

Crafting Valued Social Roles, and Crafting a Coherent Moral Stance on the Sanctity Of All Human Life

**Poster Session at the
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As we have learned in Social Role Valorization workshops, SRV is a means to an end. The means, SRV, is “the application of empirical knowledge to the shaping of the current or potential social role of a party, so that these roles are, as much as possible, positive valued in the eyes of the perceivers.”

The end toward which those means are aimed is “the good things in life” for people. The workshop describes the good things in life as the first-order goal; the second-order goal is social valuation, and the third-order goal is valued social roles. Derivative from these goals posited by SRV, our work in service and support to people must focus on crafting valued social roles.

Crafting valued social roles, then, is the topic of this Fourth International Conference on SRV here in Ottawa. What is the relationship of that topic to a five-day workshop taught every two years by Dr Wolf Wolfensberger (author of SRV) and his associates, “Crafting a Coherent Moral Stance on the Sanctity of All Human Life, Especially in Light of Contemporary Society’s Legitimization and Practice of All Sorts of ‘Deathmaking’ of Unwanted and Devalued People”?

Most obviously, the “good things in life” are available only if one is, after all, alive. But the people about whom we teach and learn in SRV live with vulnerability to having their very lives threatened by devaluation. That danger is examined carefully in SRV teaching.

The teaching of SRV in workshops and in the Wolfensberger monograph begins with an exposition of the “Most Common ‘Wounds’ of Devalued Persons.” This devaluation is the problem which SRV seeks to address. The perhaps ultimate form of devaluation, the culmination of the sequence used in this teaching exposition, is “being the object of brutalization, ‘killing thoughts,’ and deathmaking.” Having one’s very life threatened and abbreviated is the ultimate form of devaluation.

Such “deathmaking” may be direct or indirect, may be individual or systemic, may be done consciously or not; but we all know instances of the deathmaking of devalued people, including people like the individuals we may know and serve. The recent historical example of the round-up and killing of hundreds of thousands of people with impairments by the German medical profession during World War Two may be the clearest such example; but it has found an echo in the more recent killing (by their caregivers) of dozens of nursing home patients during Hurricane Katrina, and in the recurrent threats encountered by patients and their families and service workers when people with impairments enter hospitals.

The SRV workshop touches upon deathmaking also in its discussion of distantiation, which it describes as one of the most common responses to devalued people.

Distantiation can be social or physical, and it takes the form pervasively in most societies in segregation. The SRV workshop points out that segregation can itself be viewed as “an attenuated expression of the killing thought,” as a milder form of wanted to “be rid” of certain people. Among the means of physical distantiation, at its most extreme, is physical destruction. We see this over the past few decades in the huge expansion of the justification and practice of selective killing before and just after birth, and in the growing advocacy and acceptance of euthanasia.

SRV workshops analyze these threats to life in terms of roles, noting that devaluation entails being cast into devalued roles in life. Among the devalued roles into which people may be cast, the workshop describes the role of non-human (including pre-human, no longer human, and sub-human), and the roles of dying, already dead, as good as dead, better off dead, and should never have lived.

Accompanying this article on the poster are a few quotes characterized as “the old eugenics” and “the new eugenics,” both manifestations of the proposition that certain types of people should never exist. Glance at those quotations, and you can see how the devalued roles in the previous paragraph are fastened onto people with impairments (and others). Note also in those quotes the immense power of definition: if people can be defined in certain ways, and if others can be persuaded to accept those definitions, then the lives of impaired people will be in grave danger.

Influence over how people will define other people, or influence over the roles into which other people will be cast, certainly could come from presidents and Nobel Prize winners and widely read authors. But such influence can also come from anyone who is important in the life of a person who is vulnerable to being devalued. That’s where we come in.

Might any of us, as service workers or family members or friends or as people with impairments, be able to craft a valued role with and for someone? Such valued roles (as worker, as friend, as volunteer, as student, as family member, as a regular at the neighborhood coffee shop, as youth soccer fan, as parishioner, etc.) are self-evidently constructive for their likelihood of enriching a person’s life experience, and for the possibilities of introducing the person to new relationships and belonging. We should also recognize that crafting a valued role is also the most effective strategy to invite the re-definition of the person. Who is this person, who are they in the eyes of the perceivers? If someone is seen as my co-worker, as my fellow student, as my fellow member, then I am much less likely to see them as expendable, as better off dead, as less than human.

Our crafting of valued roles with and for people can change the way they are defined by others in ways that can save lives. A very practical example of direct action is to decorate a person's hospital room with role communicators (as the workshop describes them), reminders of who else the person is in addition to being (perhaps temporarily) a patient. Pictures and souvenirs and descriptions of the person as a worker and friend and family member have had powerful effects on the doctors and nurses and other decision-makers who visit the room, as have the very presence of visitors to the person in the hospital.

But, as the title of this conference implies, such redefinition will not happen by itself; valued roles need to be crafted. In other words, our work toward valued roles for the people we care about will entail forethought, analysis, rethinking, strategy, teamwork, learning from our mistakes, perseverance, and great care. Crafting valued roles.

In a parallel way, each of us needs to craft a coherent moral stance on the sanctity of all human life. It will not happen by itself. We must think it through: Who is human? What does that imply morally? Who is morally killable, if anyone? Whose lives are endangered in our current climate, and why, and how? And what will be my stance in the face of such realities? Crafting a coherent moral stance.

The five-day workshop which is taught by the Training Institute (Dr. Wolfensberger and his associates) offers a compelling invitation systematically to examine oneself, to examine our society, to examine moral principles and their implications, and to begin to craft a coherent stance on these issues. The workshop is secular, but it engages participants at the deepest level of self and worldview. The workshop is next offered at a retreat center in Nazareth, Kentucky, on September 17 through 21, 2007.

For further information about the nature of the workshop, and about its costs and arrangements, please contact the author of this poster, Jack Yates at YatesSNS@aol.com or 508 / 679 – 5233, or the coordinator of the Kentucky workshop, Joe Osburn at JosephOsburn@BellSouth.net or 502 / 348 – 1168.