

Some SRV Considerations About Work, Work Sites & Work Contexts, Especially in Light of the Contemporary Push to Abolish What Are Called “Sheltered Work Settings”

Susan Thomas

Introduction and Background

AS READERS of this *Journal* know, Social Role Valorization, or SRV, grew out of the principle of normalization. In the early days of normalization (the 1970s), there was much discussion and even experimentation about different work options and work settings for devalued people, and especially mentally handicapped people who so often were either idle, or relegated to very child-imaged education programs or “day activities” programs, often of an arts-and-crafts nature. However, as early in the modern era as the 1960s (but even earlier, such as during the period of “moral treatment” in the late 1700s to mid-1800s), it was known, and had been demonstrated, that even severely impaired persons could work a full adult work schedule, and could perform relatively complicated work. Of course, Marc Gold’s work in the 1970s (e.g., Gold, 1975)—later called Training in Systematic Instruction—also showed that it was possible to teach severely mentally handicapped people to do work that required multiple complex steps to complete a product, and, with good instruction, to do it virtually error-free and independently.

In Wolfensberger’s 1972 book *The Principle of Normalization in Human Services*, there was a 13-page chapter by Simon Olshansky, then a leader in progressive thinking about work for handicapped people, on ‘Changing Vocational Behavior Through Normalization’ (pp. 150-163). Also, in Wolfensberger’s teaching during the 1970s

about normalization, he conducted workshops on the topic of normalization implications to vocational services.

During this time, there was also experimentation with relatively new types of work arrangements, such as what were called “enclaves” in ordinary industry, sheltered work stations and fully integrated work in ordinary businesses. A model was also developed that eventually came to be called “the affirmative industry,” set up primarily to afford work to handicapped people, but where non-handicapped people were also employed as workers, to provide on-site social integration to the handicapped workers, and to serve as work models for them (see DuRand and DuRand, 1978, and DuRand, 1990).

Eventually, starting in the 1980s, many in the vocational sector began to advance what came to be called “supported employment” as virtually the most desirable work option for handicapped people. In this model, an impaired individual was “supported” by the assistance of a job coach to learn and perform some work role or work task in a business, for which that individual received an ordinary wage. Thus, a person might perform supported work as a housekeeper in a motel, or a counter-person in a fast food restaurant, or a clerical assistant in an office, etc.

Now, especially those in the field of services to mentally handicapped people, but possibly others as well, are aware that there is a major push to eliminate “sheltered workshops” for such persons.

“Sheltered workshop” is the classification for establishments in which handicapped people work under special exemptions about wages that do not apply to ordinary businesses. Typically, what makes such an establishment a “workshop” is that the handicapped people are gathered together in one place to work. Often, though not always, the work at such settings has involved short-term contracts, and the hours of work may vary—sometimes full-day and full week, sometimes only part-day and for a few days per week. (However, it should be noted that these practices, though not uncommon, are not an **inherent** part of sheltered work; what is inherent is the wage exemption.) This push for abolition of sheltered workshops is largely driven by an ideology that people have a right not to be segregated, and that if they do work, they have a right to an open-market wage or minimum wage—and that sheltered workshops violate these rights.

I have mentioned this development a few times in my regular “SRV News and Reviews” columns in this *Journal* (e.g., in 2014 and 2016), and have included in those columns numerous items on work arrangements for handicapped people. Also, two items published in the December 2009 issue (vol. 4, number 2) of this *Journal* touched on the topic (Sandys, 2009; and Wolfensberger and Thomas, 2009).

Now, in light of both this historical background and this contemporary push, I thought it would be useful to recapitulate here some general considerations derived from Social Role Valorization about work, along with some of the earlier normalization teaching (I am indebted to Joe Osburn for assistance in recovering this), and to tie this to conceptualizing, setting up and evaluating work arrangements for people of devalued status, and especially for those with either physical and/or mental impairments. At least some readers might find in this material “nothing new,” and I am not proposing this as anything like the definitive SRV document on work, but it may nonetheless be helpful to have many considerations pulled together in one item.

Readers might think of this as a companion piece to the aforementioned two earlier (Dec. 2009) *Journal* articles—see references at the end.

The Importance of the Work Role for Adults in Our Society, and Indeed in Most Societies Ever

IT IS A FUNDAMENTAL PREMISE of SRV that it is through valued roles that people usually gain access to the good things of life. And it is a historical fact that one of the most common and biggest valued roles for adults in any society anywhere at any time is some form of work role. What are some of the good things that a work role for adults can gain for a worker, or at least enable the worker to gain access to? Things such as: income, benefits and even “perks;” a way of contributing meaningfully to society; learning and developing such things as discipline, focus, concentration, mastery (of a task or skill) and other kinds of competencies such as cooperating and getting along with others; making and developing relationships; gaining value in the eyes of others, perhaps even prestige and recognition; establishing an identity; having and enacting a sense of purpose in life; gaining satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment; a “career;” preventing destructive idleness, and giving consistency and structure to one’s life; and self-esteem.

In addition, the income from work may be a major way, or even the primary way, that people obtain such necessities of life as food, shelter and clothing, though people may also or instead receive some other type of income, such as a regular government subsidy.

There are many, many types of valued work arrangements in our culture. They include full-time and part-time work, seasonal work and “odd-jobs,” daytime work and nighttime work, on-the-job training, apprenticeships and internships, vocational training in high school or a technical or business school, and at community college. There is also self-employment. The work that is carried out may be of a profession, a craft, skilled labor

and unskilled labor, and of course there is the work that is done “at home” and to “make” a home, that is, homemaking. Some work roles may be enacted under a relaxation of the standard requirements, as when someone is ill and cannot work as many hours as usual, or when someone does some work at an office and some from home, as in the case of illness or when a child is newly born.

Until very recently, it used to be the social expectation and the norm that adults would engage in full-time work. Now, these expectations are changing to include full-time schooling (what may be called “adult education”), a mix of part-time work and part-time schooling, and pursuit of an avocation such as a hobby that can be a full-time career.

Wolfensberger’s Earlier Normalization Teaching About Work for Devalued Adults in Our Society

AT LEAST THE TEACHING ON normalization that was done by Wolfensberger and his students emphasized the following elements regarding work for devalued adults in our society.

Work settings are as normative as possible, safe, dignified, but at the same time not over-protective; located in neighborhoods and areas that are associated with and imaged as work locales; and, like all other settings for valued people, with both exteriors and interiors that are age- and culture-appropriate, beautiful, comfortable. The site also affords some social contacts—for instance, it is not isolated, and there are resources nearby where social interaction can take place. At the same time, locations where there already exist congregations of devalued people or human services to such people are avoided.

Getting to the work site provides skill development to workers (for example, learning the bus schedule, how to transfer between buses, how to buy bus or subway tokens, etc.), but balanced with reasonable ease of access to the site.

Work tasks have enough variety so as to minimize boredom.

The **product of the work** is socially worthwhile and not immoral, and marketable at competitive prices, based on its quality or the demand for it, not based on appeals to pity or charity.

The **work itself**—the activity, the tools employed—is competency-enhancing, provides opportunities for workers to develop talents and to advance (be “promoted,” achieve an increase in wages), and makes high but realistic demands for workers to learn and practice discipline, discretion, even caution. The schedule is an adult one, such as seven or more hours per day, five days a week, with times for coffee breaks, with three or four weeks’ vacation, etc., depending on prevailing cultural norms. The work offers a decent wage, and has earning potential now and in the future. Pay reflects performance on the job, and funding for the program comes from sources that are not deviancy-imaging.

Early on, Wolfensberger also taught that employment should be a right. (However, as his thinking changed to separate issues or claims for “rights” from normalization and later SRV, I think it likely that his thinking that employment should be a right would also have changed. More on this later).

Both the work product, and the work of producing it, have an adult, dignified and valued image.

There should be an enjoyable **work atmosphere**, with good morale, that affords social contacts, and where people who already know the job and can act as models are skilled and project a valued image.

Further, the **workers would be called** workers, employees, or staff, or perhaps even a specific work role name or title—cashier, welder, inventory specialist, etc., not trainees or clients; and management and supervisory staff have a business or industrial identity, rather than a counseling, educational, medical or rehab identity.

Work **training** programs specifically are long-term or open-ended but not static, and with no

assumption that people will be there permanently. Work experience that is part of career exploration would be “hands on,” for example, done alongside a real worker in an industry, craft, etc.; would take place in a realistic setting; and would allow the individual to evaluate his own potential and performance in a possible career, and lead to actual vocational choice.

As to **special accommodations or arrangements** that would be helpful for specific handicapped persons, some may need help with transportation and other skills/competencies that will affect their ability to carry out the job, such as grooming, bathing and dressing. Some people may not be able to work full-time (perhaps due to impairments in health or strength), or in certain environments (such as ones that are noisy, or involve much travel). For some people, there will need to be management of behavior that is disruptive of either their own work or that of others.

Some SRV Comments on this Normalization Teaching

BY AND LARGE, the features mentioned above for normalizing work arrangements for devalued people would be consistent with SRV. Two possible exceptions are employment as a right, as noted; and that the work product is not immoral, the reason being that SRV is restricted to the empirically-grounded, and is phrased in terms of “if this, then that.” So, it would be more consistent with SRV to say, “**If** the work product is perceived as immoral, or carries images of immorality, **then** this will be tainting of those who produce the product. And if they are already at image-risk, this constitutes a serious risk to their social valuation.” Further, as regards work as a right, SRV would say that **if** any rights associated with a particular work role are withheld from devalued people who hold that role, **then** that is image-demeaning to them (and possibly competency-demeaning as well); and that **if** a social body such as a state declared that having a job, or having a paying job, were a right, **then**

devalued people would once again be image-impaired if that right were not granted to them too.

As to the remainder, SRV would phrase these criteria in terms of how they contribute to image- and competency-enhancement, and how they strengthen a person’s occupancy of the valued role of worker, or even of a very specific valued work role such as brick-layer, teacher, librarian, sales rep, etc.

Note that there are multiple categories of considerations about desirable work for devalued people: its location, access to it, the work itself and the work product, the work atmosphere, the image and competencies of fellow workers, and so forth. And within each category there are multiple considerations. Thus, once again, I encourage readers to think about **all** these criteria in pursuing work or setting up work arrangements for devalued people, and not to reduce their analyses and judgments about possible arrangements to a simple-minded (and unrealistic) basis along the lines of “segregated, bad, not segregated, good,” or “paying minimum wage or better, good, paying less than minimum wage, bad,” or “paid work, good, unpaid work, bad.” After all, there are different degrees of segregation—isolated segregation in which the segregated persons are far away from valued people, and un-isolated segregation in which the segregated persons are close to or even in the midst of valued people; segregation with hundreds of other devalued people, and segregation with only a few such persons—or possibly even congregation with only a few such persons but not a segregated congregation; segregation in a setting with very bad image features, and segregation in a setting with enhancing image features—and for each of these, there is a range of gradations between each pole.

There are also jobs that pay a good wage, but only offer a few hours of work per week; there are jobs that do not pay a very good wage, but offer almost full-time work—and where the work provides a lot of opportunities for social integration as well; there are even jobs that pay nothing, vol-

unteer work, but where the work is competency-enhancing, socially integrative, and where hardly any observers are aware that the job does not provide income to the worker—and once again, there are many further gradations or combinations of criteria among these.

And there are many more dimensions besides the degree of segregation, and the amount of pay, if any, attached to a particular work arrangement that have a bearing on how role-valorizing the work is.

Additional Considerations

AN ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATION that bears on decisions as to what kinds of work arrangements to promote or support for devalued people is this.

It is not always possible to achieve the ideal arrangement for a specific person or class, but even less-than-ideal arrangements can be defensible because the role-valorizing benefits they bring are greater than any role-degrading costs. Yet in pursuit of an arrangement that is closer to a role-valorization ideal, a viable, defensible arrangement may be thrown out simply because it is less-than-ideal, even though what is offered or promoted in its place is actually worse in terms of role-degradation.

One contributor to this reality is that the economic paradigm of our society has undergone a huge shift, from traditional types of work—manufacturing and other labor-intensive work—to service work and computer technology-based work. This shift has put even many non-handicapped people out of employment, let alone handicapped ones. It is therefore simply unrealistic to act as if getting rid of sheltered work settings for devalued people will result in their being employed in ordinary work settings. Instead, it is almost inevitable that at present, if—more likely, when—sheltered workshops are eliminated, the vast majority of impaired people are not going to end up in better work arrangements, because these are simply not going to be available for them. Rather, they are very likely to end up in “day programs” of various types—day

habilitation,” day activities—in which idleness, arts-and-crafts, childish activities, even purposeless and random activity such as mall-walking or going for car drives, will occupy their time.

Conclusion

BECAUSE SRV orients us to the many contributors and dimensions to any role, it can help us broaden our minds, our thinking and our imagination about possible work arrangements for devalued people, rather than painting us (and the devalued people we serve) into a one-size-fits-all corner. ☪

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Learning from Our History: Raising the Bar for Employment Possibilities

Milt Tyree

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This article provides an insightful commentary upon the previous article by Susan Thomas. In light of the importance of the topics raised by Thomas, we asked Milt Tyree, who combines expertise & experience in both employment & SRV, to reflect upon the article by Thomas. We are grateful to Milt for sharing his thoughts.*

SUSAN THOMAS' PAPER raises important issues for a field that is struggling to understand, articulate and take action regarding what is important about employment services for people with disabilities. Foundational to moving forward is understanding our history and what has been learned along the way. Too many decisions are based on things legislated, regulated and mandated without a willingness to wrestle with the complexities of social devaluation and principles for its address.

Social Role Valorization (SRV) theory provides a needed level of sophistication for parsing intricate issues, including an analysis of the likely benefits, costs or tradeoffs when proceeding with particular employment models or approaches. As noted in Thomas' article, in the absence of the kind of analysis that SRV offers, it's possible for one program characteristic, evaluated on a superficial level, to become everything—an on/off switch for a “good program” versus a “bad program.”

Another consequence of insufficient historical understanding and principled analysis is that program design elements proven to have limita-

tions will be celebrated as new and innovative while duplicating the same problems of old. For example, since the sheltered workshops of the 1950s, there's been a powerful belief and emphasis that workshops, work activity centers and enclaves (less so with affirmative industries) establish personal “readiness” for everyday typical employment (Bellamy, Rhodes, Bourbeau & Mank, 1986; McLoughlin, Garner & Callahan, 1987). Despite opposing study findings going back to the 1980s, it is a popular notion that persists (Bellamy *et al.*, 1986; Inge, Wehman, Revell, Erickson, Butterworth & Gilmore, 2009; Zafar, Golden & Schrader, 2012). Interestingly, little surprise or disappointment is expressed when most people do not “get ready” and leave the workshop. And it's often said that the workshop clients want to stay anyway. SRV theory is helpful in examining and understanding what's happening here: the complexity of the unconscious mind feeds people's beliefs that something is true despite evidence to the contrary; role expectancies and role circularity result in people becoming powerfully socialized into the sheltered workshop client role and then “choosing” this; lacking the power of good instruction and other benefits described in SRV's developmental model perpetuates the belief that certain people are incapable of learning, essentially blaming the learner (Gold, 1980a, 1980b). All of this exacerbates wounding experiences; life circumstances are defined by people's disabilities

in terms of whom they will know, where they will go, and life opportunities afforded and denied.

These same “getting ready by grouping devalued people together” assumptions endure in 21st century employment programs. The widely popularized and replicated Walgreens and Project SEARCH models establish *de facto* sheltered workshops or special education classrooms within participating businesses (Tyree, 2012). There's even a special “training hotel” for people with disabilities, jointly developed through the Arc and Marriott. These celebrated models are rooted in a discredited readiness theory while ignoring the culturally valued analogue (CVA) and the positive influence of imitating and modeling skilled workers, and while placing “trainees” in a socially stigmatizing environment with limited access to better instruction. The conservatism corollary to SRV informs about the need to reduce, prevent and compensate for disadvantages faced by socially devalued people. But instead, we have much-hyped disability employment models that unnecessarily place stumbling blocks in people's paths. In other words, the benefits are celebrated (positive employment results for some) without examining the shortfalls for others, and without any analysis of what could be better (even very easily) for everyone served. It's another example of people's (often unconscious) motivations, program history, and competing loyalties that result in settling on behalf of others.

To be fair, exaggerations and hyperbole continue to swirl around newer and contemporary employment practices. For instance, some believe that “customized employment” is “the answer.” Nonetheless, much has been learned over the last several decades. Refining of the “job coach” model of the early 1980s has resulted in increased understanding and improvements in two significant areas complementary to SRV:

1) *Job fit*. Devoting time to explore personal talents, purpose, contribution, and finding out how these personal attributes intersect with em-

ployer needs (Callahan, Shumpert & Condon, 2009; 2013).

2) *Job support*. Studying new employee instruction within a business, and then honoring these ways to the fullest extent possible, consistent with the CVA (Callahan & Garner, 1997). Unfortunately, these advancements in understanding are not widely practiced, and thus many programs are sticking with the dated, vastly inferior “job coach” practices (Migliore, Hall, Butterworth & Winsor, 2010; Griffin, 2011). Indeed, old ideas die hard.

It may be argued that, for a variety of reasons, personalized employment planning and supports can't be accomplished for everyone. Three primary considerations are as follows:

1) *Naming compromises*. Recently, I heard a supported employment presenter exclaim, “Everybody should have Project SEARCH!” A more accurate explanation could have been that Project SEARCH has been helpful for some youth getting positive work experience and landing good jobs, and that it voices high expectations for workers with disabilities being contributing members of society. But there are also limitations, in that it screens out students lacking certain prerequisite skills or having certain disabilities, which could unfairly lead to the interpretation that good employment is out of the picture for them. Or, one could explain that Project SEARCH has the limitation of predetermining that students could not benefit from the kinds of business instruction typically provided and instead imposes classroom training on all students within the participating businesses—practices certain to result in at least some compromise of students' image and competency. Likewise, those affiliated with a sheltered workshop program may say that they lack the infrastructure or desire to support integrated work, but they do their best to seek a variety of work that's fitting for as many people as possible regarding challenge and interest.

2) *Avoiding, as much as possible, employment services entanglement in the Post-Primary Production (PPP) economy.* Wolf Wolfensberger and John McKnight cautioned about late 20th century labor/economic shifts from primary production work (mining, manufacturing and farming) to service industry work, resulting in ordinary aspects of everyday life becoming professionalized and formalized as a way of propping up the economy (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 1994; McKnight, 1984). This circumstance increases the risks of commoditization of socially devalued people, of deepening the identity of “service client,” and of amplifying social distancing. The PPP economy collides with potential benefits of SRV’s understanding of interpersonal identification—furthering ways of improving approachability of socially valued and devalued people with one another, emphasizing commonalities, fostering possibilities of mutuality, reciprocity, shared responsibility and contribution. Related to these shared potential understandings among citizens, opposing the PPP economy, it may be said that responses developed solely within human services will necessarily be incomplete, because the problem of idleness and life-wasting of people with disabilities is ultimately a community problem—one that requires a partnership involving people with disabilities, service providers, business owners and other interested citizens. Examples include Alberta’s Rotary Employment Partnership and Utah’s Pathways to Careers.

3) *Determining opportunity costs when developing new initiatives.* During a time when it’s deemed infeasible to offer personalized supports for everyone, care needs to be taken to avoid unwittingly establishing more of the same problems. That is, if time, energy, and resources are going to be devoted to a program design that’s known to be unsound, then the same time, energy and resources will not be available for more desirable alternatives.

Susan Thomas correctly states that one size does not fit all. Shallow analyses of complicated issues will miss the point. All employment efforts will

have benefits, shortcomings and tradeoffs. It is our job to understand which is which, why this is so, and to discuss with other partners and then discern the best option for proceeding. ☺

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