

The Role of Administrators in Upholding Social Role Valorization Mindfulness in Service Staff: Its Necessity, Benefits and Challenges

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *This paper was presented at the Sixth International SRV Conference held in 2015 in Providence, RI (US).*

SERVICE ADMINISTRATORS who openly and genuinely espouse Social Role Valorization (SRV) as a guiding service theory are confronted by the constant challenge of keeping SRV in the forefront of their service staff's awareness, i.e., the business of upholding what might be called "SRV mindfulness." This challenge, along with the benefits, of a long-term commitment to SRV was the focus of a presentation given at the Sixth International SRV Conference (June 8 to 12, 2015) in Providence, Rhode Island, by a panel of human service administrators. Each panelist had lived the experience of being a strong proponent of SRV in a human service context that is so often inimical to it. Their remarks on this topic are synthesized here by the author, a member of the panel, which was comprised of:

- Ric Brown, Executive Director of Community Ventures in Living, a non-profit multi-county social service organization headquartered in Lafayette, Indiana that provides services intended to enable developmentally disabled people, ranging in age from infant to elder, to continue to live in their own homes or with their families.

- Ann Flynn, Executive Director of Shriver Clinical Services Corporation in Wakefield, Massachusetts, a non-profit organization working in partnership with the Massachusetts Department

of Developmental Services to provide optimum medical services in both community and institutional settings for individuals with significant impairments and intellectual disabilities, including training and educating clinicians, staff and allies of people with impairments.

- Barbara Vyrosto, Executive Director of Welland and Pelham Association for Community Living in Welland, Ontario, a government funded non-profit organization that provides family supports, residential options, employment, recreation, leisure and social activities services.

- Robert Weinhardt, Executive Director of Renaissance House in Tiffin, Ohio, a private non-profit residential service to individuals with developmental disabilities, most living in their own homes, in a five-county northern Ohio area.

- Beth French,[†] Executive Director of Brockville and District Association for Community Involvement, Brockville, Ontario, acted as panel moderator.

Necessity

THE ABOVE ADMINISTRATORS are motivated by a sense of responsibility to enable their service recipients to attain valued social roles. They share a strong belief in both the power and truth of SRV, and they also believe that staff awareness and commitment to SRV is essential to their service delivery efforts. This belief is exemplified in various ways. For example, each organi-

zation has a history of sending service workers to SRV and PASSING (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2007) training, sponsoring SRV and PASSING training events for their own staff and others, incorporating basic SRV ideas into its orientation of new staff, and providing recurrent reinforcement of these ideas in their formal and informal discussions. Each recognizes that his/her own deep understanding and commitment to SRV is required in order for them to, in turn, support their service workers in helping those they serve to attain valued social roles and, ultimately, greater access to the good things of life (Wolfensberger, Thomas & Caruso, 1996). Fundamentally, their commitments are sustained by a belief that the potential benefits of implementing SRV are very real and well worth struggling to attain.

Benefits

THE PANELISTS IDENTIFIED many general and specific ways in which SRV implementation benefitted the people served by their respective organizations—benefits which, they felt, were not likely to be realized without their staff having had a service mentality framed by SRV. Some such benefits included the following.

SRV, and especially PASSING, empirically describe ideal though achievable service responses to a person's vulnerabilities. What is ideal for a person provides a framework for decision making at all levels of the organization. Note that this perspective is not meant to limit the application of SRV to one person; the above-named agencies were responsible for supporting multiple people. Furthermore, these agencies have come to realize that what is ideal for a person can be difficult to conceptualize without SRV. These agencies have found that when leadership staff have been well-trained in SRV and PASSING, it helps to frame conversations about making potent and relevant decisions affecting the entire gamut of supports, from mundane to life-changing. Having a home; being a good neighbor, true friend, or a loving

and loved family member; and having a meaningful role to fulfill during the day (such as worker or student) are likely to lead to some of the good things of life that result from capitalizing upon the power of valued roles (Wolfensberger, Thomas & Caruso, 1996).

Understanding the devaluing life experience and heightened vulnerability of service recipients gives program and agency leadership a direction to follow, and improves service workers' ability to see the impact of service provision from the point of view of the service recipient. In the case of the agencies named above, this has led, for example, to service workers staunchly advocating for the worth of people with medically vulnerable conditions, to services maintaining organizational commitments to people over the long run and, in a significant number of instances, to service staff maintaining long-term personal commitments to individual recipients.

Service workers with an understanding of SRV seek and support valued roles for service recipients. A few concrete examples of this include: supporting an elderly gentleman to become recognized and respected in his family role as "uncle;" helping a middle-aged woman from a large family fulfill her roles as sister, daughter and aunt; assisting an adult man to fulfill his role as a deacon in his church; and encouraging recipients to be good neighbors by small but thoughtful and bridge-building gestures, such as making cookies for new families coming into the neighborhood, or creating opportunities for neighbors to spend time together in shared hobbies.

SRV helps service workers to gain insight into the issues that are truly important to service recipients. It greatly helps to clarify the service workers' roles, and to strengthen empathy for and commitment to the person served. When faced with difficulty finding decent housing for a service recipient desperate for a home of his own, service workers with a grounding in SRV were able to relate his "existential story," making it about a human being, and not just about a case or number,

thus countering the bureaucratic tendency to objectify and depersonalize.

The panel members agreed that it is possible that benefits such as these might occur in services with no or little SRV awareness or commitment, but that, if so, such outcomes would likely be “accidental,” so to speak; nor is it likely such services would fully appreciate the importance of such outcomes in recipients’ experience of the good things of life, or work hard to safeguard these outcomes.

Furthermore, knowledge acquired from SRV helps service workers to understand that choice is not an exercise in simply asserting one’s rights. Autonomy is often denied to devalued people, and so conscious efforts are made to provide people with enough information to make informed choices. Consideration is given to the potential effects that a particular choice may have on a person’s image and/or competence. Furthermore, expectations are not limited to choices involving segregated activities. And so on. An SRV framework can help service workers to see when choices can lead to valued roles, or to the opposite, namely, further wounding and devaluation. It helps service workers to see that societally valued roles are more likely to occur and persist when service workers help a person consider joining a community sports league, attend evening cooking classes at the local culinary school, or attend adult Bible study at a local church, rather than engaging in such activities in programs only for people with disabilities. It helps service workers see that efforts as simple as helping a person look her best and dress nicely when carrying out a valued role in a valued setting with valued people, even if getting “dressed up” to fit the role is not necessarily the person’s first choice. The above are just a few simple illustrations meant to emphasize the larger point about SRV and choice making.

Challenges

THE INHERENT pedagogic complexity and rigorous learning demands of SRV present challenges to those who are commit-

ted to its implementation, particularly on the level of a program or organization. For some direct service workers, these challenges can pose barriers to acquiring more than a fairly superficial understanding of SRV. For example, some direct service workers may have had limited educational opportunities beyond high school, or may have been out of school for a long time, and may at first find it difficult to fully appreciate the high-order concepts of SRV or to immediately connect the conceptual framework of SRV to what they do every day. Other staff may not have the time or support necessary to attend SRV and PASSING training.

However, most of the challenges faced by direct service staff in regard to SRV commitment and implementation are due to external dynamics. For example, a major obstacle is that so many direct service workers face significant financial hardships. It is not uncommon for direct service staff to work several jobs just to make ends meet. The relatively low rates of pay generally accorded to them greatly adds to the difficulty that service organizations face in trying to recruit and retain direct service workers. Altogether, these realities can make it quite difficult for such workers to identify with the need for service recipients to attain valued social roles in order to experience the good things of life, when so many service workers may be lacking in these themselves or otherwise struggling to realize them.

Another pervasive external challenge to SRV acquisition is that—with only a few exceptions—there is a general lack of interest within “developmental disabilities” and some other human service fields in sponsoring or attending full introductory training in SRV and PASSING, at least interest at the “official” or systemic level. This situation is exacerbated by the availability of, and easy access to, thousands of shorter trainings that at least on the surface appear to be more “feel good” and non-controversial than SRV, which is usually advertised as being both lengthy and demanding. Many human service leaders would rather spend their staff development funds and efforts on train-

ing that promotes things like rights, self-advocacy, person-centered planning or even staff-recipient surveillance mechanisms. Even within agencies that are committed to SRV, it is difficult to maintain commitment to engaging staff in regular full SRV and PASSING training due to the cost and time commitment that these entail.

Yet another external challenge is that of “staff turnover.” Turnover rates of direct service workers exceed 50% per year in many agencies. Turnover perpetuates relationship discontinuity, one of the common wounds of many service recipients. Turnover is a significant barrier to first getting workers trained in SRV, and then to keeping them around long enough to learn to implement SRV by the essential direct on-the-job experience and even mentorship that proficient SRV implementation generally requires.

SRV learning is challenged by the ‘rights and choice’ culture, which can overemphasize rights to the point of distortion, and can obscure issues surrounding the choices that some people make which end up exacerbating devalued status. Choice is too often exalted regardless of the result. Little thought is given to what impact a particular choice may have on a person’s image, for example, or level of competency. What makes a person happy or feel accepted gets promoted as the essential element of choice. If a developmentally disabled adult chooses to attend a children’s activity sponsored for other developmentally disabled adults, discussion about the impact this may have on that person’s image and competency is often discouraged or not even considered, thus potentially exacerbating the heightened vulnerability of so many adults with intellectual impairments to be seen and treated as more like children (Wolfensberger, 1998, pp. 15-16).

Another challenge to SRV learning, mastery and implementation is the denial in professional “developmental disability” circles that social and societal devaluation exists. This can make the importance of socially valued roles—what they really are and mean for a person—difficult to compre-

hend. “I don’t devalue people with disabilities” or “I personally don’t believe that a person’s disability is devaluing” are common responses when discussing conscious or unconscious devaluation. It is still common to see people with disabilities surrounded by images that promote such negative stereotypes, such as that they are a menace, child-like or sick. Despite self-advocacy, self-determination and other popular ideologies, vulnerable people continue to be placed in or associated with devalued roles, served in segregated services, and provided activities with little relevance or hope for truly valued roles.

Another challenge to maintaining SRV mindfulness faced by agency directors is when the authority to plan services is ultimately outside of their control. This is often the case when service planning is led by “case management” employees of governmental entities that have funding and regulatory control. For multiple, non-programmatic reasons, case managers often have little day-to-day contact with, or knowledge of, service recipients’ history or current needs. Thus, despite such mandated basics for the planning process as assessment, person-centeredness and measurable outcomes, plans are so often created that primarily address only low-level needs and short-term accomplishments—that is, things that can be more simply and quickly demonstrated, measured and checked off. The service agency in such contexts, while technically a member of the service recipient’s “team,” is placed in a subordinate status of doing what the service-shapers and funders decide, or is otherwise strongly disincentived from addressing their recipients’ higher order needs. Doing so is often seen as unnecessary by those responsible for the plan, because they can simply (and with very little mental or physical effort) go to a “person-centered tool box” website and choose from a variety of templates to come up with a plan. However, helping a service recipient achieve and fill valued social roles is greatly facilitated if doing so comes to be seen as an important endeavor by all concerned, including case man-

agers and service funders. Discussions surrounding valued social roles require insight about many aspects of a service recipient's life, and planning should follow a thoughtful process incorporating role goals (Wolfensberger, 1998, pp. 82-95). In other words, realizing valid SRV goals requires substantial SRV mindfulness.

Programmatic issues surrounding the needs of service recipients should be what gives the organization its mission and guides the efforts of service leadership and service workers. Meeting the needs of service recipients should be the driving force of service delivery. However, the reality is that agency directors spend much of their time contending with non-programmatic issues that have little to do with, and in fact largely constrain, organized efforts to address the needs of their service recipients. Funding requirements, regulatory mandates, compliance demands, staff turnover, human resource management issues, legal liability avoidance and many other non-programmatic concerns occupy much of the day-to-day time and focus of agency directors' efforts.

Funding requirements sometimes present a contradictory challenge. Agency directors may struggle to get additional individualized services, and then find it difficult to say no to providing a congregate service with a high(er) rate of compensation. On the one hand, it is a major challenge when a service recipient's needs exceed funding limits or approved billable time specifications—such as happens in the case of a recipient's failing health—causing the service system's wheels to start grinding toward the person's institutional placement or worse. On the other hand, funding, sometimes substantial funding, is readily available (at least in the US) for segregated and congregated services, such as in transportation and day services, and in elder services, including nursing homes.

Agency directors are also challenged by the very strong natural tendency to want to believe—or to at least allow others (e.g., family members, board members and funders) to believe—that staff or the organization is almost by definition doing good

work. This creates major barriers to understanding and dealing with what is wrong with services, not to mention what may be good but could be so much better, and hinders recognizing/accepting that such comforting beliefs, along with the organizational and systemic (in)actions these generate, are often part of the problem (cf. Osburn, Caruso & Wolfensberger, 2011). Serving a small number of people in a nice looking, well-appointed home in the heart of the community is a good start for service recipients to occupy certain valued roles, but is merely a positive precondition. It does not automatically mean that valued social roles will be attained without further and sustained efforts across all levels of the organization.

Conclusion

WE THINK THE CHALLENGES we have noted here are fairly “universal” among SRV-minded service administrators, at least in North American services and services systems. We further think that it would be helpful for like-minded agency directors with the same SRV commitments and determination to maintain contact with each other in order to share experiences as well as SRV implementative strategies and resources. The international SRV conferences provide occasional opportunities for this. A more regular gathering of directors to share ideas, successes and challenges would be worth organizing. On-line forums are another avenue for this that could be accessed to establish and maintain a regular dialogue among SRV directors. Implementing SRV in services can start with the commitments of the agency director and permeate the service. Such commitments are essential in order to inspire and validate the SRV efforts of service workers, and in order for them to more fully understand the power of SRV to bring the people they serve valued social roles and at least some of the good things of life. Lastly, for service directors with such commitments, integrity and earnestness in pursuit of SRV is important to uphold even if perfect successes will not always be achieved or attained. ☞

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THE CITATION FOR THIS ARTICLE IS

Weinhardt, R. (2016). The role of administrators in upholding Social Role Valorization mindfulness in service staff: Its necessity, benefits and challenges. *The SRV Journal*, 11(1), 51–56.

A NOTE ON THE WORD ‘INMATE’

Two of the original meanings of the noun ‘inmate’ were a) someone who was a mate or associate of others in the same dwelling; and b) someone who resided in a house occupied or rented by another person—i.e., a lodger or subtenant.

In the 16th and 17th centuries in England, statutes prohibited (poor) persons becoming inmates in someone else’s home. In the 16th century, for example, the owner of any cottage who took in an inmate had to pay 10 shillings per month to the local lord (Public Act, 31 Elizabeth I, c. 7; An Act against erecting and maintaining of Cottages, 1588). Anyone who took in an inmate was also responsible for keeping that person from begging. Furthermore, the local parish became financially responsible for contributing to the relief of any poor persons, including inmates, within its boundaries (Public Act, 43 Elizabeth I, c. 2; An Act for the Relief of the Poor, 1601). In essence, taking in poor inmates during this time was discouraged both legally and financially.

A related meaning of inmate described someone who was a foreigner or stranger, someone dwelling in a place where he or she was not originally from or did not belong.

Thomas Medwin in his 1834 book *The Angler in Wales* mentioned an inmate of a lunatic asylum. This may be one of the earliest usages of inmate to refer to residents in some kind of institution.

Related terms include *inmatecy* (the position of an inmate); *inmated* (located as an inmate); and *inmateless* (without an inmate).

Source information from the Oxford English Dictionary