS THAT BECAUSE Maria was mentally retarded in a culture that devalues intellectual impairment, she occupied a low social status and experienced multiple forms of social and societal devaluation (Wolfensberger, 1998). She was largely "rejected, not only by society as a whole but quite often even by [her] own family, neighbours, community, and even by the workers in services that are supposed to assist [her]" (Wolfensberger, 1998, 13). Almost all facets of her life were connected to one human service agency, and because of this, she experienced the wound of loss of control and freedom. It was through a human service agency that I met Maria. While the concepts of the culturally valued analogue and Social Role Valorization were almost certainly not understood by this agency, there were some efforts made by the agency to assist those served to achieve positive valued roles. These efforts included recognizing the importance of having a job, a roommate, friends and a summer vacation. To varying degrees these were part of Maria's life. I wish to discuss how each of these aspects, which could and should have led to more socially valued roles and a better life, became perverted, muddled and mystified.

### Employment

I OPENED THIS ARTICLE by describing part of Maria's employment history. Here I will examine her last job and how it failed to meet the requirements of the CVA of work, which meant that Maria did not benefit from the good things in life that derive from the valued role of employee. When most people think of what being an employee entails, they might think of the money one makes as an employee, of the responsibilities or duties that are taken on by the worker, of the authority one gains from having a job, of being part of a group of co-workers, and so on. At the recreational dinner-time program mentioned in the introduction, Maria had responsibilities in

the kitchen. She had certain tasks that she was required to do every time she worked. She was also called a staff member, and when there was a staff table at meal times, she sat at it.

Yet her role as staff was compromised by several pertinent factors. She was not paid for her work, unlike other staff. Despite other staff at the program advocating that she get paid, those who controlled her life did not support the idea. To the contrary, Maria had to pay to attend the program, as did the other clients. Maria also hung her coat where the clients did—in lockers, instead of on the coat rack in the kitchen, where all the other staff hung their coats. She left when the other clients did and not an hour later when the staff did. She was never offered a ride home with the other staff, even though we drove right past her house. She did not have keys to the locked doors at the program, something all the other staff members had, despite the fact that some of them frequently forgot to bring them. So while Maria was called a staff member, in many ways she was not treated as one. Many of the other role communicators sent the message that she was in the client role. There was a confusing, haphazard, blurring of her role, making it somewhere between that of client and of staff person.

There are several important points to draw from these examples. While Maria's job role was far from perfect, it was still a valued role that afforded her certain privileges that she otherwise would not have had. She was not paid for her work, which is typically of integral importance within this role. Yet, as Wolfensberger explains, "even where the valued work role does not bring payment, a great deal of valued status and other benefits can thereby be achieved nonetheless" (Wolfensberger, 1998, 60). Despite filling some aspects of the work role, however, Maria experienced both physical and social distancing from the other staff. The hours that she worked, and the ways in which she interacted with other staff members, indicated that she was not fully accepted as a co-worker. These forms of (subtle) rejection diluted the potential access to

the good things of life that Maria could have had through a stronger work role.

### Roommate

**D**URING THE TIME I KNEW MARIA, she always lived with a woman whom she called a roommate, despite many aspects of this relationship that are not usually understood to be part of this role. The roommate role is one that requires complementarity, meaning that you have to have a roommate to be a roommate. The term "roommate" conjures up ideas such as shared space, shared rent, shared 'stuff' and often shared time. All of these characteristics comprise some of the privileges and responsibilities that derive from being a roommate in the valued world. Comparing these few features of the CVA of a roommate to Maria's situation reveals some major discrepancies. Maria's roommate was paid by the agency to live with her, instead of contributing to the cost of the apartment as is usual. Maria's family owned the apartment and paid for it. Typically this kind of disparity might mean that the person paying the rent would have certain extra privileges. This was not the case here, as the roommate's room had a balcony off of it that Maria could not access. Also inaccessible were the answering machine and a computer, as both were in the roommate's room. Maria did not feel comfortable inviting friends over for fear of disrupting her roommate. These concerns were not unfounded: in the past, the agency and the roommate decided that one of her friends was not to come to the apartment anymore because it was disruptive to the roommate's studying. The roommate was almost always said to be studying; it was the reason given for the living room being a bad place to watch television or to spend time in at all after a certain hour. In terms of shared time, almost any time that these two spent together was expected in conjunction with the "job" of being Maria's roommate; their twice weekly "work outs" at the gym was one of them. Maria frequently said she felt very lonely, and that spending so much time alone made her feel like

she was going crazy. Yet living semi-autonomously was deemed a good thing by those who controlled her life. This was clearly not how she felt; she said on numerous occasions that she liked to stay as busy as possible and that she was not the kind of person who was meant to live alone.

Maria's role as a roommate and the following discussion about the friend role point to some of the bad things that typically get done to devalued people. Despite the supposed good things that are usually associated with having roommates and friends, for a devalued person, these relationships do not always follow the same model. For most people, natural relationships lead the way to having a roommate or having friends, yet for Maria these relationships were filled by people who were recruited and/or paid to fill these roles. This contributed to the reality that Maria did not truly fill the valued roles of roommate or of friend (as described in the next section): the CVA of these roles is quite unlike what she experienced. She thus had virtually no chance of gaining access to the good things of life through these roles.

### Friendship

**T**RUE FRIENDS IN MARIA'S LIFE were few. Most were people that she had worked with and that had some position of authority over her, including myself. One of her friends was told not to come over any more, for fear of disturbing the roommate. The role of friend was further distorted for Maria by her participation in a program run through a local university that matched disabled adults with university students, with the stated goal of developing a relationship by regular visits with each other. This program only ran during the school year, so the matches were only expected to be "friends" for 8 months. While for many people, participating in the program created an important connection as it allowed them to have someone to go out with on a regular basis, this did not change the fact that the program perverted the role of friend. The level of human service control held by the program

organizers meant that the CVA for a friend was violated to a significant degree through this program. True friendships are not orchestrated and controlled by a service agency. Volunteer hours are not accumulated by a friend. The two parties participating in a friendship generally have equal standing, or at least a level of respect for the other that is not possible when one is "matched" and has assigned visiting times. There is a high degree of human service control in these scenarios that are not normative in friendships that valued people have with each other. These matches did not tend to last for a long time, and they were often not very stable, as the lives of many of the student volunteers were hectic and subject to change. While a friendship match of this nature may represent some of the things on which friendship is built, such as going out, conversation and fun, it is severely lacking in other ways, including having someone to depend on when times are tough, having someone who knows you well, and having shared values or experiences. It is exceedingly difficult to develop meaningful or merely long-lasting relationships through controlled and regulated programs such as this which do not match the CVA. Instead, the wound of relationship discontinuity is likely, and even more rejection can be expected. This was true for Maria, who enjoyed having someone to go out with on the weekends, but did not look forward to April when her match for that year left to go back to her hometown for the summer.

### Vacation

**F**INALLY, FOR MARIA the culturally valued activity of taking a vacation was perverted by the human service agency that controlled her life. Every summer, the agency organized two-week vacations where 8-12 disabled adults were grouped together, assigned two staff and sent on vacation to a different city or to a cottage. For many these two weeks were eagerly anticipated for the whole year; it was a frequent topic of discussion for the clients of the agency. While Maria

used to go on these vacations, thus occupying the valued role of vacationer, she was not permitted to do so for the past few years. The last time that she went on one of these vacations, she acted aggressively toward a staff person. Instead, for two weeks each summer, she did what the service provider called “in-town vacations.” This consisted of day trips in the city for part of the time while the other service recipients were away. Each morning, the “in-town vacationers” met at a day program site in the basement of a hospital, and then the group went on to do different activities both at the hospital location and in the city. The activities ranged from attending local festivals or visiting museums to going for a walk or baking cookies. For Maria this was clearly not the activity of vacationing. She lived in the same city all her life, attended the same festivals and went to the same museums. A walk in a familiar neighbourhood or baking cookies was not her idea of a vacation. She was not in the role of vacationer when she attended the “in-town” vacations.

Maria complained on numerous occasions that for her (as for all of us) a vacation, or being in the role of vacationer or tourist, meant getting out of one’s home city and perhaps going somewhere one had not been before. She cited going on a long car or train ride, and sleeping at a hotel or in a different bed, as two examples of things that encompassed a true vacation. It was especially hard for her to stay in the city as most of those around her acquired the role of vacationer, and got to leave the city for their vacations; yet when she complained about her situation, staff reminded her why she no longer went on vacations, making her situation a kind of on-going punishment for something she did quite a while ago. The wounds of rejection and of impoverishment of experience became even more deeply ingrained with every passing year that she was shut out from this opportunity. While Maria was by no means satisfied with her “in-town vacation,” she still preferred to attend this program to being alone. Calling these two weeks a vacation was dishonest; it confounded

the CVA of a vacation. Because her “vacation” was not a true one, she was not accorded the valued role of vacationer either by herself or by second and third parties, and did not have greater access to the good things of life.

### Conclusion

**A**LL OF THE SITUATIONS discussed above illustrate how facets of normal life are so often overwhelmingly distorted for a socially devalued person, particularly clients of human service agencies, in such a way that they barely resemble the culturally valued analogue. It is worth noting that culturally valued analogues may appear to be a relatively simple way to create a meaningful experience for a devalued person, yet in reality there are countless aspects of any given CVA that must be adhered to if one wishes to craft a legitimate analogue. In most of the instances discussed above, the human service agency did not adhere to many or most aspects of the CVA. As a tool, the CVA is just as useful for family members, friends and typical citizens. For Maria her previous job, her roommate, her ‘connections’ through the friendship matching program and her vacation merely paid lip-service to the true meaning of these notions. The roles of employee, roommate, friend and vacationer were deeply tainted to the point where no one could honestly say that she filled any of these roles.

With a deeper understanding and commitment to the notion of the CVA on the part of not only the service agency, but also her family, friends and others in her life, Maria could have had access to more of the good things in life through these roles. As SRV claims, one is more likely to have the good things in life with valued roles. The human service version (or more accurately, perversion) of such roles meant that Maria did not have access to the good things of life, and was further wounded because of a lack of vision on the part of the human service agency to think deeply about what constitutes work, home, friend relationships and vacations. ☺

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### To learn more about Citizen Advocacy, three excellent written resources are:

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