

SRV in action

A VALUED ROLE:
THE GIVER OF GIFTS

WHAT MIGHT SRV
SAY ABOUT ... 'SLOW'

CARRYING THE
WEIGHT OF
STIGMATIZATION

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by Donna Duncan

In the paper *Choosing Values; The Consequences For People's Lives*, Michael Kendrick and Frances Hartnett state:

'It is important to understand what it is we do to hurt each other and what we can do about this. There is an old saying ... "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me!" It is perhaps unusual to think of human beings as being creatures that might be hurt by words, or thoughts or feelings, but the truth is that these can indeed hurt us. ... We may pretend that words do not matter, but when they are applied to us in a way that diminishes us in front of our peers, the pain is all too real. There is pain in stigmatization due to the meaning and value assigned to people.'

Pain from cruel and highly stigmatizing words, while mostly emotional, can be akin to a physical attack. It can be like a punch in the stomach or having something heavy dropped across your shoulders. A couple of years ago I saw this happen to our two little boys while on a family excursion.

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And also our regular features:

- *Helpful Articles*
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SRV in action

An initiative of Values in Action Association Inc. to assist people make the links between the theory of Social Role Valorisation and how it can be used in our work and our lives. We are assisted by our colleagues in local groups across New Zealand and Australia as well as the Australian and New Zealand SRV Group.

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Values in Action is a small unfunded Brisbane-based incorporated association which exists to promote greater awareness and understanding of Social Role Valorisation Theory and related concepts, to conduct relevant training events, to provide support and assistance of a personal, advisory and information nature to Association members involved in human service change efforts and to engage in cooperative activities with other organisations with similar aims and objectives.

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VALUES IN ACTION ACKNOWLEDGES THE TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND AND OUR GRATITUDE THAT WE SHARE THIS LAND TODAY, OUR SORROW FOR THE COSTS OF THAT SHARING, AND OUR HOPE THAT WE CAN MOVE TO A PLACE OF JUSTICE AND PARTNERSHIP TOGETHER.

viaa
values in action association

by Wendy McGlynn

A VALUED ROLE: THE GIVER OF GIFTS

It was fluffy, cute and green: a small, friendly crocodile in the form of a soft toy. No threat to anyone — or was it?

In this instance, the answer was a definite 'Yes', for the recipient was our adult son, Mark. Mark is well into adulthood, so you would think that a soft toy would pose no problem. However, it is easy for people to categorise someone like Mark, who needs support to live the life that people typically take for granted. He is someone at risk of being seen as a 'forever' child.

With that label and role comes lowered expectations and, in turn, Mark is made more vulnerable. Recognising this, we have tried hard to surround him with positive imagery; imagery that reflects who he is and what he likes; imagery that confirms his status as a man who has been experiencing life for well over 30 years and is now an Uncle.

We've learnt that it's important to be constantly on the lookout as the potential is there for things to quickly come undone. That's where the crocodile came in ...

Mark was keen to join the tens of thousands of people who flock to Sydney's Royal Easter Show each year to see the animals, visit the exhibits, watch the performances and buy showbags.

Like so many others, Mark is drawn to 'Sideshow Alley' with its colourful booths, lots of excitement and spruikers enticing passers-by to 'have a go' and test their skills and maybe win a prize. The highest scorers are likely to be seen hefting around oversized soft toys, with the prizes getting smaller according to one's score.

We realised that 'having a go' was important to Mark and that he was likely to win a prize or prizes of some kind. So we were concerned that Mark storing his soft toy at home would reinforce the 'forever' child role in the eyes of his visitors and support workers. So we did some brainstorming and came up with a plan that would turn the threat into an opportunity: we enthused Mark with the idea of trying to win prizes to give to his nephew Cooper and niece Rachel.

Mark now had a new motivation to win. However, to be sure of keeping his positive image intact, we had to consider how he would get any prizes home. To cover this, we made sure that a large bag was on hand to cope with prizes of all sizes, thus ensuring he wasn't seen walking around with a huge soft toy.

When Mark won his first prize, he chose the crocodile as he knew Cooper liked crocodiles. Choosing the next prize was a little trickier, but he found a soft, velvety fabric flower to give Rachel. By agreement, the third prize he won (a plastic Space Shooter) has been put away for Mark to give when Cooper is older.

The potential negatives had been turned into positives. It was quite touching to see Mark proudly present Cooper & Rachel with the prizes he had won, and to see their excited responses, confirming his role as a 'giver of gifts'.

WHAT MIGHT SRV SAY ABOUT ...

'SLOW'

*by Peter Millier, an SRV
Senior Trainer, based in
Adelaide, Australia*

We live in a world that values physical and mental quickness and agility. People who do not think, act or move quickly tend to be devalued. Have you ever stood in a '12 items or less' queue at your local supermarket where an elderly person is struggling with EFTPOS, or at a similar scenario at an ATM?

Typically we will roll our eyes and mentally urge the elderly person to hurry up and go away, or perhaps hope someone else will assist them. We are in a hurry and cannot be bothered. We do not value 'slow' — we do not value perceived incompetence.

Formerly, elderly people were valued for the longevity of their lives and the wisdom they accumulated along the way. Now they are more likely to be perceived as a burden (to family and society), sick, dying or better off dead. A common assumption is that elderly people can no longer learn or develop new skills. Of course they will hold many of the skills learned over a lifetime but these are seldom taken into account or utilised. The focus of many helping forms is usually on deficits rather than assets or abilities.

A starting point suggested by SRV is to get to know who the person really is, what have been his/her life experiences, what are the valued roles he/she has held over a lifetime, how these have shaped the identity of the person, what are the assumptions held about the person by his/her family, community and society.

Then one needs to envisage — together with the person — possible valued roles s/he might continue to perform or learn which fit their life experiences and identity. For instance, an elderly person might be physically slow but mentally very alert and might have a role of teaching a younger person to read or write; or perform household repairs; do woodwork or welding. It will depend entirely on the person, his/her skills and capacities.

Most elderly people, when asked what they would like to do, say they would appreciate opportunities to contribute to family, community and society. An approach based on SRV will look to harness these hopes and desires in a positive way rather than confirm community stereotypes that they are past their 'use-by' date.

HELPFUL ARTICLES (a regular feature)

by Greg Mackay

Shevellar, L. (2008). 'I choose to be a person of integrity': a model for constructive relationships between human services and their bureaucracies. SRV Journal, 3 (2), pp 6-17.

The international SRV journal publishes many great articles, and this one by Queenslander Lynda Shevellar is no exception. Lynda helps us weave knowledge derived from SRV (model coherency) with Michael Kendrick's work on Right Relationship and her own study into the culture and functioning of bureaucracies. She reminds us that most of us work in bureaucracies (even community based ones) or deal with them, so the matrix that she has developed is relevant to anyone who wants to explore the roles that workers in bureaucracies can assume.

She names the limiting bureaucratic roles as police officer and bouncer found more likely in services that are professional-centric and the enabling roles as coach and champion, more likely found in person- and family-centred services. The article concludes with encouragement about the power in each of us to shape the structures in which we work.

For more information about the International Journal, go to http://www.srvip.org/journal_subscriptions.php

FROM THE

INBOX

2009/10/19 Lisa Bridle lisabridle@optusnet.com.au
Subject: UNFORTUNATE NAME OF GROUP

Hi Jane,

I received an email about the name of a group which is sponsoring White Ribbon Day (Nov 25 – Elimination of violence against women). The name of the group is the Mad Spaz Club. (One of the Qld ambassadors for White Ribbon Day is the president of the Mad Spaz Club). It's a website with a young feel and what seems at quick look to be lots of positive stuff for people with quadriplegia and paraplegia — I guess it is one of those attempts to “reclaim” a negative label or taboo word but wondered if there has been any feedback or discussion in other areas that you might have heard of??? Any thoughts??

Lisa

2009/10/19 Jane Sherwin sherwinconsulting@gmail.com
Subject: UNFORTUNATE NAME OF GROUP

Yes, I agree: the content of the site looks quite good, with lots of positive messages about the potential in life. Yes, I think you're right about the name being an attempt to 'reclaim the language'. It's an interesting strategy, and I wonder how conscious they are about what they are trying to do? Do they assume that in using that language, it will influence how they are perceived? And if that is the case, why not use positive language?

I can think of no other change movement that has used it successfully. Women did not use derogatory language at their own expense. African American? Only African Americans can use the N-word and even then very few people think it makes a positive contribution. There is the 'Gay Pride' language. I'd be surprised if that in itself has produced lasting attitude change. What has helped with community acceptance of gays and lesbians is the realisation that people who are gay have many valued roles, and live life fully and ordinarily.

Language-reclaiming is also seen in the mental health arena. Mental health celebrations are liberally sprinkled with events like Mad Hatters Tea Party and Fruitcake Parties. (Sigh).

I suppose there is a nuance in that people with the conditions themselves by-and-large can get away with calling themselves what they like but others who are not members of that group cannot use that language. For example, as I mentioned before, no-one other than an African American can call someone by the N-word; (some) 'wheelies' refer to themselves using that term.

It is important to stress that this is not about political correctness. It is about societal attitude change, and IF the group wants to be viewed positively, then they need to think about two things.

Firstly people are not very conscious about the way in which they absorb and process information. And secondly, that if a group calls themselves 'spaz', then people who hear this language will have their pre-existing stereotypes (unconsciously) reinforced. If the group put *choice* (which they might call 'their rights') above this principle, then so be it. The consequence is that negative views of people with disabilities will continue into new generations.

Thanks for the chance to comment.

Warmly,
Jane

Jane Sherwin is an SRV Senior Trainer based in Brisbane, Australia

CARRYING THE WEIGHT OF STIGMATIZATION

Continued from the front cover

by Donna Duncan

First let me tell you about my family and our excursion that day. My husband and I (both previously married) have what we — and all who know us — believe is a beautifully blended, large family. Some children his and some mine, some of Western descent, some of Aboriginal descent. We can't help but be proud parents. Our children are polite, well mannered students, and generally good, fun-loving kids with their dreams of good life ahead of them. They have many and great valued roles, as individuals and as a family.

This particular day was my parents' 40th wedding anniversary. To celebrate they were taking all their children and grandchildren (there were 14 of us in all) on a country day trip on an old steam train. The youngest children were so excited. They saw the trip as a real 'olden days' adventure (the teenagers coped and put on a brave face). They all spread themselves across the length of a carriage and settled in for the trip, occasionally changing seats, to have siblings and cousins to sit with and talk to.

During the trip our two youngest boys (6 and 8 year old) and I decided to spend some time at the opposite end of the carriage from the rest of the family. The two boys were completely engrossed in their conversation about the scenery inside and outside of the train. Directly across from us was a woman with her two young grandchildren who were obviously much excited, jumping around a lot and shouting. Several times their grandmother asked them to 'stop being so naughty', to sit still and keep their voices down ... but with no success.

The grandmother then raised her voice and said firmly to them 'STOP ACTING LIKE ABO'S!' She had the impact she wanted — they quietened down.

The impact on our sons was very different.

My children stopped talking — stared down into their laps — and their shoulders slowly hung down. It was as if the words that had been spoken were an invisible, heavy weight that our boys now took onto their shoulders — it was truly weighing them down.

This woman's words implied that if you were of Aboriginal descent, as both boys are, then you were the worst possible thing that a person could be (explained in SRV theory as being perceived as deviant, a menace and an object of dread). Her words implied that they should feel ashamed of who they are. These words also had the impact of isolating our boys. They were singled out by her words.

To see their tiny bodies droop under the physical weight of those words was heartbreaking. But worse was hearing it from a grandmother. In their minds all grandmothers are loving and affirming; you admire them and learn from them, making the impact of her words even more hurtful.

As a parent I felt defenceless and unable to protect them from what they heard. How do you respond?

I honestly felt that this woman had no idea the harm her words could cause, or that what she had said was offensive and hurtful. It did not appear to be deliberate, but what would have happened if our boys or I had responded sharply. Would they have then been seen as 'attacking' a harmless elderly woman on a train trip with her little grandchildren? Would the response reinforce her entrenched belief (and possibly that of onlookers) about Indigenous people being a menace and object of dread?

The other thing I find deeply saddening from this experience is the likely impact on that woman's grandchildren. She clearly didn't understand that through her either unconscious or deliberate stereotyping, she is teaching her children to hold the racist belief that Indigenous people are a menace to be loathed. Through her they will learn to stereotype and even hate people. Will they grow to recognise that their grandmother's false assumptions and stigmatization of people leads to deep hurts, abuse and even violence — and try to change things? Or will they grow to believe what her stigmatizing words tell them about other people?

When reflecting on this day I find it ironic that everyone on that train, including the grandmother, would have seen our two little boys as role models for good behaviour and manners. So what is the impact on two little boys, all of 6 and 8 years in the face of stigmatizing and harmful comments? In this case it was a physical weight they carried on their own shoulders, and the physical weight was enough to weigh them down for a time. What followed was that they were embraced by their family, and their valued roles in life reaffirmed, and they continued with their 'olden days' adventure. I hope that the grandmother did catch my stare — and that it did give her the prompt to reflect on her assumptions about other people, and the hurt she caused.

MY FAVOURITE SRV CONCEPT

by Juliette McAleer

Not so long ago, I overheard someone utter the phrase: 'SRV is so old hat'. Personally, I fail to see the problem with old hats — particularly providing they are still capable of keeping the sun off my face.

I concede that a conceptual understanding of SRV theory does not, in and of itself, prompt people to act — just as the hat that remains on the hatstand is inadequate protection from the sun. Once we know all about the bad things that happen to devalued people, why should we do anything at all to change their lot? We can name the issue — so what ?

Simply changing the word 'their' to 'our' makes for powerful reframing: why should we do anything to change our lot? Words (and theories) themselves aren't going to make a great difference in the lives of people at the margins — people are. It is for this reason that the theme of Interpersonal Identification is one of my favourite SRV concepts.

Interpersonal Identification is the process through which one person gets to see him or herself in another, or at least views the person as being like him or herself. This is important because people who identify with others will generally want

good things for others, want to be on others, communicate good things about the others, want to please the others — do what they ask, and possibly want to be like them.

Moving people to do difficult things is a tricky business. We need to be motivated. We need incentive! We need courage. Interpersonal identification is what shifts our understanding and our values from the abstract to the concrete, and inspires us to act on behalf of those with whom we identify. It is a powerful antidote for many of the things that make us susceptible to so-called 'bystander effects' and group think.

It is infinitely more difficult to inflict harm upon or ignore the suffering of someone with whom you personally identify. We feel a sense of responsibility for the wellbeing and protection of those who are like ourselves. Even if others' vulnerabilities are different from our own, these differences pale in comparison to our commonalities. We do not then need concepts like 'duty of care' and 'vicarious liability' to prompt us to action. It is one thing to know that a person has been wounded, but it is quite another to truly empathise with their suffering to the extent that you would do anything within your sphere of influence to alleviate it.

And impotent though we may feel at times, when the power and influence of systems and bureaucracies threaten to demoralise and overwhelm us, it is the connection we feel one with another that keeps us going.

GETTING THE GOOD LIFE: FROM IDEAS TO ACTIONS *SOCIAL ROLE VALORISATION AS A FRAMEWORK FOR TRANSFORMING LIVES*

5TH INTERNATIONAL SRV CONFERENCE
Hosted by Koomarri Assoc, Canberra

Watch for notifications
of speakers and call for
papers during 2010

Canberra ACT, AUSTRALIA
21, 22, 23 September, 2011

To register your interest email
srvconference@koomarri.asn.au

Accompanied by workshops
18, 19, 20 September

AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND SRV CONTACTS

AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL ROLE VALORISATION GROUP (ANZSG)

For more information of the purpose and membership of ANZSG contact any of the local groups listed here

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SRV DEFINITION

The pursuit of the good things of life for a party (ie person, group, or class) by the application of empirical knowledge to the shaping of the current or potential social roles – primarily by means of enhancement of the parties' competencies & image – so that these roles are, as much as possible, positively valued in the eyes of the perceivers.