

# The “Happiness Issue”: A Brief Elaboration on a Common Obstacle to Social Role Valorization

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## Introduction

ONE WAY TO THINK OF Social Role Valorization, or at least of PASSING (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2007), is as a set of very high standards for addressing the wounds of devalued people, supporting them in valued social roles, and thereby nurturing their experience of the good things in life (Wolfensberger, Thomas & Caruso, 1996). As with any set of high standards, Social Role Valorization (SRV) ought to present varying degrees of challenge for those who wish to both learn and practice it. And, of course, it does do so. Most people who encounter SRV (Wolfensberger, 1998; Osburn, 2006) feel challenged by it on at least some occasions and in some ways. The challenge can arise from something within or outside the people themselves as well as from something intrinsic or extrinsic to SRV. In order to understand why the “happiness issue” can be an obstacle to SRV for some people, I will first mention three of the most common ways that people are likely to feel challenged by SRV, and then elaborate the “happiness issue” as an example of one of these ways.

### *Challenge to One’s Intellectual Capacity*

IT TAKES SOME TIME AND EFFORT to learn SRV at any depth beyond the superficial. However, experience as an SRV trainer tells me that most people who try to learn SRV can. For example, 99% of the trainees who come to introductory SRV training

workshops report that they like it, a lot: they find most of it to be pretty straightforward, make a lot of sense, and not all that difficult to understand. At the same time, most also find certain elements of SRV to be somewhat more intellectually challenging than others. For example, an important theme of SRV that most people grasp right away is the construct of imitation, because the tendency to imitate others is so natural for human beings, and the trainees are often vividly aware that they practice imitation all the time, and in hundreds of ways. On the other hand, most have to work a little harder to grasp the SRV relevant concept of service model coherency (Wolfensberger, 2009).

Related to the potentially intellectually challenging nature of SRV is that introductory SRV content can be conveyed in all sorts of different formats, degrees of comprehensiveness, and levels of demanding-ness, from short, slow and easy to lengthy, complete and quite rigorous. For example, a one-hour SRV overview for non-human service workers or members of the general public is at one end of the range, and at the other end are those introductory workshops which we often conduct that are designed to train SRV trainers of SRV trainers, what we sometimes call SRV leadership training, which are very comprehensive and taught at a high level of rigor and expectation. We tell potential participants that this type of training is geared to people who have college level minds, whether or not they actually went to college. Be-

yond introductory SRV training, there are various post-introductory training opportunities, and there is also an advanced Social Role Valorization workshop. So, one could say that the intellectual challenge involved in learning SRV is analogous to most learning processes of incremental learning advances: some SRV learners master the material more easily than others; some go further in their mastery than others.

### ***Challenges to Aspects of One's Identity***

SECOND, AND MORE COMMONLY, some people find that SRV presents a challenge to aspects of their personal or professional identity, such as their self-image, their beliefs or values, or commitments, or roles, or their attitudes or mind-sets, or even quite often, their livelihood. For instance, someone who gets paid to segregate devalued people in large groups and engage them in meaningless activities all day is very likely to feel challenged if he comes to SRV training and hears (perhaps for the first time) that what he has been doing all along is harmful to people. Or, the identity challenge may come from the fact that SRV does not fit well with what the person wants to believe, or wants the world to be like. A common example of this is the difficulty many people have in coming to grips with the reality of devaluation, or with the implications of that reality, perhaps because devaluation gets them very close to some of the most basic questions of human existence. For instance, they may be the type of person who resists the notion that human beings do devalue some other human beings, perhaps because they do not want to believe that they themselves do that. Or, they may agree that there is devaluation, but resist the notion that particular devalued people are, in fact, devalued. In either case, they, therefore, also have a great deal of difficulty fully appreciating that valued and devalued people are not the same because the sheer condition of being socially devalued creates major existential differences between those who experience it and those who don't. (We give many examples of this in SRV training.)

This reality also runs against the grain of some people, who therefore have trouble accepting its logical implications to role-valorizing service. A key point about this second type of challenge is what the person who feels it does about it. He might decide from it that SRV is not for him; or, he might conclude that SRV is right and that he needs to change what he is doing.

### ***Challenge to One's Service Skills & Discipline***

A THIRD VERY COMMON TYPE OF CHALLENGE has to do with putting its ideas into practice—actually doing things to valorize the social roles of one or more individuals. While, of course, some people do much better at this than others, almost everybody finds SRV challenging to implement. Sometimes, this is for reasons already mentioned, such as incomplete understanding or incompatible attitudes. But also, even in services provided by people who both understand SRV fairly well and want to do it, it may still be hard to carry out fully. We see this in SRV-based evaluations of such services—few attain a score on PASSING in the excellent range (cf. Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2007).

There are many reasons for this. For instance, because SRV has implications across the board to nearly every facet of addressing service recipients' needs, even people with high SRV proficiency and commitment are tested in their efforts to implement it fully. For example, it is usually much easier to support people in (ascribed or attributed) relationship roles than in (function-contingent) roles that require skills and competent performance; likewise, it is relatively easy to put into effect many SRV implications having to do with image enhancement, but much more challenging to implement SRV requirements of competency enhancement.

Over and above the facts that SRV is hard to implement in general and that some parts of it are harder to implement than others, the biggest difficulty comes from the fact that people who want to do SRV have to do it with real people in real life circumstances, where things do not al-

ways work well because the real world is not only full of obstacles, but is also where the devaluation is. Moreover, even if SRV-implementers do get everything just right, that state of affairs may not last, and the implementers will have to make adjustments or even start over again. Sometimes even very good SRV arrangements are disrupted by things that are hard to anticipate. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

One family I know is pretty committed to SRV mainly because one of their children has Down's syndrome. More than two years after he graduated from high school at 21 years old, he finally got a decent work role: a full-time paid job in the main offices of a large corporation. When he was hired, his parents and agency support worker approached this opportunity very carefully in terms of preparing him to succeed in the corporate world, helping him learn the building layout, study the employees' handbook, get outfits of new clothes in line with the dress code, and so on. After a month or two into the job, everything was going pretty well. One night, he went out to eat with some coworkers, and later a couple of them took him to a night spot, where they all carried on and had a good time. The next day at work, he was on the elevator with a woman who complimented him on how nice he looked, saying "That's a nice suit." Trying to return the compliment, he said "Thanks ... those are nice breasts."

Well, he was not fired, but was suspended a few days so he could be counseled by the company's human resources people. This did not make him "happy," but was very instructive for him and everyone else concerned. This brings us to "the happiness issue," which seems to be an obstacle to some people "getting" SRV, and is a common example of the second type of challenge mentioned above, i.e., to aspects of one's identity.

### The "Happiness" Issue

**M**OST OF WHAT I have to say here about this issue is taken directly from Wolfensberger's *Guidelines for Evalua-*

*tors During a PASS, PASSING, or Similar Assessment of Human Service Quality* (Wolfensberger, 1983; p. 60, numbers 5 a, b & c.) I have added a few embellishments to these, hopefully without distorting them in any way.

Many people who are in a human service role to a devalued person think that the best and most important thing they can do for that person is to make, or keep, or let him or her be, "happy." (That is why we call it "the happiness issue.") This is particularly the case if the devalued person upon whom they are serving is very young, or elderly, or mentally retarded, or severely impaired. They simply believe that being "happy" is the highest priority in life, at least for that person, and they may feel this way even if they do not believe the same is true for themselves. Meaning no disrespect, and for lack of a better term, I will call those who think this way "happiness-invokers," because they invoke the state of being happy as the ultimate yardstick for determining whether a service action is appropriate or not.

We find "happiness-invokers" in both formal organized services and in informal contexts. For example, people, such as paid staff, who are in formal service roles may be "happiness invokers." Or, adult children taking care of elderly parents in an informal service role may be "happiness-invokers," as could be the parents of a handicapped child. In other words, many human service workers, as well as many ordinary people, like family members, are like this.

"Happiness-invokers" often clash with other servers who simply do not support the constant pursuit of happiness for the devalued person, or who advocate things that seem to interfere with the devalued person's happiness. Such clashes sometimes occur between people who have been trained in SRV and those who have not, because one believes that role valorization of the person served is of utmost importance while the other believes that keeping the person always happy is the main thing. A typical example of this kind of clash is one that takes place between the non-

SRV-trained parents of a handicapped person and the SRV-trained staff of an agency that provides services to that person. However, I hasten to add that just because someone has been trained in SRV does not mean he is always going to be right, or just because two parties have had SRV training does not guarantee that they will always agree on every issue (although there is likely to be a higher degree of agreement on most SRV-related ones).

In the minds of “happiness invokers,” an SRV measure is simply wrong if it runs counter to what seems to make or keep a service recipient “happy.” However, it is possible—and even likely—that some SRV measures may be quite contrary to what some people think; after all, some of its implications are counter-intuitive. If this occurs, people who invoke happiness as their standard think SRV should be disregarded or else changed to accommodate their issue because, they believe, service recipient happiness trumps all other considerations. They may disagree with SRV partly, or reject it completely, over this one little issue. This may be the only reason, or at least the only expressed reason, why they never fully embrace SRV or never pursue SRV any further after their initial encounter with it.

Following are some useful guidelines for developing an SRV perspective on this problem. The first thing is to develop an adaptive predisposition to the “happiness issue.” This can come from cultivating four basic mental stances about it.

### ***Maintain Consciousness of the Ultimate Goal of SRV***

FIRST, ONE NEEDS TO REMAIN AWARE that the goal of SRV is to enable devalued people to experience the good things in life: this is what SRV is ultimately aimed toward. These good things do not necessarily fall into the laps of most devalued people; and so, both they—and those in service roles to them—will usually need to put forth some effort, some persistence, some struggle in order to gain them and maintain them. Remaining conscious of this worthy goal can help sustain one

through those times when carrying out SRV gets difficult and requires one to hold to one’s rigorous SRV-derived expectations, even when that means confronting or even clashing with others, such as “happiness invoking” staff, but possibly also with service recipients themselves.

### ***Avoid Equating “Happiness” with Role Valorizing Conditions***

SECOND, ONE MUST KEEP IN MIND that valorizing the social roles of a party is not incompatible with that party’s happiness, a point I will come back to in a moment, but neither are they the same thing, as some people think they should be. Therefore, we should be very careful ourselves not to equate service recipient “happiness” with either a good life, or with role-valorizing service conditions whose ultimate aim is to enable the person to experience the good things in life.

### ***Avoid Oversimplifying SRV***

THIRD, WANTING THINGS TO BE simple and easy is a pretty common human trait, but it is not rational or helpful to oversimplify or dumb-down complex multi-layered things. We see this often with SRV, when people try to reduce it down to something maybe as simple as “SRV is just common sense,” or “SRV means being nice to people.” I have heard individuals responsible for teaching SRV to others say things like “SRV is all about integration,” or “SRV really all boils down to one thing: rights!” The “happiness issue” is in the same mode of thinking. One needs to help others understand that the good things in life for a devalued person or, for that matter, any person, do not reduce down to simply being “happy,” because there is a lot more to life than that. Fortunately, there is likewise a great deal more to SRV.

### ***Give SRV Due Consideration, i.e., A Fair Hearing***

FOURTH, IF SOMEONE REALLY AND TRULY wants the good things in life for a devalued person then he or she would be wise to take SRV very seriously

and to consider it in some depth, because SRV theory has so much to offer anyone who wants the good things in life for a devalued person. SRV is so potentially important for making someone's life better that the server would be unfair to him or herself, and more importantly also to the person served, to either neglect SRV, or to reject it, on the basis of some casual exposure to it, or of some less-than-complete understanding of it, or of an impulse or feeling provoked by it.

Let me now elaborate a little bit on these four basic mental stances by making ten additional derivative points.

### ***SRV Measures & Happiness Often Correlate***

FIRST AND FOREMOST, it should be made very clear that there is an exceedingly high degree of correlation between SRV measures and the kinds of things that would help to assure "happiness" for most people, including service recipients. For instance, SRV contains thousands of specific im-

plications for positive actions on behalf of devalued people that would directly affect their well-being, security, identity, self-esteem, dignity, respect, belongingness, acceptance, education, learning, growth, development, home-life, work and career, contributions to others, valued participation and involvement in their society and its culture, high quality and adaptive interpersonal interactions, engagements in meaningful, caring and long-term relationships, and the realization and fulfillment of their desires, hopes, and dreams—all of which would contribute enormously to the likelihood of the person's happiness. To reject SRV because one out of a zillion potentially valorizing actions on behalf of a specific individual might momentarily diminish that person's "happiness" is not rational, especially if it also leads one to reject working on some of the zillion-minus-one other things that are virtually certain to improve the person's life. (See Wolfensberger, 1983, p. 60, #5b.)

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## **Invitation to Write Book, Film & Article Reviews**

### **From the Editor**

I ENCOURAGE OUR READERS to submit reviews to *The SRV Journal* of current films, books and articles. For people who are studying SRV, looking for everyday examples can help deepen one's understanding. For people who are teaching SRV, learning from and using contemporary examples from the media in one's teaching can be very instructive for audiences. For people who are implementing SRV, contemporary examples can provide fruitful ideas to learn from. Some books and articles mention SRV specifically; others do not but are still relevant to SRV. Both are good subjects for reviewing. We have written guidelines for writing book and film reviews. If you would like to get a copy of either set of guidelines, please let me know at:

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Thank you.

### ***SRV is Not Primarily a Therapeutic or Clinical Tool***

SRV IS CONCERNED PRIMARILY with measures that support people in valued social roles. It is not a clinical instrument that measures individual characteristics and personal dynamics. Thus, SRV is not oriented to how specific individuals “feel” about or assess their so-called “quality of life,” or how others may do so, but rather SRV is oriented to the conditions existing in a service provision that are likely to contribute to more “valorization,” though not necessarily “happiness,” in the lives of all service recipients. (See Wolfensberger, 1983, p. 60, #5a.)

### ***Happiness is Idiosyncratic; Not Fully Under Others' Control***

IT IS NOT UN-IMPORTANT THAT a person be happy; happiness is generally a desirable thing. Yet, for most people, most experiences of happiness in this world tend to be random, transitory and imperfect. Only the saintliest people seem able to sustain a state of happiness over time, and of course, many saints were sublimely happy when they were suffering! On the one hand, even under optimal conditions, some persons will be unhappy, and create their own hell. On the other hand, some people are very serene under even the most adverse conditions, including ones that may last a lifetime. Therefore, personal feelings of well-being and happiness are only partially controllable by other people, including those in serving roles, such as family members and program staff, or by service provisions, or by program structures. (See Wolfensberger, 1983, p. 60, #5a.)

### ***Happiness is Subjective & Relative***

HAPPINESS IS A SUBJECTIVE FEELING STATE, and is thus always relative, not only to the person, but also to the (fleeting) present moment and temporal circumstances. Obviously, no one is ever “perfectly happy,” at least not for very long. Most people, most of the time, say they are only relatively moderately happy: if someone always seemed

ecstatic, others would think there was something wrong with him or her.

### ***SRV is Often Demanding***

VALORIZING LIFE CONDITIONS do not always imply reduction in stress or discomfort. To the contrary, in a sheltered and non-valorizing setting, it may be much easier for certain people to be content, while a role-valorizing structure may be demanding, stressful and at times turbulent. For example, high developmental challenges do not always bring happiness. There is an idea called the “dignity of risk,” meaning that a certain inherent dignity is attached to a person who tries, who takes on developmental growth risks, who confronts and struggles with challenges, and this dignity the person retains even if he should fail. He may not be happy that he failed, but perhaps the dignity of having tried is more important than “happiness.” (See Wolfensberger, 1983, p. 60, #5c.)

### ***Some Believe Happiness Outweighs its Negative Costs***

AS NOTED EARLIER, many people apparently believe that “happiness” is what matters most in the life of a devalued person. They argue (at least implicitly) that whatever makes such a person “happy” is okay, even if it also has negative consequences for that person, which they tend to downplay or disregard. This clashes with a fundamental notion in SRV that has endless implications, which is that if one thinks it is important to help others think good things instead of bad things about a vulnerable person, then one would not support things that might lead others to think less of that person or to see that person in a negative light. For example, one would avoid doing or saying or supporting things that might encourage, or risk conveying, any negative stereotypes that the person one cares about is vulnerable to. And, there are all sorts of pernicious stereotypes affecting devalued people. As an example, perhaps the most common stereotype about people with mental disorders is that they are violent or dangerous, and

therefore scary and menacing. So, knowing that, if one serves people who are likely to be thought of in that way, then getting them enrolled in a class where they learned how to shoot handguns would be a real problem—even if it did make them “happy.” This is just what the staff of a group home for people coming out of psychiatric facilities actually did with several of their residents. So, in the minds of those staff people, it was okay to cast their recipients further into the menace role, as long as it made the residents happy, even if it scared the hell out of their already fearful neighbors and practically sealed this very negative stereotype permanently into their minds.

As one can see, the “happiness” criterion is especially problematic when applied in service to devalued people, particularly if they are image- or competency-impaired. Those who hold this perspective, that is, people who invoke “happiness,” should be forthrightly challenged to consider if what they call “happiness” constitutes the highest value in earthly life, especially if brought at the expense of independence, self-sufficiency, acceptance and respect from others.

### ***Happiness Can Be Used as a Cover or Detoxification***

IF ONE WHO INVOKES “HAPPINESS” acknowledges that measures which seem to make a devalued person “happy” also have problematic aspects, and yet insists on defending those measure nonetheless, then several things may be at work. There may be some degree of defensiveness (psychologically speaking) or other type of emotional investment in a practice being argued for, often because the arguers themselves or someone they know may engage in that practice. For example, some people who work for services that segregate devalued people often argue that this is good for such people because they are “happy with their own kind.” Some service workers, family members and others defend institutions based on that rationale. Or, the arguer may be ambivalent about devaluation. For instance, as mentioned before, he or

she may simply refuse to believe that it is real, or may accept its reality, but insist that particular individuals, groups or classes of devalued people are not devalued. Or, he may see that a particular person is devalued, but be unable to appreciate that that person’s heightened vulnerability makes him or her different from non-devalued people and requires a more cautious and careful, or “conservative,” service approach. In any case, the “happiness-invoker” may try to “detoxify” the problematic elements, meaning try to make them appear less problematic than they really are, or else do things to cover them up.

### ***There Are Many Paths to Happiness***

THIS SOUNDS MORE LIKE Zen than SRV, but it applies here nonetheless. The point is that some people will insist on the acceptability for a devalued person of a de-valorizing, but “happiness-inducing” practice, as if it were the only thing that could possibly make the person happy, and as if nothing else of a role-valorizing nature could equal it, let alone bring even greater potential happiness. When one runs up against this type of argument, it can be helpful to communicate to the “happiness-invoker” that one personally has nothing against happiness and that, in fact, some of one’s best friends are happy, and that surely the two of you should be able to come up with other, more valorizing ways that the person in question can experience a bit of happiness. Not being able to do this usually indicates a failure of the imagination more than that there is only a single path to happiness.

### ***Happiness May Be Invoked as a Cop-Out***

IN OUR EXPERIENCE, THE “HAPPINESS” criterion is invoked almost exclusively on the side of acquiescence to the status quo, or what might be called the “default” position, which is most often that of doing nothing, and it is almost never invoked on the side of active intervention on the part of the invoker. People rarely seem to make the “happiness” argument when it would require them to

work harder. In other words, if they genuinely put the person's "happiness" above all else, one would expect them to argue for it at least as strenuously when they would be required to work very hard or to make significant personal sacrifices in order to assure it. We suspect that many people who resort to this argument require nothing more of themselves than toleration of a service recipient's maladaptive, but presumably happiness-inducing, behaviors or decisions. Such complacency can be a form of laziness or even outright irresponsibility on the part of the serving entity. This, in turn, may result from lack of identification, or conversely, from an unhealthy over-identification with the service recipient, or to a lack of genuine caring for the person, or a lack of commitment to providing an excellent service overall to a wounded person.

### ***Low Expectations May Be Defended by Invoking Happiness***

LASTLY, PEOPLE WHO INVOKE the "happiness" rule may harbor low expectations of certain devalued people, which allows them to defend a practice that confirms those negative role perceptions and expectations. For example, if people hold the belief that a particular devalued person is a "holy innocent" or an "eternal child," they may exempt that person from any duties or obligations or rules or challenges which that person does not like. This attitude is why many devalued people never learned the value and importance of work, or were never challenged in school, or lack social graces.

### **Conclusion**

THE "HAPPINESS ISSUE" HAS IMPLICATIONS to the dissemination of SRV insofar as effective SRV teaching requires knowledge of the issue, its roots and its rationales. It also requires communicating the countervailing rationales for pursuing SRV. The issue also has implications to effective SRV practice which requires a disciplined and strategic approach rooted in well-thought-out principles applied to individ-

ual people; an approach, in other words, that is likely to understand and withstand the clamoring of "happiness-invokers" in its pursuit of higher, or at least more valorizing, overall aims. As an SRV trainer, my own experience with the "happiness issue" is that many people come to SRV training thinking this way somewhat intuitively, but are usually able to sort it out and, in effect, change their minds, because SRV puts this and many other issues they may have in a larger more coherent context, and helps them to distinguish between SRV and non-SRV issues, and between issues that are related but different. For instance, there is some overlap between the happiness issue and the "client choice" issue, but they are not exactly the same. Also, as readers familiar with PASSING will know, that instrument renders a number of sub-scores in addition to the overall service performance score. These sub-scores measure elements of service quality not contained in single ratings, but rather are derived by summing the scores of various combinations of different ratings. One such sub-score is "Felicity," comprised of ratings which measure conditions that taken together would likely contribute to a recipient's overall sense of "well-being" or, yes, feelings of "happiness." However, again, making "happiness" the decisive factor in one's service philosophy is not the same as the idea of supporting a felicitous set of service conditions which potentially might facilitate such a state.

Finally, in summary, let me reiterate that SRV is not "anti-happiness" and, I am happy to say, neither am I. ☺

SEE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ON PAGE 67

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