

The need for roles & relationships

At the heart of the teachings of Social Role Valorisation is the acknowledgement that people with disabilities experience social devaluation, and that this has multiple ways of impacting on a person. **Jane Sherwin** provides an example of what an SRV frame-of-reference offers when thinking about the most helpful forms of support that could be offered to someone she knows, called Anthony.

Anthony grew up with his mother and older brother and attended Special School in his town. When I met Anthony, he was in his early twenties, living with his mother but spending more and more time in a respite house. Anthony had been working in a sheltered-workshop for six years, but had run away from that environment three times. He had no interests apart from listening to the radio. His mother had declining health and his brother was planning to move to another town. The future was looking limited for Anthony.

The principles of SRV encourage us to understand the needs of the individual, both human and specific, that flow from having an appreciation of the true identity of a person. In Anthony's case, this meant that there needed to be an appreciation of the experiences that had contributed to shaping his identity so far. The years spent at special school and the increasing amount of time that Anthony spent away from his mother needed to be deeply appreciated, and their impact on Anthony deeply understood if he was to be well supported to have an enhanced future.

Having an appreciation of a person's particular strengths is one of the ways in which a person can be positively perceived. One of the impressive things about Anthony is his strength, courage and dignity. He has battled with epilepsy all of his life. At times Anthony's charming swagger can deteriorate into a stumbling gait, and his cheeky grin can give way to slurred speech and confusion. Yet Anthony continues to assert his resistance to being treated in ways that do not take him seriously or respect his individuality, or that underestimate his abilities.

The insights of SRV show how important it is to understand Anthony's particular vulnerabilities. Anthony's segregated life-path has barely equipped him to feel a real part of his neighbourhood. Because of his segregated schooling, Anthony has not had the usual opportunities to learn about the formation of friendships; he has not had these opportunities in the school-yard, in sport activities or at school camps. As an adult, getting a job has been made harder for Anthony because graduating from Special School holds no sway with prospective employers.

These experiences show that Anthony, like many other people with disabilities, has endured being labelled, rejected and marginalised by society. While Anthony strongly tries to assert his personal dignity and identity, he is frequently perceived in negative ways that define him as forever-child, burden to his family, and even as a menace. Given all of these negative experiences and perceptions, unless Anthony and the people around him could craft a life that was different from that which he was experiencing, there was a high risk that Anthony would always be living on the margins of society.

One of the most potent strategies of Social Role Valorisation teaching is that it offers a vision of a "good life" for people with disabilities. It asserts that enabling people to gain and maintain valued roles holds one of the keys to a good life. It asserts that if people with disabilities have roles that are appropriate to their age, gender and culture then they are more likely to be perceived in positive ways and to have greater access to what most people take for granted in terms of life's experiences, comforts and relationships. This is a far more potent vision than that of people merely living in 'home-like' environments, or of having a life that is simply full of service programs.

There are two-fold gains when people with disabilities acquire positive roles. Firstly, the person with a disability is more likely to have access to the good things in life, and secondly the observer has their mind-set about a person with a disability challenged or changed.

For those who were seeking a different kind of life experience for Anthony, one of the important questions that needed to be asked was: how do other men of a similar age live their lives? This question needed to be asked while at the same time acknowledging Anthony's particular vulnerabilities – his health, his changing family circumstances, his limited life experiences, and a lack of relationships outside his immediate family.

The vision that was crafted with and for Anthony, was one that was characterised by positive roles at home, in employment, and in his spare time.

Using an SRV framework and its multitude of strategies helps us to think deliberately about how to make a difference in a person's life. SRV is a probabilistic theory. It proposes that if we do 'x', then it is highly likely that 'y' will happen. For example, if Anthony moved to a group home, and spent all of his time in places where he was not mixing with ordinary citizens doing typical things, then it is probable that the following would happen:

- Others around him would continue to have negative beliefs reinforced; beliefs such as: 'they like to be with their own kind'; 'they need a life separate from others';
- Anthony would continue to have low exposure to positive role models, and so miss out on rich learnings from people who he might like or admire, and aspire to be like;
- Anthony, as well as others, would continue to have low expectations about his capacities and abilities.

In contrast, if Anthony had strong, positive roles such as those of tenant, home-maker, house-mate, neighbour, son, brother, music-fan, cinema patron and model-train enthusiast then it was probable that the following would happen:

- Anthony would be perceived to be more like any other young adults;
- Relationships would grow out of these roles;
- Anthony would develop competencies and be perceived by himself and others in more positive ways;
- The expectations held of Anthony would rise, leading to other opportunities.

These were, over time, things that did happen for Anthony. As Anthony began to be more involved in typical life experiences and to take on more positive roles, people around him began to notice that he had a greater sense of himself and more confidence. The people around Anthony used extra-ordinary strategies to help Anthony to achieve these things. As one person said, 'It looked easy on the surface, but much work was being done in the background.'

An SRV framework uses strategies that are not only consistent with what is typical and valued in our society, but it also encourages us to go-the-extra-mile in our willingness to support someone to gain valued roles and to maintain those roles. The teachings of SRV also confront us with a consciousness about how people with disabilities have a heightened vulnerability to wounding experiences at the hands of society, and even at the hands of human services or good-hearted people.

The theory of Social Role Valorisation help us to understand the challenges that arise when we want to counter the impact made by social devaluation on a person. Applying the principles of SRV requires great discernment and an ability to deeply understand and appreciate the life experiences of another person.

Anthony will always struggle with the impact of conditions that make him vulnerable to ill health and marginalisation. It is hoped that the valued roles that Anthony now holds, and the people that are now in his life (in paid and unpaid capacities), will go some way to meeting Anthony's everyday needs of having a sense of belonging, having a home, and a variety of relationships.