Valued Social Roles And The Necessity Of Values Based Leadership

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The social role valorization literature has amply demonstrated the many ways that people and groups become socially devalued and deprived of valued social roles. (Wolfensberger, 1998; Race, 1999; Osburn 2006) It has also attempted to generate action strategies that, if pursued with a sense of integrity, would act to confront and reverse social devaluation. It has often remained unclear as to who precisely would undertake such actions, as the potential field of such candidates is vast, given that all of society is implicated in social devaluation, so theoretically we are all candidates for enacting some sort of SRV actions, should this be something that we seek to do.

Notwithstanding the existence of this vast pool of people who could potentially stand in solidarity with devalued people, it is obvious that much of their potential might go untapped if there are not others who would catalyze them into taking part in SRV action strategies. Clearly, it would be unrealistic to expect people to commit themselves to action, simply on the basis of the fact that this is needed: after all, such needs have been ignored down through time in all manner of ways. The poor and socially devalued are often abandoned to their fate and frequently perish for want of committed allies (Wolfensberger 2005). Needs in people can go unmet indefinitely, often accompanied by the most appalling demonstrations of indifference and even active collusion in their oppression.

In this regard, it is useful to consider the implications of this observation. One is most certainly that many of us may well need to be mobilized to stand with socially devalued people, as there may be any number of reasons why such acts contain within them their own disincentives to act. For instance, standing with devalued people may well bring the person into conflict with our many social institutions, as it may mean challenging their practices. Many people are wary of entering and upholding such conflicts, as they fear that they may be punished in some way.

If the person succumbs to such concerns, then they are effectively eliminated from the task of attempting change, albeit from at least this one role. The matter would then sit there, perhaps indefinitely, unless the person either had a change of heart or others were able to persuade them to alter their conduct. This latter option, i.e. of parties that arise to influence people to pursue actions that might help people achieve valued social roles, is very much bound up in the phenomena of leadership.(Race, 2003) People who take on either informal or formal leadership roles exist in all societies, though it is doubtful that "all people are leaders", despite the fact that many people enthuse to this effect. Nonetheless, there does exist at least some latent leadership capacity in communities and it is important to try to link this to the task of generating the people willing to act to help people acquire valued social roles i.e. people willing to provide personal leadership, to the task of motivating others to take action that will help disadvantaged individuals or groups acquire valued social roles.

The task could be further refined by noting that not all those persons with inherent leadership capacity would have the type of outlook, values and personal engagements that would dispose them to standing with specific devalued persons or groups. Even where such values and capacity for commitment do exist for a given potential leader to

take up a leadership role, it still remains for that person to take such a personal decision to involve themselves or not and to what degree. Should these matters get resolved, it then becomes possible to imagine the activation of leaders whose values and their personal commitment to them, are consistent with taking SRV action, at some level (Wolfensberger, 1998, pp-77-80) to support the achievement of valued social roles and undo the effects of social devaluation.

Typically, societal change of the kind foreseen by SRV theory relies heavily on collective action taken through social movements. However, this collective action only appears collective when examined from a distance. For social change activists of various kinds, it is more likely to express itself through micro initiatives tied to the very concrete experiences of socially devalued persons, whether these be in the areas of employment, neighborhood, education, rights, roles or any other aspect of life that has been touched by social devaluation.

For instance, if a person was denied or lost a job due to prejudicial attitudes, then addressing that injustice becomes the specific flashpoint for committed actions to undo or reverse this harm. The fact that this issue resonates with so many others in terms of the underlying effects of social devaluation, may not necessarily have any meaning to participants in these particular events. Nonetheless, the effort is still part of a bigger movement towards social role valorizing goals and will, in its small way, add a measure of momentum and possibly leadership to the larger movement.

So the task of values based leaders, relative to social role valorizing actions, becomes one of mobilizing well disposed people to first face the choices and possibilities inherent in SRV goals(Wolfensberger, 1998, pp.58,62) and to decide to pursue them in some manner of application that is realistically available to them in the context of their lives. The tasks of leadership always revolve around the need to establish direction and purpose within potential action-takers. Having these directions be SRV related, requires that the leader be persuasive in justifying such directions. Otherwise, the potential action taker will remain unengaged and uncommitted to social role valorizing actions.

Naturally, should the actor and the person exercising leadership already share a common frame of SRV perspectives, then their alignment in a common action becomes more likely. Should they not, then the task of leadership would shift to establishing agreement on such perspectives, given that future action would be contingent on these "values" and theory questions being agreeably resolved. For instance, if the potential actors are not persuaded that socially devalued persons could and should be able to enjoy full valued social participation within community life (Wolfensberger, 1998, pp 122-124), then it is doubtful that they would advocate with their local community organization to cease and desist its exclusion of people.

Values based leaders, seen through this lens as being catalysts for change, emerge as crucially important to the realization of the ambitions of SRV based action strategies. They are the key animators of the base of support needed to bring about significant shifts in the social order, both at a micro and more collective macro level. If such leaders are

ineffectual, scarce or absent, then it would be predictable that the achievement of SRV goals would be impaired.

If the importance of SRV based values based leaders to the change process is accepted, then it raises the question of what helps identify, develop and sustain such leaders and whether all of this is in place, or needs to be. It also raises the question of the impact of a theory such as SRV, if it cannot attract such leaders to take it up and apply it to the concrete problems of existence in the lives of people feeling the hard edge of social devaluation. Theory, as important as it may be, requires adherents and action takers to have any effect on practical matters and it is leaders who will be crucial in mobilizing such people.

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