

VALUED SOCIAL ROLES AND THEIR LIKELY BENEFITS

by Dr Michael Kendrick PhD

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"In the end, it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years."

Abraham Lincoln



THE NATURE OF SOCIAL ROLES

Though most people are somewhat unconscious of valued social roles, they nonetheless bring many benefits into the lives of people. Social roles are generated and embedded within everyday life and reflect the

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many differing aspects of community life. In the course of a given day, an average citizen might play a large variety of roles as they go about their daily life in the community. For instance, they may be a mother, customer, club member, an employee, acquaintance, a neighbor, team member, newcomer, an ally, a "friend of a friend" and so on. In this

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enduring pathways within community life that literally shape and define our lives with great specificity and consequences for us.

If these social roles are valued within a given community, then the occupants of those roles would themselves be more socially valued and

person occupying them will find themselves to be perceived more negatively and thus be socially devalued. For instance, in western societies at present many groups of people have personal attributes that may lead to them being devalued by others and are thus at risk of being placed in devalued social roles. For instance, since being employed, financially

government benefits are at considerable risk

positively regarded by others. On the other hand, if the roles one occupies are devalued in that community, culture or society, then the

self-sufficient and prosperous is highly valued, then people who are unemployed, poor and possibly dependent upon

of being perceived in a socially devalued way and subsequently assigned devalued social roles.

When a person is seen as "other" and treated as such, it is common that they will be treated differently from others and usually in a negative devaluing way based upon the human attributes that are devalued by the perceiver. In reality, almost any conceivable human trait can serve as the basis for the devaluation and mistreatment of a given person or group. For instance, this could include appearance, customs, language, religion, affiliations, skin color, accent, heritage, education, disability, conduct and so on. The social roles extended to such persons with devalued traits will not be positive in nature and may lead to devalued roles being imposed on them such

as subhuman, menace, child, burden, object of ridicule, sick or diseased, better off

dead, etc. These are all examples of social roles that render the person to be somehow "less than" others and will lead inevitably to their rejection, mistreatment and deprivation in life opportunities and benefits. Valued social roles act to prevent and reverse such social devaluation in the direction of enriching life opportunities.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACQUIRING AND BEING SUPPORTED IN VALUED SOCIAL ROLES

The world is full of experiences, opportunities and possibilities that, if properly tapped into, a person can get to enjoy life more richly and explore and fulfill their greater potential. However, if they do not access these potential life experiences, then this scope for enriched living will be lost. The practical means to get to

these experiences is through the taking up of valued social roles within community life that show promise of enriched life experiences of potential interest to the person. These roles can, for examples, include friend, companion, club member, traveller, employee, sports fan, music lover, partygoer, neighbour, adventurer, acquaintance, etc. These sorts of "life-giving" roles are usually in extremely limited supply in segregated settings reserved for disabled people, so their pursuit inevitably will mean a stronger presence of the person within the many aspects of community life rather than on its margins. Consequently, the route to enriched and satisfying lives that suit the person are not going to be in places called "special", but will instead will be found deep within the rhythms and patterns of everyday community life.

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Fortunately, such social roles can be consciously created for and with a given person even if these roles do not yet exist for the person, so long as there are people willing to take on this task. The more one has a diversity of valued social roles to engage in, the more of life's diversity the person can taste, embrace or reject depending upon whether these experiences are to their liking. Valued social roles provide socially approved and multiple common pathways within community life to enable people access to its many potential benefits. It is true that in some instances, some manner of assistance and support may be required to undertake various aspects of such roles, but this would be true at times for most people depending upon what the role might require.

BEING GRANTED FULLER HUMANITY AND PERSONHOOD

One of the ways that people with disabilities and others at risk of social devaluation get cheated out of lives they are quite able to enjoy is through the belief that they do not deserve or want as good a life for themselves as others in society. Though we may often be unaware, we may extinguish many life possibilities for people with disabilities. This can occur when we endorse expectations for their lives that are too low, because this conveys, confirms and reinforces the message that they are somehow worth “less than” others and thus have no right to expect a life as rich and enjoyable as more privileged citizens in our communities that do not live with the risk of social devaluation. Whether intended or not, this perception acts to crush and destroy the many life possibilities for a person that might have existed otherwise.

On the other hand, if one starts from the assumption that a person with a disability is fully human rather than a diminished one, then we would be much more able to appreciate that the person ought to have all of the hope and sense of possibility in life that many others may take for granted. It is important to not forget that being fully a person, irrespective of living with a disability, is a great gift because it means that that person and those who know and care about him or her can conceivably enjoy and appreciate any aspect of life they might find satisfying and meaningful. Should they be supported to pursue the countless conceivable potentials of life they may be drawn to, then it would be hugely reinforcing to the belief and expectation that life could be very rich for a person with a disability, and that this is as it should be.

PROACTIVELY PURSUING A PERSON'S LIFE OPPORTUNITIES: NOT OVER-FIXATING ON THEIR IMPAIRMENTS

When we focus on what people are not or cannot do, it draws attention away from who people are and what they could conceivably do with their lives. In other words: who they might become if the opportunities to do so were put in place. Most specific impairments that people live with can usually be significantly offset by good supports. Consequently, this concern about a person's functional impairments should be considerably minimised, as these may have little relevance to their personal interests and fulfillments in life and how to mobilise or obtain and enjoy these. By focusing on the person's capacities, life interests, passions, strengths, gifts, enjoyments, potentials, and similar attributes, the question inevitably shifts to how these might be optimally pursued in line with the person's sense of their unique preferences and priorities in life. Taken together, all of these dimensions of who the person is or could be can be engaged and provide for a pattern of living for the person that has the greatest promise for life satisfaction and fulfillment. It must be remembered that there may not only be the person's already evident potentials to pursue; there may also be many undiscovered and hidden potentials. Obviously, taking an interest in what these might be offers the possibility of many new discoveries.

SEEING AND MEETING THE PERSON'S NORMATIVE NEEDS IN NORMATIVE WAYS

It would be mistake to presume that the normative needs of people with disabilities cannot be met in essentially the same way most people meet their needs. Yet, many people believe the opposite, i.e. that people with disabilities can only get their needs met through some kind of “special” way. This

presumption again reinforces the idea that people with disabilities are somehow not a human being just like everyone else and must resort to extremely unusual ways of living and meeting their needs, and that it must be done in places separate from their fellow citizens. The truth is far more straightforward.

People with disabilities first of all share the same normative needs as all other human beings. Secondly, they can get these addressed just as fully as others do by using the same methods used by their fellow citizens. Thirdly, this will ensure that their needs are met properly, since “special” almost always means “less than,” and this will have the effect of not meeting their needs adequately. Since living a life of deprivation is damaging, the prudent strategy is obviously to bet on the “sure thing” and in this case, it is that what works for the majority of their fellow human beings will work for them.

The reason we must aim for people with disabilities to have access and support to use the same resources as meets the needs of others is that these resources are already available, effective in meeting the needs of all people, and can usually and easily adapt to any supports that the person with a disability may have in using such “generic” resources. Why in the world would we create “special” shops for persons with disabilities to use when the shops that they might need already exist? This would apply to all other resources they might conceivably require such as schools, places of worship, transport, housing, employment, leisure, restaurants, supermarkets, healthy living and so on. It is true that a given person with a disability may have some distinct

additional needs not always required by their fellow citizens, but the premise should be that these specific disability related needs can in all likelihood be accommodated in the context of using generic resources. Consequently, it must

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PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONTRIBUTING TO LIFE

One of the normal expectations for most people is that an enjoyable life would have within it the opportunity to both assemble one's own personal achievements and to contribute to the lives of others. This premise should apply equally to people with disabilities as being as important for them as these aims and needs are for other people. Assuming this is the case, then the task becomes one of discovering the specific valued social roles that offer the person the most promise by finding both sources for personal achievement and opportunities to contribute to the community and other people. It is not necessarily obvious to a given person what the answer to such questions might be, nor is it guaranteed that one will always find fruitful ways forward. Nonetheless, even the effort involved in doing so may bring with it much inherent satisfaction. Hence, what is being sought are the social roles and subsequent opportunities to accomplish and contribute, not the assurance that these outcomes will always result. This is true for all people, and should apply just as much to people who live with a disability.

ON BEING PART OF THE LIFE OF A COMMUNITY IN INDIVIDUALLY SUITABLE WAYS

It is not typical for any of us to be part of all aspects of community. On the contrary, people tend to gravitate to elements and niches within community life that offer the best prospects for a good life. So, when it is said that a person is “part of the life of their community”, it would almost always mean those parts of community life of greatest interest and relevance to them. Thus, one’s pattern of social inclusion ought to reflect one’s purposes, needs and interests in life if it is to be a pattern that fits the person well. Obviously, having social roles in community life that engage and satisfy the person is much more optimal than being in community in ways that poorly suit the person.

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The social roles that will suit the person best will derive fundamentally from who they are rather than from who they are not. Hence, the person’s deep personal “nature” or identity ought to serve as a basis for exploring and establishing social roles that enrich one’s life and add value in living. Hence, the nature of one’s place(s) in community ought to be distinctive to the person and driven by who they are and who they might like to be. Where there is a good fit between these and the patterns of one’s life, it can be assumed that the person will be much more personally fulfilled than when the person lives a life that is out of sync with the kind of person they are.

NOT ALLOWING VULNERABILITIES TO BE A REASON TO DENY A PERSON A GOOD LIFE

Though people with disabilities are often referred to as “vulnerable people”, this

portrayal is deeply misleading. In reality, all human beings have vulnerabilities of many kinds, so all people ought to be considered “vulnerable people” given that vulnerability is a core element of human nature and human existence, and cannot be transcended. What can and should be done to lessen concerns about living with vulnerabilities is to manage their existence in such a way as to reduce the degree of vulnerability that we might live with. This can be done with adaptive, intentional safeguards, provided that people engage the question of vulnerability responsibly and with the premise that life can be lived quite well irrespective of the presence of vulnerabilities. Otherwise, the mere presence of vulnerabilities may be taken to mean that all life should stop should it be discovered that one could conceivably experience some hurtful consequence.

Instead, it is much better if it is assumed that living with vulnerability can simply be part

of managing life adaptively. If so, then having a rich and rewarding life could potentially be reconciled much of the time with developing well-targeted intentional safeguards. Hence, it is important to see that vulnerability can be balanced thoughtfully and effectively with the pursuit of a rich and rewarding life. If so, then one could also conceivably pursue and live countless valued social roles that are life-enriching, while still managing one’s vulnerabilities prudently. In this sense, the “good life” might well be a life lived well in concert with one’s vulnerabilities.

SOURCE

Wolfensberger, W (2013). A Brief Introduction to Social Role Valorization. The high-order concept for addressing the plight of societally devalued people, and for structuring human service. (4th Ed). Plantagenet, ON: Valor Press


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