

The Systematic Stripping of Valued Roles from People

Wolf Wolfensberger[†]

SOcial Role Valorization (SRV) THEORY asserts that people perceived by others as holding positively valued roles are likely to be afforded by them the “good things of life” (Wolfensberger, Thomas & Caruso, 1996), but that these good things tend to be withheld or withdrawn from people seen as holding negatively valued social roles (see Wolfensberger, 1998, 2000).

Even beyond any withholding, outright bad things are apt to be done to people seen in devalued roles. For instance, people in devalued roles are very likely to get rejected, segregated and congregated with other devalued people, made and kept poor, as well as impoverished in experience by being denied the opportunities in life that valued people aspire to, even violated and brutalized. All these and other common “wounds” (18 altogether) of devalued people are detailed in SRV teaching, and in Wolfensberger, 1998, pp. 12-24.

SRV teaching has tended to emphasize that any number of such wounds might be inflicted on devalued people, and how this wounding gets done, with different wounds being more likely to be inflicted on members of different devalued classes. But the teaching has only peripherally and occasionally made the point that one particular wound might be systematically inflicted on all members of a devalued class, even though that is not uncommon. Jews are a good example: one wound, or a small number of specific wounds, were often inflicted on whole populations of devalued Jews,

such as ‘marking’ them by making them wear distinctive clothing. There are many interesting stories that could be told of this infliction of possibly a small number of wounds, but on virtually all members of a class.

One of the bad things that may be done systematically to some devalued people and even entire classes by their devaluers is a systematic stripping from them of any valued roles they may have, and preventing them from acquiring valued roles. For instance, ordinarily, a newborn is seen and treated as in the valued role of the family’s new son or daughter, perhaps even its heir—but if the newborn is discovered to be impaired, then instead, the infant may be stripped of the ‘son’ or ‘daughter’ role, interpreted as non-human, and may be put away in an institution, given away, or even made dead. A man sentenced to prison for life may, by law, be easily divorced by his wife, and custody of his children given to someone else, thereby stripping him of his ‘husband’ and ‘father’ roles. One maximum-security prisoner in New York State had created art works in his cell, and gave them to a friend outside of prison who sold them at Internet auctions in order to buy amenities such as sneakers or snacks for the prisoner. The artist had sent these works out quite legally through the prison mailroom, yet when the prison authorities learned of it, they took away his art supplies for five years, as well as his telephone and mail privileges (AP in *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, 19

June 2000, p. A5), thereby also taking away one of his few ways of competently achieving the valued social role of an 'artist,' possibly leaving him with no valued roles at all.

An interesting apparent fact is that achieved valued roles are easier to strip away than many kinds of attributed ones. Valued achieved roles can be stripped in an instant, as the Jews in Nazi Germany found out. Many attributed valued roles will take longer to 'deconstruct.'

Sometimes, it is only specific valued roles that are the target of devaluing role-strippers. For instance, during the eugenic era (from about 1875-1925), the eugenicists tried to take, or withhold, the roles of spouse, father and mother from people whom they judged to be genetically tainted. They did this via denying certain people the right to wed, segregating the sexes from each other, and sterilizing people even without their knowledge and/or consent (e.g., Black, 2003; Malcomson, 2008).

Even entire devalued subcultures may be deprived of the valued roles that had been traditional in that subculture, as was done by the British authorities to the Maori natives in New Zealand once British immigrants settled there. When the British took over in the 1800s, they systematically destroyed or eliminated virtually every role valued in the Maori culture, including the political, religious, moral and social ones (conference presentation by Sullivan & Clarke, 2007). As a result, hardly any Maori could move into, or retain, a role valued in Maori culture—or in British culture, for that matter. This totally demoralized the Maori culture, sapped its strength (which was what the settlers really wanted), and made the Maori turn to degeneracy.

By the way, a distinction must be made between situations where members of a devalued class were still able to hold roles valued within their class, versus situations where the oppressing classes made it impossible for a member of a devalued class to hold valued roles either in the larger society, or within their own class. A good example of the former are the Jews who were always able to

maintain valued roles at least within their class, even if it was a devalued minority.

Any of the 18 common ways of 'wounding' of devalued persons can contribute to the stripping of valued roles that they may have held, or might have held if there had not been a wounding interference. For instance, one common wound of devalued people is being put at a distance from valued people, and this is often accompanied by segregation. One result is likely to be that such distantiated persons will never learn how to carry out roles valued in the society from which they have been separated, because they will not be around models of such roles; and the only valued roles they may end up with are ones that are valued in their devalued sub-group, but not in the larger valued society. Another common wound is impoverishment, which may strip the person of ownership-related roles (e.g., bank customer, homeowner, shareholder), and puts a person into the devalued role of pauper.

An example of how the infliction of wounds can result in role-stripping is the relegation of devalued ethnic and racial groups (such as devalued immigrants) into slums and ghettos, which may deprive them of practicing certain valued roles that can only be had, exercised, or learned in the larger valued parts of town, such as homeowner of a valuable property, or operator or owner of a business. Similarly, devalued people tend to be denied educational and work opportunities that valued people enjoy or desire, and this may prevent them from acquiring any number of valued roles, such as promising and capable student, perhaps high-achieving student, and any number of professional work roles, especially those that are prestigious and high-paying. But it may also strip them of valued roles they did possess, such as typical neighborhood child, or for which they possessed the potentiality, such as future taxpayer or possible leader of society.

Any devalued party may be prevented from acquiring valued roles, but stripping from people valued roles they already possessed is obviously

only going to be done to people who once held such valued roles or were at least seen as potentially holding such valued roles.

Here is an example. An elderly man with some signs of dementia lived alone, but his niece had his power-of-attorney. When she began to look into an 'assisted living' placement for her uncle, the department of human services swooped in and removed him from his home without his family's knowledge or consent, and placed him into a mental institution. The court-appointed conservator (note: conservator, not liquidator) of his estate sold or threw out practically everything in his home, including family photos and his old military uniform (Diament, 2010). Thus, virtually overnight, his roles of homeowner, neighbor, family member, military veteran—and probably others as well—were taken from him.

Stripping of valued roles from vulnerable or already devalued people can take place quite unconsciously, and often as part of rearranging the life conditions of these people. A good example is what happens in the lives of a lot of elderly people. Often, in rearranging where they live, some of their valued roles get lost. For example, in moving from their old neighborhood to a supported living arrangement, they may lose all their valued roles related to their old neighborhood, right down to valued customer at the neighborhood stores, helpful neighbor to others, benefactor of neighborhood children, etc.

The situation can be even more catastrophic when an elderly person is moved to a nursing home, and thrust into the sick role, the second childhood role, and into greater dependency all around. All their valued community roles, their work and avocational roles, even their spiritual roles, can be lost.

Another example is when impaired persons who lived with their parents are moved to a group home as the parents age. Group home staff may be unaware of the valued role(s) the person may have held, and then these roles get lost in group home living. This can also lead to the person de-

veloping behavior problems, the source of which is not recognized by the group home staff.

Admittedly, not all role loss must be equated with role stripping. Some role losses occur naturally (e.g., as a result of a disease process, or of maturing), whereas role-stripping has to be understood as due to preventable actions by others.

All this can be very painful to the people who previously held, or had access to, any number of valued roles. Again, this happened to the Jews in Germany under the Nazis, as one restriction after another was placed upon them. Jewish people who had been respected professionals, property owners, productive workers, decorated veterans and former army officers, in possession of citizen rights, etc., etc., saw themselves increasingly deprived of these roles and interpreted as scum, foreign, menaces, parasites, non-citizens, and even non-human. In their case, this happened in the course of only about five years, though in other cases, it may take generations. Particularly where this happens quickly, the victims may be totally disoriented, unable to understand or adjust to the situation.

Members of many devalued classes have never held valued roles, or only few and sporadically (e.g., worker, customer). However, it can be very painful if such persons find themselves stripped of maybe their only valued role, or the most valued one of the few they held.

When a person gets stripped of valued roles, one consequence could be that the person develops, or increases, role avidity (Lemay, 1999), and this can result in embracing devalued roles in lieu of no roles at all.

Another response could be that the stripping precipitates total disorientation, despair and mental breakdown. The person may 'resign' from life, withdraw, become vulnerable to disease and early death. The person may even commit suicide. Remember the wave of suicides in the Great Depression, even though the only valued roles that people might have lost at first were economic ones. Alternatively, the person may also engage in rage behavior. For instance, a person who gets

divorced against their will by a spouse may go on a rampage.

As mentioned, a lot of role-stripping is a secondary result of some kind of wounding, and this result may not have been specifically sought by the devaluers. But the most vicious kind is the one that is deliberate, and is usually part of a systematic effort to reduce an entire class of people. It can even be the initial phase of a genocide. We can see the connection of valued role-stripping to genocide in the widespread and systematic efforts, ever since the early 1970s, to interpret conceived but not yet born humans as non-human in order to facilitate their destruction via abortion. These very small human beings were once acknowledged to hold the roles of human child, of person in the eyes of the law, and of son or daughter—even though as yet unborn—of their parents. But these roles were stripped of them, in part by law, as via the 1973 US Supreme Court decision (*Roe v. Wade*) which stripped legal personhood from the unborn, and via widespread media and propaganda campaigns by pro-abortion parties to convince everyone that the product of the sexual union of a human male and human female is not human.

The deathmaking of the role-stripped party can also be very indirect (see Wolfensberger, 2005), and can occur as the result of the demoralization and degeneracy that sets in after access to valued roles has been barred. As noted, this was one of the impacts upon the Maori of being role-stripped by the colonizing British. ☺

SEE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ON PAGE 57

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I thank Guy Caruso and Joe Osburn for a critical editing of the draft of this manuscript.

REFERENCES

AP in *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, 19 June 2000, p. A5.

Black, E. (2003). *War against the weak: Eugenics and America's campaign to create a master race*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows.

Diament, M. (2010, October). What an outrage: Taken from home, without notice. *AARP Bulletin*, p. 8.

Lemay, R.A. (1999). Roles, identities, and expectancies: Positive contributions of role theory to Social Role Valorization theory. In R.J. Flynn & R. Lemay (Eds.), *A quarter-century of normalization and Social Role Valorization: Evolution and impact*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 219-240.

Malcomson, T. (2008). Applying selected SRV themes to the eugenic movement in Canada and the United States, 1890-1972. *The SRV Journal*, 3(1), 34-51.

Sullivan, L. & Clarke, S. (2007, May). Applying the teaching of SRV to the address of colonization on the valued roles of indigenous peoples. Paper presented at the 4th International Conference on Social Role Valorization, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, May 16-18, 2007.

Wolfensberger, W. (1998). *A brief introduction to Social Role Valorization: A high-order concept for addressing the plight of societally devalued people, and for structuring human services* (3rd ed.). Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership & Change Agency.

Wolfensberger, W. (2000). A brief overview of Social Role Valorization. *Mental Retardation*, 38(2), 105-123.

Wolfensberger, W. (2005). *The new genocide of handicapped and afflicted people* (3rd ed.). Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency.

Wolfensberger, W., Thomas, S. & Caruso, G. (1996). Some of the universal 'good things of life' which the implementation of Social Role Valorization can be expected to make more accessible to devalued people. *SRV/VRS: The International Social Role Valorization Journal/La Revue Internationale de la Valorisation des Rôles Sociaux*, 2(2), 12-14.

WOLF WOLFENBERGER, PHD, developed both *Social Role Valorization* & *Citizen Advocacy*, & authored over 40 books & 250 chapters & articles. He was Emeritus Professor at Syracuse University & directed the Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership & Change Agency, Syracuse, NY (US).

THE CITATION FOR THIS ARTICLE IS

Wolfensberger, W. (2011). The systematic stripping of valued roles from people. *The SRV Journal*, 6(2), 15-18.