The Indispensable Mindset

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The Influence of Assumption Perspectives in Early Developments of Normalisation *&* SRV

IN THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF Normalisation and later Social Role Valorisation (SRV), Wolfensberger recognised the essential role which individual and collective assumptions play in human affairs (Wolfensberger, 1998, 116). For instance, any effort to serve the needs and interests of another party will immediately generate or draw upon assumptions about such crucial things as: the nature of the world, the meaning of life, the nature of human nature, who the people are and what needs do they have, what 'solutions' or responses are called for, etc. (Wolfensberger, 1998, 108-109). In truth, many of these assumptions remain unexplicated and possibly unconscious to the people making them. Yet no matter how unconscious and unexplicated assumptions may be, they will inevitably generate many actions[1] that can coalesce into service models and even form service cultures (Schein, 2010). Many features of service models cannot be explained without reference to and discovery of these underlying assumptions—which is no mean feat; since assumptions are not directly observable and therefore can only be inferred (presuming one can do this accurately enough) from the actions observed.

Assumptions also occupy a significant place in our understanding of unconsciousness and its role in social and societal devaluation. From the SRV theme of unconsciousness (Wolfensberger, 1998, 103-104), we can learn that much human activity, including the potential to devalue others, can come from what are often unconscious assumptions about a devalued party, which nonetheless affect the actions of the observer(s) toward that party, without the observer(s) necessarily having full awareness of this.

Additionally, assumptions play a central role in the formation of one's expectations of other people and of the view of their learning and growth potential (Wolfensberger, 1998, 105-106). For example, the assumption that people could grow and develop if given the right opportunities was captured in the phrase, 'developmental growth orientation' used in the evaluation tool PASS 3 (Wolfensberger *&* Glenn, 1975). PASS 3 contained a rating cluster (114) by that name, comprised of three ratings: Physical Overprotection (R1141); Social Overprotection (R1142); and Intensity of Relevant Programming (R1143). This concept later widened to become incorporated within the developmental model, a central theme of SRV, and subsumed within key ratings of PASS-ING (2007) such as R231 Program Address of Recipient Needs, R232 Intensity of Time Use, etc.

The Rise of the Mindset Perspective

WHILE THE CONCEPT OF ASSUMPTIONS exists as a framework for understanding what might be thought of as largely unexamined notions and ideas that result in either adaptive or maladaptive actions, especially for our topic in the lives of other people, they are apparently very hard to measure or test under experimental conditions, as mentioned earlier. You might say that assumptions are too small to be seen and identified in any singular and objective sense and can only be inferred–itself a process of interpretation open to much bias–by observing the actions that assumptions generate.

Social scientists have begun to refer to the construct of 'mindset,' a collection of related assumptions, which is then 'large' enough to be seen and categorised in useful ways. It would seem apparent that Wolfensberger was aware of this as he shifted focus in his later writings from assumption language to mindset language, or at least added mindset language to the teaching (Wolfensberger, 1998, 105-106). The potency of this emphasis is that mindsets can be identified and named, and therefore be understood and potentially altered. Mindsets are not just a theoretical construct, but also a practical one. Note that the concept of 'mindset' can negatively imply certain rigidity or resistance to change, even in the face of compelling evidence, though the concept of mindset also has positive interpretations.

We see in the re-development of SRV teaching material[2] conducted by Wolfensberger in the late 1990s that he incorporated three new themes into the leadership level teaching framework and within the SRV monograph, 3rd (revised) edition (105-106, 116-118, 118-120). One of these themes was "the power of mindsets," which refers to the ideas and expectations that one party holds about another party. Within SRV theory, the aim is to shape the mindsets of observers so that they are more likely to hold positive, realistic ideas and expectations about socially devalued persons and groups (Wolfensberger, 1998, 105).

In respect to the developmental model specifically, the mindsets that incorporate mental expectations and beliefs which people carry toward others can subsequently either generally facilitate or prevent their growth and development, particularly their potential for holding valued social roles (Wolfensberger, 1998, 105-106, 108). Indeed, a mindset can propel a party either more towards normative, typical and valued expectations about other people, or conversely toward negative expectations, conforming to one of more devalued stereotypes[3] and socially devalued roles.

An Example of Related Recent Research into Mindsets

SOME RECENT AND PROLONGED RESEARCH into mindsets has provided useful additional material relevant to understanding, teaching and applying SRV. For instance, Dweck (2000) found contrasting mindsets as illustrated in two broad questions: 1) what expectancies do people hold towards themselves and others regarding intelligence, and 2) what other broad attributes do we give ourselves and others, as captured in our mindsets?

It appears for example that as soon as children begin to evaluate themselves in respect to others, they begin to form mindsets about their own intelligence (Dweck, 2006), that also generalise into perspectives about other people (though this latter point was only evident in later research). Her research into mindsets regarding intelligence is especially relevant to the developmental growth orientation in SRV. Through experiments with people across a variety of ages (young children, adolescents and adults) and settings (kindergarten, school and college) conducted over a thirty-year period, her team exposed an all-too-common 'fixed,' deeply-seated mindset that contributed to a series of actions which limited that person's own growth. These actions or orientations prevented people's development and progress, even to the extent that they avoided challenge in an attempt to validate their own ability but without ever actually

putting it to the test. In other words, engaging in hard work and effort was seen as running the risk of exposing them to actual failure, something people with fixed mindsets could not countenance.

These patterns of avoidance had people seeking constant validation that they were essentially smart, capable and clever (or conversely, negative reinforcement that they were hopeless failures and dummies). "Clever people don't need to work hard, they should find everything easy—that's why they are smart, that's what makes them clever." However, when faced with the (inevitable) difficult task and the possibility of failure (as for instance when people go to university for the first time and take on the role of university student), they might quickly plunge into despair, especially if they lack the strategies for counteracting the prospect of failure. This merits further reflection for those engaged in SRV teaching and implementation: what might we learn from this pattern in regards to societally devalued and wounded people?

On the other hand, Dweck's research indicates that people who operate with a growth (or even mastery) mindset understand intelligence as something that can be developed but only with much sustained effort. This mindset leads people to seek a challenge, to enjoy being tested and to attempt progressively harder things. While intrinsically no smarter than the 'fixed-mindset' people, their orientation allows them to recognise challenges as opportunities for expanding growth and development, and therefore to be embraced and even sought out.

The same people who have fixed mindsets about their own intelligence generally also hold such views about the intelligence of others (Gervey, Chiu, Hong & Dweck, 1999; as cited in Dweck, 2000) and about the personalities of other people; views such as, can they be trusted or are they reliable?[4] Such views were often formed from only a single encounter with an observed party (cf. Wolfensberger, 1998, 35). In other words, fixed mindset people tended to form rigid stereotypes of others faster, with more assurance and with less in-

formation than those with a growth mindset, who considered the behaviour of someone they had just observed to be potentially due to many explanatory factors outside of the person (Gervey et al., 1999). This pattern can be seen often in the mindsets and interactions of teachers, human service staff, medical and clinical personnel, etc.; to the detriment of societally devalued people in services.

Dweck and her colleagues believe that we all probably hold fixed mindsets about some, even many things, but that mindsets can also change once one becomes aware of the alternatives. What they have found is that encouraging someone to put out effort is more likely to promote a growth mindset, whereas an emphasis on outcomes–such as winning, or proving one is the best or the smartest–is more likely to secure a fixed mindset with its resultant tendencies.

Most of Dweck's research concerns the response of normatively capable people in relation to their sense of self. While she offers some comments about the likely outcomes of people with very low expectations of themselves, I have seen little direct research in this body of literature addressing that problem directly.

Some Potential Implications for the Teaching & Use of SRV

THE STRENGTH OF SRV AS a meta-theory is very much based on the validity and empirical rigour of the related theories which SRV relies upon. If the work of Dweck contains such validity then the following implications might also apply to SRV:

• The implications for expectancies of growth and development apply to all of three parties: the devalued party, anyone closely interacting with that party (worker, agency, parent), and anyone observing such interaction (what Wolfensberger referred to as the party of first, second and third part);

• A fixed mindset has strong links to the "failure set" and "avoidance mentalities" seen in deeply wounded people, who have often concluded that

they are indeed failures, and it is therefore fruitless to even attempt new experiences or challenges (Wolfensberger, 1998, 22);

• The "Theories of Self" (Dweck, 2000 and 2006) might therefore strengthen the understanding which SRV holds concerning the power of a devalued person's own expectancy set about themselves, and in particular, the strategies that a second party might utilise to encourage and facilitate the development of a growth/mastery mindset in a party of the first part;

• Fixed mindsets could sharpen the distinction between those people resistant to change, compared to those willing to take a reasonable risk. Dweck's research on mindsets provides valuable insight into such dynamics and even suggests a course of action that could potentially help 'move' some parties formerly resistant to effort, especially when that party feels exposed as a failure;[5]

• Though not explicitly covered by Dweck's research, Schein's work with organizations suggests that service cultures can become fixed, i.e., believe they are already optimal, and thus become risk averse, avoiding any challenge and failing to adjust to new demands, while simultaneously creating and maintaining positive illusions and rhetoric of excellence. Such organizations tend to reach a plateau (at best) in achievement for themselves and for those they support. Many PASS-ING (2007) scores from introductory workshops could reflect aspects of the above scenario;

• SRV and SRV teachers have commonly tried to describe "assumptions" as an underlying and often unconscious thought process that profoundly affects such things as role expectancies right through to service models. However, I am suggesting that assumptions may not be very amenable to study because of their implied narrow dimension. Therefore, a theory utilising a discussion of assumptions alone may threaten its legitimacy in some teaching contexts, not because it is inaccurate or implausible, but because it is difficult to demonstrate it. Mindsets comprise and coalesce from a larger set of assumptions, and therefore have more dis-

cernible patterns that theoretically can more easily be studied. People could have many differing assumptions, but share the same broad mindset which can be demonstrated and reliably shown to operate distinctly from other mindsets;

• The current discussion of mindsets and expectancies in the teaching and writing of SRV is generally limited to a description of what mindsets are and how they relate to expectancies about people. There is room within SRV teaching to incorporate additional material on mindsets, such as related above, that also shows the interrelationship with the themes of Unconsciousness, the Developmental Model, and Role Expectancy; and how those themes discuss the mindsets that would be necessary as devalued people and their supporters strive towards greater access to 'the good things of life' (Wolfensberger, Thomas & Caruso, 1996).

Conclusion

DR. WOLFENSBERGER always described the main teaching events of SRV as "Introductions to SRV," which sometimes amazed us as we sat through four days of lectures: if this is the introduction, what is the main bit like! I think he always appreciated that he was describing a framework, a kind of skeletal picture from which a great deal of additional material could be developed. His emphasis on leadership development encouraged learners to dive into the background material underlying SRV, and to keep researching new material. His own resource files, and his development of three additional themes for SRV, illustrate this emphasis. As well, his newly released book, "Advanced Issues in Social Role Valorization Theory" (2012), further exemplifies this process of ongoing learning and theoretical development of SRV.

SRV then might be seen as a framework that permits much flesh to be added. Indeed, as a meta-theory, it relies heavily on pre-existing and emerging knowledge to be relevantly added to our understanding of how humans evaluate and treat each other, but also how this might be used wisely

so that vulnerable people can experience the 'good things of life.'

Thus any serious student, teacher and implementer of SRV cannot restrict themselves to only SRV literature, but should be encouraged to search the fields of knowledge and assess edifying connections or clarifying corrections that can still be made to our understanding of SRV. I very much encourage your research, learning, questions and comments in this regard, both personally as well as within the pages of this *Journal*, and through other forms of constructive interaction. ☙

Endnotes

1. Schein (2010) refers to actions as 'artefacts', as though the actions are only representative symbols of our assumptions. Thus assumptions or the sum total thereof is what the culture of a service really is (or corporation or program). The artefacts are representations of that culture.

2. What we came to know as the 'SRVX10 themes.'

3. There is a view that people tend to form views that reflect polarised positions, especially once they contain some emotional content for the person.

4. This tendency to blame most/all behaviour on a person's innate tendencies, and undervalue the importance of the situation and context that influences behaviour, has also been called the "fundamental attribution error" (Ross, 1977).

5. Dweck comments that people with fixed mindsets are concerned that 'failing' means they actually become a 'failure' (Dweck, 2000). There is also the fear for some devalued people that they actually will live down to the low expectations and stereotyped roles that others believe about them, thus trying something new or risky might fuel that fear into becoming a reality. Some might manage this by not trying at all.

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