

# REVIEWS MORE

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**SEEKING COMMUNITY: HE NGAKAU AATA KITEA, LIVING WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY.** By STANDARDS PLUS. Auckland, NZ: Standards Plus with Whitireia Publishing, 88 pages, 2007. **REVIEW AVAILABLE ONLINE @ [www.srvip.org](http://www.srvip.org)**

**Reviewed by Susan Thomas**

THIS 88-PAGE BOOK CONTAINS 11 brief stories, each about three to six pages long, and each about one person “with a learning disability.” This is the current terminology in New Zealand to refer to those whom in the US would still be called “mentally retarded,” especially since the term “learning disability” in the US refers to a wide range of different and much milder impairments, such as not being able to decode letters, or to learn to read the way most other people learn to do so. Some of the people “with a learning disability” in the book are mildly impaired, some are very seriously so. The stories are told either by the person him or herself, or by family members. Some of the impaired persons are Maori, or part-Maori, others are white. Some of the stories are written in both English and Maori. But even in the English sections, there are numerous Maori words that are not translated, so people outside New Zealand and not familiar with these terms are at a disadvantage.

The stories are typically about what the person’s life used to be like and what it is now. Most tell of the person’s birth, childhood, the discovery of the impairment, how it affected the person’s family and clan, some of the wounds that were inflicted, and of current vulnerabilities. Most of the stories tell of a reasonably contented life at present, though those impaired adults who live on their own appear to live in marginal settings and in or near poverty, and the lives of the families are not free of worry, concern or work.

The book is forthright in elevating “inclusion” to being the defining quality of a good life for im-

paired people. After each or a few stories, there are short commentaries (each again about two to three pages) either on the stories themselves, or explaining what are called “five aspects of inclusion” attributed to John O’Brien: sharing ordinary places and activities, making choices, contributing, growing in relationships, and having the dignity of valued social roles. The authors of these interspersed commentaries are not identified.

The two pages on “the dignity of valued roles” (pp. 64-65) emphasize that severity of impairment must not be seen as an obstacle to valued roles, but give only two examples of valued roles, both in the domain of work.

There are also photographs throughout the book, identified in the foreword (on p. 9) as pictures “that have meaning to” the writers. Unfortunately, few of the pictures are without some, and sometimes significant, image problems. For instance, the appearance of the impaired people in about half the photos is less than positive, with ill-fitting clothing, very casual and often sloppy-looking clothing, and numerous juxtapositions of devalued persons to each other. The authors take pains to explain their terminology in the very first chapter entitled “Labels,” but other image issues have not received as much attention.

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**MY JOURNEY WITH JAKE: A MEMOIR OF PARENTING AND DISABILITY.** By M. EDELSON. Toronto,

Ontario, Canada: Between the Lines, 2000. **REVIEW AVAILABLE ONLINE @ [www.srvip.org](http://www.srvip.org)**

**Reviewed by Wolf Wolfensberger**

THIS IS A PROBLEMATIC BOOK: insightful and instructive on the one hand, and reflective of the culture of modernism on the other. The author is a secular Jew in the public relations business in Ontario, Canada, with a “total control” mentality, who was married to a secular Christian. In her late 20s (in 1990), she gave birth to a profoundly retarded son Jake who had the extremely rare chromosomal abnormality of lissencephaly. She tells many of the usual horror stories, including predictions that her son will soon die. Despite her many bad experiences with professional and service contacts, the author is very gullible about professional expertise, and the death talk dominates her life and her relationship with her child, and is passed on to her later second child, Emma, who grows up expecting her brother to die imminently. The death expectancy is also acted out by their holding Jake’s Bar Mitzvah at age five. The book ends with Jake being 10-years-old, having survived one crisis after another, without the mother ever having caught on that she was a victim of dead-talking.

But in the end, even after the predictions of his death had been proven wrong for 10 years, the author buys an urn for Jake’s ashes once he really dies, and enshrines the waitful urn in her living room.

Once the author is beyond ordinary child-bearing years, she and her husband decide to have a second planned child, and go about it the “total control” way, prepared to abort if tests should reveal abnormalities.

The author is totally devoted to Jake, but for reasons not at all clear, she separates from her admirable, stable and totally involved husband. The author and the children’s father Jim had both been involved in previous quasi-married relationships, she with a man who had a child. But the author gets a lesson of how much more difficult child-rearing is without a spouse, even if the former spouse is still involved.

The story also highlights the dilemma of so many secularists: living out the decadent culture of modernism while yearning for spiritual meaning, resulting in incoherent dabbling in spiritual or religious activities. In this case, the author pursues Jewish culture and ritual while not embracing Jewish religion. Strangely, the author states that the secular worldview she shares with her husband unites them in their positions.

The author is a hyper-intense person who constantly courts burn-outs, and gullibly falls for professionals who by-and-by diagnose her as having depression, anxiety, panic attacks and seasonal affective disorder. As a result, she also ends up on prescription mind drugs with their adverse effects, and conjures up the stereotypical image of a discontented neurotic Jewish wife.

The parents also fell for a number of treatment crazes for Jake, but were wise enough to draw the line at heroic treatments.

A child like Jake is not manageable by most parents, and his parents were extremely fortunate to find a group home for medically fragile children near Belleville, Ontario, run by highly competent and totally committed Christians.

The author seems unaware of how privileged she was. She was able to recruit all sorts of help, supports and services, and seems unaware of those parents who come with poor skills and get no support. She also takes for granted the services she receives for herself: massage, mental therapies, swimming, etc., etc. At the same time, she gets a dose of the typical service disfunctionalities, such as endless discontinuities of paid helpers—a situation she analyses astutely.

She also points out the wastefulness of forcing families to undergo constant reassessment of their situation when the child suffers from a condition that hardly changes over time.

There is a chapter devoted to the 1995 battle between the Ontario provincial government versus parents and unions to close Thistleton Residential Treatment Center, a small provincial institution and service center. The author was one of the

organizers of the opposition to the closure, and ultimately won. The narrative is too one-sided to leave the reader with enough information on the wisdom of the decision, except that the whole book brings out the evil that resides in the provincial government, on which I had already taught in the 1970s.

She also points out that the efforts to “privatize” care services are really a disguise for trying to push service workers into the minimum wage category.

The author makes an eloquent argument that a society which forbids parents to euthanize their severely impaired children has an obligation to support the family, and provide the services needed. Unfortunately, she falls at least in part for the quality-of-life arguments. She also misinterprets the situation in the Netherlands, apparently unaware of the deathmaking policies there. She also falls for the myth that Tracy Latimer, a young girl with cerebral palsy who was euthanized by her father in Saskatchewan, “lived in pain.”

The book is well-written. The reader will not readily lay it down.

To students of SRV, this book is one of the best examples of how an inappropriate death expectancy and a dying role can be built up and acted out for a remarkably long time, and how experiences contrary to the expectations may still not be able to falsify it in the mind of the perceiver.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *Something rare happened in preparing this issue of the Journal: We received two reviews of the same book! This could have been a sticky decision*

*for us but thankfully, both reviews were well-written, rooted in SRV, and focused on **different** elements of the book. Therefore, read on and you will gain a fuller understanding of the issues raised in Smith's book from these two complementary reviews.*

**A RAT IS A PIG IS A DOG IS A BOY.** By W. SMITH. New York, NY: Encounter Books, 312 pages, 2010. **REVIEW AVAILABLE ONLINE @ [www.srvip.org](http://www.srvip.org)**

**Reviewed by Susanne Hartfiel**

THE TITLE OF Wesley J. Smith's new book is taken from a 1986 interview with Ingrid Newkirk, head of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). She said: “A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy. They are all mammals” (p. 3). Smith's title captures the theme of the book in which he analyzes the contemporary animal rights movement; traces its history; describes its ideology, language and goals; identifies core adherents and organizations; describes its methods and campaigns, including its lies and deceptions; talks about its success in reshaping people's minds and societal values; and finally warns against its acceptance in Western societies, as it poses a threat not only to the lives of vulnerable people but to society in general.

For people interested in Social Role Valorization (SRV), the book is especially relevant in terms of three aspects of SRV theory which get promoted by the animal rights perspective: (1) inflicting the wound of deathmaking onto devalued people (Wolfensberger, 1998, 21); (2) putting vulnerable people into the devalued roles of ‘animal,’ ‘subhuman being,’ ‘being which would be better-off-dead’ or ‘ought-to-be-dead,’ and ‘object of medical experimentation,’ (Wolfensberger, 1998, 14-16); as well as (3) impeding devalued people's competency enhancement by hindering research that would alleviate or cure diseases and impairment, or develop therapies to improve movement.

According to Smith, the term ‘animal rights’ “denotes a belief system, an ideology, even a qua-

si religion, which both implicitly and explicitly seeks to create a moral equivalence between the value of human lives and those of animals” (p. 3) and whose central dogma is that domesticating any animal or using animals for alleviating human suffering or for human consumption is a moral evil. Criteria, such as ‘painience’ (the ability to feel pain) or ‘sentience’ (the ability to experience sensation) are used to claim that animals and people are equal, and that animals should be attributed rights. Thus, killing people is seen as equal to killing animals. The raising and killing of chickens in a chicken factory, for instance, is seen as just as morally wrong as the Nazi holocaust of the Jews or the American enslavement of Africans. Although there are personal, ideological, as well as organizational overlaps, the animal rights movement is not to be confused with animal welfare efforts and organizations which advocate for a more humane treatment of animals but which are not opposed to the human use of animals.

Smith traces the animal rights movement’s origin back to Peter Singer and his 1975 book *Animal Liberation*, in which he promoted a utilitarian morality of judging actions not according to unchanging principles of right and wrong but according to likely or actual outcomes. What promotes happiness or reduces suffering the most while serving the interests of those with the highest ‘quality of life’ (i.e., those with higher cognitive abilities or similar criteria) is morally right (cf. Wolfensberger, 1994). Singer did not distinguish between animals and people, but decried such distinctions as ‘speciesism,’ something similar to racism or anti-semitism. Instead, he redefined the term ‘person’ which ought to include any being (human or animal) that exhibits ‘rationality’ and ‘self-consciousness.’ The implicit threat to the lives of vulnerable people is obvious: if they are not perceived as having certain abilities (such as intelligence) but of having ‘low quality of life’ and/or if they are not defined as ‘persons,’ they are seen as

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## Invitation to Write Book, Film & Article Reviews

### From the Editor

I ENCOURAGE OUR READERS to submit reviews to *The SRV Journal* of current films, books and articles. For people who are studying SRV, looking for everyday examples can help deepen one’s understanding. For people who are teaching SRV, learning from and using contemporary examples from the media in one’s teaching can be very instructive for audiences. For people who are implementing SRV, contemporary examples can provide fruitful ideas to learn from. Some books and articles mention SRV specifically; others do not but are still relevant to SRV. Both are good subjects for reviewing. We have written guidelines for writing book and film reviews. If you would like to get a copy of either set of guidelines, please let me know at:

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Thank you.

being below animals in moral worth (at least below some higher animals, such as dolphins, pigs or dogs) and thus considered killable, just like we kill animals for any number of reasons. Thus, Singer and his intellectual followers, who can be found in many prestigious universities, have suggested all kinds of deathmakings (e.g., killing unborn and newborn children, using impaired people's organs to save animals' lives, using vulnerable people in medical research alongside animals) as well as disgusting practices (e.g., sex between animals and people, creating human/animal chimeras). If animal 'persons' and human 'persons' are similar in moral value, and if human 'non-persons' and animal 'non-persons' are also similar, there is no logical argument against such practices.

However, unlike the proponents of the modern animal rights movement, being an utilitarianist, Singer does not believe in rights, neither in human nor animal rights. But he did, according to Smith, pave the animal rights movement's way as a successful societal movement by blurring the moral distinction between animals and humans. He and his followers also paved the way in connecting the moral value of humans to certain artificial criteria. All of this was contrary to the western Judeo-Christian tradition which clearly distinguishes between the moral value of humans and animals, and believes that all humans are entitled to equal moral worth regardless of their individual capacities, age, or state of health—that all have intrinsic human dignity.

Smith criticizes the movement's rights perspective in arguing that 'rights' can only be accorded to humans (and not to animals) because rights involve freedom and knowledge, and because they always come with specific duties. The biggest difference between humans and animals, according to him, is what he calls 'moral agency,' i.e., the ability to distinguish between 'right' and 'wrong' and to choose one course of action over another, which only humans as a species possess but not animals. "Only humans have the capacity to intentionally embrace the good—or engage

in the worst evil" (p. 239). Or, as Hans Jonas put it: "something like an 'ought to' can issue only from man and is alien to everything outside him" (p. 239). Not one single animal in the world can understand the concept of 'rights,' and it would be completely absurd to ask an animal to respect other animals' or people's rights. For instance, a female lion who kills a human baby does not commit a moral evil because she is only acting as a lion who is trying to feed her young; one cannot expect her to act otherwise and she is not free to act differently. Thus, no animal can be held morally accountable for its actions, which also means no animal has duties, no animal has rights.

According to Smith, the whole question of 'animal rights' boils down to the question of what responsibilities humans have vis-a-vis animals and the rest of creation, not what rights animals possess. He claims that virtually all major faith traditions promote the proper care of animals but also assert that humans have greater worth than animals, and that the differences between humans as a species and animals as a species can be and have always been known by a rational examination of the differences between humans and all other known life forms.

Smith is convinced that rejecting 'human exceptionalism' will lead to tyranny, that knocking "human beings off the pedestal of moral distinctiveness" (p. 8) will change society completely. In the words of Mortimer J. Adler: "superior human beings might be separated from inferior men by a wider gap than separated the latter from non-human animals. Why, then, should not groups of superior men be able to justify their enslavement, exploitation, or even genocide of inferior human groups, on factual and moral grounds akin to those that we now rely on to justify our treatment of the animals we harness as beasts of burden, that we butcher for food and clothing, or that we destroy as disease-bearing pests or as dangerous predators?" (pp. 242/243).

Much of the book describes the activists of the animal rights movement, quotes their statements

and describes their methods. Apart from the basic beliefs described above, the movement is not a homogenous block, but there are differences of views and strategies. Some activists pursue legitimate and peaceful methods (such as attitude shaping, education of the public, lobbying for different legislation) while others are involved in harassment, vandalism, criminal attacks, fire bombings and threats of murder against people and organizations accused of animal abuse, such as scientists who are experimenting with animals to find cures for diseases, or the food industry. Smith is convinced that most animal rights activists and organizations support the various (including the violent) strategies ideologically and sometimes even financially, even if they are not engaged in it themselves. He shows with a multitude of examples how violence gets detoxified and how most information material issued by animal rights organizations and most of their media campaigns are a mix of truthful information and well-placed lies and deception, aimed at misleading the public and destroying people's reputations and livelihoods, thus advancing the organizations' ultimate goal of banning all animal use.

Although most ordinary people will not agree with the movement's radical goal of eliminating all human use of animals, Smith claims that many have become confused about the differences between animals and humans. He also says that many animal welfare organizations which started out advocating for a more humane treatment and use of animals have been co-opted by animal rights ideology, and are not clear about their purpose and goals any more.

Just how successful the animal rights movement has been in recent decades is exemplified in its worldwide legislative successes and efforts that blur the distinction between animals and humans, and that aim at enabling animals to bring lawsuits against people—which is, of course absurd, as it will always be people who will actually be bringing the lawsuits. For instance, in 2002, an amendment to Florida's constitution was passed that granted pigs

a constitutional right not to be kept in gestation crates. In 2005, a Brazilian court allowed a chimpanzee to bring a lawsuit in his own name—and awarded the animal a writ of habeas corpus against its keeper. In 2007, the Balearic Islands of Spain issued a declaration that equated the protection of apes with the protection of human children, and one year later the Spanish parliament passed a law that protects apes' 'individual liberty' and 'right to life,' granting them 'freedom from torture.' Spain also instructed its diplomats to push for similar changes in other countries and for UN declarations. In Austria, animal rights activists tried to have a court grant personhood to a chimpanzee, so that they could be made its legal guardians. The court rejected the attempt but in 2008 the European Court of Human Rights agreed to hear the case and determine whether the ape should be considered a legal person.

Smith writes that there are now at least one hundred law schools that offer animal law classes and programs, and the names of the academics and universities he mentions are quite prestigious. He also mentions several US instances in which animals today are already better protected by law than certain vulnerable humans, one example being medical experiments. On page 29 he writes: "This belief that profoundly cognitively disabled or undeveloped human beings—now reduced in human status to nonpersonhood in order to avoid speciesism—could ethically be used along with, or in place of animals in medical research has been discussed respectfully at the highest levels of professional discourse, in books, journals, public media, and at symposia." How fast such ideas and discussions turn into practice today is, I might add, exemplified in the European Union's recently proposed rules that restrict experiments with animals while allowing them with human embryos (*Die Tagespost*, 10 June 2010).

The next step will be, Smith suggests, granting rights to plants. And here, too, there is already a forerunner: Switzerland, which "recently under-

took a government-sanctioned process that could be constructed as the beginning step in establishing plant rights” (p. 245).

Although Wesley Smith’s book is filled with much detail and resource material and very worthwhile reading, there are also some points for critique. For instance, I wished it was a bit more clearly organized which would have made it easier to follow certain lines of argument. In terms of the animal rights movement’s ideological background, it would have been interesting to hear more about its philosophical materialism and how this quite logically leads to a degradation of human dignity. In regard to the ‘rights’ perspective, an analysis of the Western world’s obsession with legal rights (as opposed to transcendent ones) would have helped to put the worldwide legal success of such an irrational social movement into perspective. Both aspects are touched upon in the book but not elaborated. Wesley Smith’s book is nevertheless very worthwhile reading, especially for those who want to learn more about the wound of deathmaking of societally devalued people and how deeply it is engrained in Western societies.

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**A RAT IS A PIG IS A DOG IS A BOY.** By W. SMITH. New York, NY: Encounter Books, 312 pages, 2010. **REVIEW AVAILABLE ONLINE @ [www.srvip.org](http://www.srvip.org)**

#### Reviewed by Stephen Tiffany

WESLEY J. SMITH is an American consumer advocate, political thinker and expert on such issues as euthanasia, assisted suicide, and in-vitro fertilization. Smith is probably best known for some of his earlier work with renowned American politician and consumer rights advocate Ralph Nader. In Smith’s previous book, “Culture of Death: The Assault on Medical Ethics in America,” he asked people to take a second look at the pro-euthanasia movement and argued for “human exceptionalism,” a stance similar to a sanctity of life position. Currently, Smith is a Senior Fellow in Human Rights and Bioethics at the Discovery Institute, a political think-tank, and regularly writes about a variety of issues on his blog entitled ‘Secondhand Smoke.’

This particular book is devoted to animal rights activism. Smith’s stance is clear from the beginning; he is unequivocally opposed to the animal rights movement’s exaltation of animals to equal status with humans. He believes this degrades the value of human life with disastrous consequences for societally devalued people; more specifically, those with severe mental impairments, physical impairments, the aged, the un-born and newly-born, and the comatose. It is a complicated argument, but one that can be explained using the language of societal devaluation.

In the first section of the book, Smith presents us with a rundown of the prevailing ideologies currently influencing animal rights activists, which vary widely between factions. For some it is the utilitarian theory presented by Peter Singer, and

his assertion that each living thing has an inherent value based on its capacity to reason and experience emotion. From Singer's ethical viewpoint, one could argue that an ape has more inherent value than a comatose human who, according to Singer, can no longer reason or experience emotion. Singer is well known for his use of the word 'Speciesism,' defined as "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species" (Singer, 1975, 6). It is with Singer's theory that we can see the danger to devalued people most clearly, in that 'personhood' is no longer simply based on being human, but rests on an arbitrary continuum of intelligence. This theory of course puts mentally impaired persons in the same devalued roles that they have been placed for centuries, such as that of subhuman, animal, vegetable or the 'other' (Wolfensberger, 1998, 15), and thereby opens the door to great risk of unjust, abusive and even life-threatening treatment. After all, by such dangerous logic, if a human person is not really human but more like an animal, then we who are human beings can treat them as animals or as dumb brutes rather than as human persons with all the inherent dignity which that implies.

For other animal rights activists, the "Rights" ideology trumpeted by activist groups such as PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) or the ALF (Animal Liberation Front) has been more influential. Such groups call for the establishment of the same equal rights for all animals as there are for humans. This includes rats, mice and fish. For such groups, being a pet owner is considered cruel because the pet is enslaved 'against their will' to serve a human need for companionship. Many people might dismiss the views of such groups as extremist and on the fringes of the political left. Smith argues however that we should familiarize ourselves with such views as they are quickly becoming part of the mainstream. A case in point, according to Smith, is Cass Sunstein, US President Barack

Obama's 'regulations czar' "who explicitly advocates that animals be granted legal standing to sue" (Smith, 66).

Also in this section Smith illustrates how the activist group PETA has seized on what Dr. W. Wolfensberger (1998) refers to within Social Role Valorization (SRV) theory as "The Dynamics and Relevance of Social Imagery" (1998, 104). PETA is a group that is well known for using media to successfully advertise their brand and fund-raise for their cause; in short, they know what kind of images bring sympathy from humans towards animals, whether they are truthful or not. The high-consciousness of the dynamics of social imagery in the business sector has been previously commented on by Wolfensberger and Thomas (1994, 36). The skilled use of imagery by activist groups such as PETA appears to be a more recent phenomenon. In one such campaign, PETA juxtaposed images of dead pigs with that of emaciated inmates from German concentration camps. The name of this campaign: "Holocaust on Your Plate." In another incident, known as the "The Silver Spring Monkey" case, PETA were accused of manipulating images of monkeys to make them look as if they were being horribly tortured during medical experiments. Despite the fraudulent nature of the pictures, the public outcry over them was enough to shut down the experiments. Ironically, the monkeys were involved in experiments for a therapy called "constraint-induced movement therapy" which has since been proven to help stroke victims regain mobility in their limbs; in SRV theory we would say that this therapy is competency enhancing.

The stark (and often false) images presented to us by groups such as PETA provoke outrage and sympathy for the animals pictured. Many of the hardcore activists, however, hope that humans will do more than sympathize with animals; they hope that we will empathize with animals, literally seeing ourselves in them. This concept in a perverse way fits with the SRV theme of Inter-



personal Identification (Wolfensberger, 1998, 119). Through images, vignettes and anthropomorphizing language, animal rights activists hope that the common person will come to believe exactly what the title of this book states: "A Rat is a Pig is a Dog is a Boy." As proposed in Social Role Valorization (Wolfensberger, 1998), "The more people identify with each other, the more they are likely to want good things to happen to each other" (p. 119). Similarly, animal rights activists believe that it is necessary for people in society to see themselves in animals in order for them to treat them more humanely. Smith believes that however well intentioned the activists are in this regard, the tactics used to promote identification amongst humans and animals (such as the use of anthropomorphizing language) are untruthful and for the most part scientifically unsound. Despite what the activists might say, a rat is not a pig, is not a dog, nor is it a boy.

Part two of the book gives us a detailed description of the increasingly violent methods employed by animal rights activists in their pursuit of animal/human equality. In many cases, activists have engaged in legal protests or acts of civil disobedience in order to grab the attention of the media, governments and society in general. In an increasing number of instances however, certain activists (especially those who align themselves with the ALF) have been resorting to acts of violence and to what Smith refers to as terror. This includes threatening scientists' children and planting car bombs in the vehicles of medical researchers. Smith argues that often this intimidation has worked, with many scientists, professors, farmers, etc., choosing different careers after enduring years of harassment and in some cases life-threatening injuries. According to Smith, it is just a matter of time before the violent activities of animal rights activists result in the death of humans, whether it is accidental or not.

In the third and final part of the book, Smith explicates his own ideologies and beliefs sur-

rounding our treatment of animals, including his belief in 'human exceptionalism,' along with a passionate and coherent defense of medical experimentation, an omnivore's diet, and the fur and hunting industries.

Overall, I found this book to be an informative and engaging read, one where the author pulled no punches about his stance on the issue. I'm sure that Smith would hope that animal rights activists would take his book seriously, but I'm afraid that much of what is contained in it reads as a direct attack against such activists and, indeed, Smith himself has already been demonized by such groups. While animal rights activists are just one of many groups that devalue the lives of the impaired and the disabled, theirs is a message that is gaining traction in our culture and it may already be too late to turn the tide against them. For those of us dedicated to protecting the lives of vulnerable people, Smith's message is one that we should familiarize ourselves with and take very seriously.

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**ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE IN HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE.** By V. NZIRA & P. WILLIAMS. London: Sage Publications, Inc., 223 pages, 2009. **REVIEW AVAILABLE ONLINE @ [www.srvip.org](http://www.srvip.org)**

**Reviewed by Marc Tumeinski**

AT BEST, A REVIEW OFFERS one perspective on a book. No review can likely do justice to an entire book, especially, as in this case, a 220-page textbook; that would require reading the entire book for oneself. A review though can give a sense of the book, particularly what the reviewer took away from it. My perspectives in reviewing this text were threefold: I teach Social Role Valorization (SRV); I try to apply SRV, particularly in the lives of people who are societally devalued due to impairment or poverty; and I teach undergraduate and graduate students at a local college.

Various 'blurbs' on the book cover and in the preface mention that the book is aimed at those studying oppression and trying to counter oppression, particularly in health and social care, and is thus geared at both a college and professional audience. On that most immediate level, the book is a natural for someone interested in SRV to pick up and read. One of the authors, Paul Williams, has a long connection to PASS and Normalisation in the UK and to the work of Dr. Wolfensberger.

In the broadest strokes, SRV is concerned with making things better for disenfranchised individuals and groups, of lower social status, who are excluded from the benefits of typical society. SRV is an approach rooted in social theory that can be applied on the level of the individual, of primary and secondary social systems, and of society overall. It is built on understanding the identity and needs of societally devalued people and groups. A pressing focus within SRV circles is on educating those who offer service about the problem of societal devaluation, and about a relevant and potent response. In similarly broad strokes, Nzira and Williams are concerned with a comparable problem and range of approaches

across a spectrum of services. The authors do a nice job of linking personal and organizational responses to oppression. The text references SRV and related concepts, such as 'wounding,' devaluation, social roles and integration/participation.

The format of the text should be beneficial for students. Each chapter includes an opening list of aims and a closing summary. Helpful exercises are offered at key points in each chapter. A fair number of web references make it more likely that the average student will actually access these resources, and also grounds the book in contemporary developments. The layout of the book chapters moves from a basic description of the problem of oppression and relevant definitions to an overview of 1) organizational and 2) personal adaptive responses to oppression, and closes with an invitation to reflect on the issues raised. The final section emphasizes personal and organizational evaluation. This structure lends itself well to reflective learning for university-level students. I am less sure that social service practitioners would turn to this text as a reference, though this is one of the stated goals of the authors. Its layout and level of detail seem more suited to introducing people to these concepts rather than a reference that one would turn to for specifics.

After reading the book and going back to re-read certain sections, I have a number of reactions running through my head, mostly based in my own SRV background. In that way, the authors certainly achieved their intention of encouraging reflective learning. Keep in mind that other than hearing a few references to it over the years and reading a bit here and there, I was fairly new to the history and approach of 'anti-oppressive' practice. My primary reactions were to the following.

- **The language and approach of 'anti-oppressive' practice.** Philosophically and linguistically, it was hard for me to wrap my head around a negative goal (don't do this: don't be oppressive) as opposed to a positive goal (do this: support valued social roles). Perhaps that is an intentional move

by its advocates, to underscore the harm caused by oppression.

The word 'oppression' indicates to me a level of consciousness which the term 'societal devaluation' does not. Oppression seems to carry with it an underlying tone of intentionality by the oppressor. In SRV, by comparison, we learn about the dynamics of personal and systemic unconsciousness which often surround the processes of societal devaluation.

The notion of 'anti-oppressive' practice as described also felt a bit subjective to me, as opposed to being rooted in a solid set of assumptions and principles. I would like to have read more about this, but I was left feeling that it was up to me as the reader to work out the practical implications of 'anti-oppressive' practice. I had the sense it was more a general mindset than a concrete set of principles and action implications. Some of that subjectivity may come from the limitations of a university textbook for undergraduates. Part of what the authors do is offer an overview of relevant contemporary literature in the field, which can be quite useful for new learners, but also is inherently selective, given the limitations of text length.

A major heuristic described in the textbook was the 'WISE' approach, standing for Welcome, Image, Support and Empowerment. WISE is certainly a positive acronym from an imagery standpoint. Some of the four elements share common ground with principles and themes of SRV, 'Image' being one clear example. However, I still do not have a concrete sense of what each of these elements represents, either on the individual or organizational level. Welcome, for example, is described as welcoming diversity and being knowledgeable about and sensitive to the identity and self-professed identity of people, which includes knowledge of history, survival, culture, language, belief systems and contributions (p. 117). Support is described as giving people the help they need to function equally in society (p. 128). Empowerment is focused on self-help and self-advocacy. Clear enough, but the concrete implications of these four elements or how they relate to addressing oppression, other

than potentially increasing one's basic knowledge of oppressed people, was not very clear to me from the text. Addressing societal devaluation is deeper and broader than just being knowledgeable and respectful in one's personal interactions with others.

- **Primary focus on racism and prejudice against homosexuals.** The examples and practices mentioned in the book were heavily geared toward prejudice against homosexuals and minority racial groups. This may speak to the audience that Nzira and Williams are trying to reach. This emphasis made it a bit more difficult for me to relate the content of the book to issues of societal devaluation due to impairment. Impairment was certainly touched on in the book in several places but I would have liked to have read more about how 'anti-oppressive' practice and the WISE heuristic could be applied to supporting individuals and groups devalued due to physical and intellectual impairment.

- **Assumption concerning empowerment.** One clearly described assumption was that oppressed people can pull themselves out of oppression and should be given more credit for doing so (pp. 14-18), and perhaps by implication, should be given more opportunities to do so. I can agree to a certain extent and enjoyed reading the examples offered in the book, many of which were new to me, but overall this seems a debatable point. Despite the citing of a few examples, I would have liked more analysis and so am not convinced of this claim by the text itself.

The way I have understood it, informed by SRV and my own service experience, devaluation is fundamentally a societal problem, and therefore any address of the problem must fundamentally be societal as well. It must by implication directly and indirectly involve the relevant society. The very nature of the processes of societal devaluation, of the negative perception and subsequent negative treatment of particular groups of people by the larger society, cannot be addressed solely or even primarily by those oppressed people advocating for them-

selves. Additionally, it has been my experience serving others that at least some devalued people will not be able to extricate themselves from oppression, devaluation and wounding. Doing so would require at minimum a certain level of instrumental competency which devalued individuals/groups often do not have, largely because of their physical, intellectual and/or functional impairments, either the cause or result of their devaluation. Others could of course assist them and even work together with them to make a positive difference.

- **Identity.** The notion of identity was raised in the book, e.g., how certain categories of identity can be associated with risk of oppression (p. 115). The emphasis seemed to be on gaining basic knowledge about oppressed people, such as their nationality, history, appearance, roles, skills and so on. In PASSING foundation discussion terms, this might be thought of as asking the question ‘factually and demographically, who are the people served?’ I would like to have read more about this idea in light of what SRV teaches about the importance of stepping into the shoes of societally devalued people, and answering the PASSING foundation discussion question, ‘who existentially are the people served?’ Williams has touched on this idea in some of his previous writing (2006). The idea of deeply coming to grips with the identity of devalued individuals and groups comes across clearly in SRV workshop teaching on devaluation and resultant wounding, the theme of interpersonal identification in the SRV monograph and SRV workshops, and the ‘foundation discussion’ process in PASSING workshops.

A FEW relatively minor considerations for readers:

(a) The UK context of the book will occasionally require non-UK readers to do a little background research to understand some of what is referred to, e.g., New Labour, the Third Way, the MacPherson Inquiry. This is not necessarily a bad thing of course. An invitation to look outside of ourselves, our practices and what we are used to can be a healthy

stretch, and encourage us to look more objectively at what is going on in our own systems and environments. I learned by researching these references.

(b) The book contains several references to Social Role Valorization (though oddly this was not capitalized), to Dr. Wolfensberger and to PASSING.

(c) Some references to SRV-related ideas were not included in the index, and some index references seemed to point to the wrong page numbers.

ALL IN ALL, THIS BOOK gave me a ‘taste’ of ‘anti-oppression’ thinking, but I am left wishing I could have read more about concrete strategies and principles to help me form a deeper understanding of ‘anti-oppressive’ practice. Reading the book also pushed me to reflect more on SRV, what it calls for and what it implies, in comparison to ‘anti-oppressive’ practice. I certainly share the stated desire of the authors to encourage and invite those involved in services to stand up on behalf of societally devalued people, and to reflect on one’s own individual as well as organizational practices in light of that goal, though we approach this problem and how to address it from different perspectives. My sense is that there are few people thinking clearly about and working hard at helping vulnerable devalued people, and so, differences aside, I am glad to read of others joining in that moral endeavor.

EDITOR’S NOTE: *Paul Williams gave a presentation on the topic of anti-oppressive practice & SRV at the 2003 International SRV Conference in Calgary, CAN.*

#### REFERENCE

Williams, P. (2006). *Social work with people with learning difficulties*. Exeter: Learning Matters Ltd.

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