Strengthening the role of the employee: An analysis of supported employment using social role valorization theory

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Abstract. At the age of thirty, supported employment has given rise to significant accomplishments, but much of its promise remains unfulfilled. Wolfensberger's Social Role Valorization (SRV) theory offers a substantive method for analyzing and strengthening supported employment practices while describing principles for addressing patterns of social devaluation imposed on people with disabilities. Using formal SRV theory, this paper will explore the power of the employee role. Improved clarity about the role of employee, when it exists and when it does not (i.e., "my employee" versus "your client") represents one way to bolster supported employment and increase positive possibilities in life for people with disabilities.

Keywords: Supported employment, integration, inclusion, natural supports, SRV, social role valorization, normalization, choice

1. Introduction

The late 1970 s and early 1980 s provided the right social climate for taking a critical look at human services' response to employment for people with disabilities. Expectations were rising due to various emerging movements countering the mistreatment of people with disabilities, both within the community and in residential institutions. Wolf Wolfensberger's "Principle of Normalization" [31] as well as the earlier writings of Scandinavians Bengt Nirje and Bank-Mikkelson [2, 20] catapulted high expectations and hope. These writings generated a remarkable shift in thinking about whether people with disabilities actually "needed" to be congregated and segregated apart from the community or instead whether the same people could move toward more integrated and typical lifestyles within community life itself, including regular employment.

In a similar, revolutionary sense, with his "Try Another Way" [10, 11] method of systematic instruction, Marc Gold challenged the assumption of "unemployability" for people having significant levels of intellectual disability. As one example, using Gold's instructional approach, a man having a measurable IQ of 13 learned to build printed circuit boards for space tracking stations used by NASA [26]. Given this entirely new context, "supported employment" emerged as a new human service practice, packed with heightened expectations about integrated employment possibilities.

Since its inception approximately 30 years ago, supported employment's proponents have had a substantial

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period of time for accumulating extensive experience and for subsequent analysis, learning, and reflection concerning what has advanced in supported employment practices and what has not. How have expectations risen over time, and how have they stayed the same? How have employment prospects for people with disabilities improved and what could still be better? What practices have been affirmed as being sound and what practices have now become viewed as regressive? These are all timely questions as to the quality of supported employment in actual practice.

Social Role Valorization theory, or SRV [33], potentially provides a relevant and compelling lens for examining supported employment practices and their quality. SRV is an evolution of normalization theory emphasizing that people who have been excluded from society should have the opportunity to have all of the advantages of a typical life, and that such a life should be obtained in the context of people being in valued social roles within their communities. The overarching emphasis of SRV theory on supporting people to obtain, grow into and get rooted in valued social roles has informed many service delivery practices including supported employment on occasion.

This assertion, that people with disabilities should have access to the same everyday life opportunities and experiences that their fellow citizens enjoy, stems from the theory's recognition of the negative effects of social devaluation. Social devaluation is due to culturally driven negative perceptions of various groups of people that result in such persons being seen and treated as being of low value and even sub-human [33]. This, in turn, leads to their exclusion from community life, mistreatment, discrimination and impoverished lives. This epiphenomenon of social devaluation occurs in all societies, though the excluded groups change from one period to another in history and from one society to another. Fortunately, social devaluation can be reversed and overcome to a meaningful degree, despite its entrenchment in human nature. Social role valorization theory explicitly addresses and proposes positive strategies that can be enlisted to help affected people acquire valued social roles and thereby offset, to a considerable degree, the tendencies toward social devaluation.

Employment, like all aspects of human life, can be affected by social devaluation. Thus, it is important to look closely at how certain groups of people are seen and treated in employment contexts, particularly if a group is at risk of being seen negatively by their society. For instance, what are the indicators of a "good" job and are these indicators different for socially devalued persons? How are quality supports defined? What are the ways that employment supports can be done poorly? Are people with disabilities treated in a similar manner to other, valued employees? What are ways of distinguishing if one is in the role of a valued employee versus being principally seen as a supported employment client or possibly placed in some other devalued social role? For example, on the one hand, a person with a disability could be a business' employee, entitled to the rights, privileges and responsibilities typically extended to employees. On the other hand, the same person could be perceived predominantly as a client of a supported employment program, perhaps one who is "allowed" to work in the business, even fulfilling an employer's desire to "help the less fortunate," while the employer lacks any sense of the person as a contributing member of the workforce.

This paper focuses on the potential of supported employment to help people obtain the valued social role(s) available through employment; i.e., that of valued "employee." Promoting understanding about what it means to be established in the valued social role of employee can strengthen supported employment's cause with employers, people with disabilities, family members, and supported employment providers, as well as with members of the general public, by emphasizing how this role benefits both people with disabilities as well as others.

A qualification regarding terminology: Since there are many variations and translations of what is meant by supported employment (e.g., levels of integration, ways supports are provided, etc.), "supported employment type programs" will often be used in this paper instead of supported employment. Additionally, since many things are said to be either normalization or social role valorization in casual usage, the authors' use of the term "formal SRV theory" is based entirely on what is in the published SRV theory literature.

2. A formal SRV theory critique of supported employment practices: threats to the role of employee

Certainly many job seekers with disabilities have found employment by participating in supported employment type programs [4, 22]. Furthermore, various versions of supported employment have spread to many parts of the world including all states within the US. [4, 8]. Refined employment practices have evolved;

however, there is significant room for advancement of employment opportunities through yet further improvements in supported employment. For instance, it is still possible to find ongoing versions of practices or mindsets that supported employment set out initially to confront and remedy (e.g., screening out people thought to be too disabled to work, and grouping together people with disabilities).

This paper will examine the current issues or gaps in supported employment practices using some, but not all, of formal SRV theory's ten core themes and related principles [33], and offer some basic ideas for their application. These considerations are offered to propose how formal SRV theory may strengthen supported employment practices and illuminate why supported employment has not lived up to some of its earlier promises.

2.1. Socialization into negative social roles and perhaps "choosing" these roles

It is possible for people to become socialized into negative social roles – living profoundly limited lifestyles because of a general lack of vision about positive alternatives [29]. This section will introduce the SRV theme of *Role Expectancies and Role Circularity* [33] as a way of thinking about ways social roles are learned and reinforced. Additionally, the *Culturally Valued Analogue* [32] will be defined as an SRV principle that seeks socially valued options as a standard for proceeding with plans for a good life.

Social roles play a powerful function in defining people's identities. These roles are driven by whatever perceptions and resultant expectations may exist about people at a given moment. If these *a priori* perceptions are negative, they will translate into roles for the person that are negative and devaluing, thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the other hand, if these originating perceptions are positive and valuing of the person, the resultant role assignments will be much more positive.

There is a circularity in this process of role formation, and it is essential for employment specialists to appreciate how this dynamic works. Formal SRV theory uses a feedback loop for describing how social roles are communicated, learned, and reinforced. First, role expectations are conveyed. Next, the person begins to conform to the expectations. Others see the person in the role and they reinforce the person. The person conforms to the expectations and so on. Gradually, the person becomes strong in the role. Formal SRV theory

describes specific role communicators or ways expectations are conveyed and learned [33]: a) physical settings and environments, b) personal presentation, c) social contexts (i.e., groupings of people), d) language, e) activities, behaviors, and uses of time, as well as other miscellaneous factors.

For example, because of dominant societal stereotypes, a 21-year-old man with Down syndrome is highly vulnerable to being cast into the role of an eternal child. If he is encouraged to engage in child-like activities, dress like someone much younger, and has a childish nickname, then this will reinforce the eternal child role in his mind and in the minds of others, and additional child-like expectations will be conveyed. It follows then that he will not be afforded relationships, acceptance, ways for contribution, and life opportunities typical for young adults. Moreover, he will be exceedingly prone to rejection and to having his life trivialized. On the other hand, offering and promoting the role of valued employee for this same man can compensate for some of his social devaluation because it is very difficult for the opposing social roles of eternal child and valued employee to coexist. So it is a matter of strengthening the valued role and weakening or avoiding the devaluing role.

Given a choice, it may seem predictable that the 21-year-old man would select roles that accurately reflect his age, such as employee. However, it is possible that through his experience of being treated as a child during adolescence and into adulthood, he responds accordingly; his child-like behavior is reinforced and as a result, he becomes quite habituated to this role and its ways. Others may assume this is his "choice." Likewise, if he has been deprived of valued work roles, he may "choose" to stay in a congregated, segregated day program and to spend the day sitting with little to do or making child-like crafts. However, many people have observed that when people with disabilities are offered age appropriate choices, even those deeply socialized into childish roles have often chosen the adult options. People thought to have low intelligence, lack of insight, or simple concrete thinking appear to understand that the adult roles, such as employee, are held in higher regard by other adults.

Additionally, the SRV theme of role expectancies and role circularity elucidates ways employers make choices and become entrenched in certain mindsets about work. Employers may hire people with disabilities because of their contributions to the workplace, expecting and receiving good work, and conforming to their role of progressive employer. People with

disabilities may be encouraged to explore and express their unique talents in socially valued jobs, be reinforced for taking on new levels of challenge, conform to these expectations, pursue job advancements, and as a result, learn and become well established in the role of valued employee. Conversely, employers may perceive employment primarily in terms of benefit to the person with the disability and hiring is largely done for altruistic reasons [28]. People with disabilities may only be offered and reinforced in low challenge, stereotypical jobs. They then conform to these expectations, "choose" these kinds of jobs and "settle," believing this is their place, and all they are capable of doing.

Complexities of choice, along with the many dimensions of people's life experiences, as well as expectations conveyed, reinforced and learned need to be acknowledged. It is human nature to make decisions based on: a) what is familiar; b) what is certain, less risky; c) what is simple, concrete; d) what is quick, immediate; e) what requires less investment; and f) what people think others want them to choose. Informed choice means providing accurate and relevant information in ways that people understand while recognizing that people typically rely on trusted allies to help them make good decisions [7]. Employment specialists and others may find that balancing people's autonomy, including the right to make poor choices, with a suitable level of guidance has proven challenging – perhaps especially when the complexity of choice is underappreciated and when individual differences need to be taken into account. "Abandoning people to choice" [15] becomes a significant risk, and one often unrecognized. In other words, merely going with a person's stated "choice," in the absence of accurate, relevant, understandable information, and a typical level of guidance from a trusted ally, essentially is a form of personal abandonment.

Expanding on promoting characteristics of a valued employee, the *Culturally Valued Analogue* or *CVA* is a long held SRV principle that underlies a way of thinking about both people's potential and their rightful place in the world. It has particular significance in relation to the need to offer the role of valued employee to working-age adults with disabilities, as well as to provide guidance regarding the nature of job supports. In applying the CVA conscientiously, one must first explore aspects of a typical and valued life for people without disabilities and how these aspects can be a guide to obtaining a typically fulfilling life for a person with a disability of the same age and gender. Next one must consider what needs to be in place for the

person's success within these normative and valued life patterns. This approach, beginning with what is typical and valued as the benchmark or starting place, is radically different from the creating of a special program for people with disabilities that is intended to approximate the real thing rather than be the real thing.

Clearly employment is a meaningful way adults devote their time, providing opportunities to make authentic personal contributions and to find valued roles in everyday workplaces. Furthermore, valued employment roles represent one often overlooked but crucially important way to promote mutuality and commonality between people who have and do not have disabilities, while people with disabilities, at the same time, get the needed work done and experience the dignity of personal contribution [17]. This perception of likeness eradicates much of the substance of devalued social roles.

Since becoming established in the role of a valued employee goes far beyond getting hired, an additional area of relevance for the CVA involves analysis of the nature of employment support – the ways that imitation, modeling, instruction, support and work guidance are provided; who provides these supports; and the degree to which supports are familiar and valued. This provides another clear example where SRV principles are consistent with supported employment research and literature. Nisbet and Hagner's breakthrough 1988 article "Natural Supports in the Workplace: A Reexamination of Supported Employment," cited the term "natural supports" and quite properly drew the whole field's attention to better ways to assure employment opportunities [21].

Studying the relationship between quality outcomes and supported employment compliance with typical business practices, Mank et al. [18] noted, "The typicalness of the job acquisition process, compensation, similarity in work roles, and initial training and orientation is positively and strongly related to wage and integration outcomes" (p. 195). Furthermore, it is important to immediately begin facilitating the typical practices of a business since research has shown that if a person has atypical employment features in the beginning, these features are likely to continue [18].

Relatedly, the study of workplace culture and instructional methods requires a sophisticated type of job analysis – one that goes beyond the traditional checklist of physical requirements and job task listings and delves into understanding workplace culture [12]. Callahan and Garner's [5] Seven Phase Sequence provides a framework for job analysis and decision-making that

is highly consistent with the CVA, exploring in depth a company's culture, the means by which new employees usually learn their jobs and the people who typically provide instruction, support and guidance, and then subsequently honoring these critical existing components to the fullest extent possible. External supports via employment specialists are available to supplement the typical, natural supports only when needed by the supported employee and his employer.

Unnecessary overreliance on external support via employment specialists, who are not part of the usual workplace configuration, can perpetuate one of the most pervasive and destructive negative roles imposed on people with disabilities, the role of "client." This role is apparent when a person's identity and life revolve around various human services to the extent that the client role consumes one's life and supplants desired valued social roles [27, 34]. This represents another important area of vigilance for employment specialists, because the "human service client" role is one that interferes mightily with the role of valued employee.

The CVA has relevance for additional supported employment practices. For example, it is worthy to consider locating fitting employment opportunities, including highly specialized jobs, via networking rather than relying on help wanted advertisements, making cold calls on businesses, or conducting Internet job searches. In terms of utilizing approaches that are typical and valued, people routinely get good jobs through people they know or who are known by people that they know [25]. One practical and complementary strategy used by some supported employment providers who are mindful of the cultural fit and power of networking is paying membership dues for each employment specialist in community organizations such as Rotary, League of Women Voters, or other organizations where people who know people gather.

This section, by describing a conscious use of formal SRV theory, underlines the benefits of thinking in terms of what is revealed in roles, in appreciating the liberating qualities of valued social roles as well as recognizing the destructive impact of negative roles. Formal SRV theory enables us to see the vulnerability of people with disabilities to having negative roles communicated and imposed, and ways these roles can, in a sense, capture people and severely limit their potential. Also the CVA provides a clear rationale for why employment is important for people for whom work had not been previously considered. Furthermore, thinking about employment in these ways can lead people to seek out and appreciate complementary supported employment practices such as natural supports, while deepening their understanding of these practices.

The yielding to profoundly low expectations of people with disabilities is one way to ensure that negative social roles are eventually imposed. We explore this further in the next section.

2.2. Low expectations for personal growth, development and employment for people with disabilities and forgetting the originally intended job seekers

Many of the people originally intended as recipients of supported employment services are not being served because employment is not seen as possible or relevant for them. The theme from formal SRV theory, *Personal Competency Enhancement and the Developmental Model*, described in this section, offers a framework for action rooted in high expectations.

In the instance of the United States, the people of focus for supported employment were defined quite similarly in the Developmental Disabilities Act of 1984 and in the regulations under the 1984 Amendments to the Education of the Handicapped Act and the Rehabilitation Act: "Supported employment is limited to individuals with severe handicaps for whom competitive employment has not traditionally occurred" [9]. However, these early intentions have not only remained unrealized, they have been ignored in actual practice. One illustration of lowering expectations for employment is the steady growth of community-based non-work programs [4]. We contend that those attending non-work day programs would certainly fit the eligibility criteria for supported employment definitions of 1984, i.e., people believed to be capable and interested in employment even though it would be fair to say that at least some individuals may have little concept of or interest in work.

However, the culture of patterned exclusion for people having more significant disabilities has been evident since early in the development of supported employment. "Creaming" came to refer to the practice of selecting job seekers with disabilities thought to be "the cream of the crop," or those believed to require less time and effort to get "results," often defined as countable "placements." People truly needing job supports were often left on the sidelines of the employment world after inaccurately being deemed "unemployable."

There remains a striking *de facto* yielding, in everyday practice, to the assumption that a good number of people with disabilities are not realistic candidates for

employment. How much of this conviction of "not realistic" relates to our failure to provide ways for people to learn how to do otherwise? Supported employment providers remain somewhere along a continuum relative to their vision of what is realistic for a given person [14] and in their efforts to address people's needs for personal growth and development. Inadequate personal competency development and enhancement will jeopardize, and often preclude, people with disabilities from attaining commensurate, valued work roles. Moreover, this same competency vacuum can readily lead to people being assigned to years, perhaps a lifetime, of less challenging and menial work typically devalued by the larger society. Additionally important is the employee's successful comprehension and learning of "soft" skills, the unwritten work rules and existing social norms. Failing to learn subtle social competencies can and will stigmatize, and can have a devaluing impact upon the naïve or socially unskilled employee.

SRV's Developmental Model articulates assumptions that all people thrive on: a) challenge, not mindless, endless pleasure, b) work, not idleness, c) work that can be understood, and d) inspired commitment to society. Furthermore it recognizes that: e) Competency development and exercise are the natural growth mode of humans; f) Personal competency is highly culturally valued; g) The more competent an individual is, the more accepting society will be of any negatively valued differences he or she may have; h) Competencies are necessary in order to perform valued roles; and i) Competency enhancement is the stated goal and explicit mission of most human services. Additionally, formal SRV theory is based on an understanding that all people, and especially people with disabilities, have vastly more growth potential than is realized. The only way we can know and fully realize a person's potential is to optimize life conditions for learning and growth [33].

Regarding the above points "a" and "b," supported employment proponents are offered a sound philosophical basis for addressing low expectations and their depressing effect on personal growth, the resurgence of day programs, and the unwitting creation of a leisure class of people with disabilities. Point "d" punctuates the innate need for contribution, doing something that matters, that is especially important for people who so often find themselves on the receiving end of assistance. Echoing the sentiment of Marc Gold's competence/deviance hypothesis [10, 11], point "g" illustrates the significance of competencies in authentically holding valued social roles as well as the power for

these roles to overcome negative expectations. Points "h" and "i" serve as reminders of our mission to support competency development in people who have disabilities – seeking proven strategies such as systematic instruction [5, 11]. Competency development also includes an element of protection against congregation and segregation since our society has a tendency of involuntarily putting people together that are believed to be incompetent and unable to fit in with typical life functions, including employment.

In addition to positive assumptions that form the foundation for competency enhancement, formal SRV theory also offers two strategies that are the means of application: relevance and potency. "Relevance" refers to strategies that are highly responsive to a given person's specific needs. "Potency" refers to the strength or power of specific strategies and can be thought of as strategies with high impact, efficiency and effectiveness in relation to personal growth and development [33]. Supported employment approaches that would reflect SRV's strategies of relevance and potency would include: 1) devoting time to get to know and understand the job seeker while discerning his or her personal interests and talents related to employment; 2) negotiating a job that capitalizes on these personal interests and talents; 3) ensuring that excellent instruction is provided, and that the instruction is delivered to the fullest extent feasible by those within the business who typically provide instruction.

Formal SRV theory's Developmental Model provides a context for supporting individuals to achieve positive employment outcomes. For instance, what if all employment specialists understood what is becoming the lost art of systematic instruction [17], albeit within the context of "naturalistic" supports, so that they could provide high-quality instruction directly or offer advice and coaching to natural supervisors if other typical ways of teaching prove inadequate?

2.3. The need for increased clarity and improvement of social integration through supported employment

Personal Social Integration and Valued Social Participation is a theme of formal SRV theory that clarifies a rationale for social integration and defines what integration means [33]. Most people take personal social integration for granted. On any given day, socially valued people experience a wide range of socially integrative experiences, such as coming into contact with coworkers, friends, neighbors and casual

acquaintances, in many different places, and doing many different things. In contrast, for people at risk of social devaluation, including people with disabilities, practices of segregation and congregation are deeply entrenched in their lifestyles, thereby limiting their potential for being "everyday" citizens "like everyone else." "Specialness," a code word for segregated environments and practices in the lives of people with disabilities, is still alarmingly and highly prevalent (e.g., special homes, special schools, special classes, special camps, special vacations, special friends, special work, and even special worship). For far too many people with disabilities, "special" is the predominant way of experiencing life.

Given their pervasiveness in our culture, it is predictable that "special," congregated and segregated approaches have found a place in the realm of disability employment service through the creation of sheltered workshops, work activity programs, and day programs. Even today, despite evidence that people rarely move from one such vocational service to another, much less into the realm of typical employment [3], the notion that congregated and segregated programs "need" to exist to make one "ready" for typical employment still somehow persists [13]. This is despite the fact that countless thousands who formerly "needed" *de facto* perpetual readiness training have long since moved on to regular jobs in the community.

Furthermore, there are employment service approaches that congregate people with disabilities, such as work stations in industry, mobile work crews, and enclaves, that some, but certainly not all, consider to be desirable forms of ostensible "supported employment." Additionally, there are corporate efforts targeting employment of people with disabilities that result in a workforce in which a high percentage, (30% to 40%) of employees have disabilities [30]. Despite the good intentions and improved employment possibilities in terms of wages and "realness of work" of such strategies when compared with sheltered workshops and day programs, some have rightly questioned the quality of social integration that results. In other words, due to the high percentage of people with disabilities recruited and hired, is there a risk of these arrangements becoming corporate sheltered workshops?

At the root of the debate about what constitutes higher quality supported employment and socially integrated employment are varied interpretations about what is meant by "social integration." This is another area where SRV theory has much to offer since it provides considerable clarity and precision in its definition of social integration and its benefits, as well as in the potential ongoing perils of segregation. This is in contrast to the rather vague and difficult to define use of terms such as "social inclusion," "belonging" etc., which many seem to want to mean the same as valued social participation, but it is hard to know for sure, given their imprecise meanings.

The following definition of personal social integration and valued social participation is derived from formal SRV theory: Adaptive participation by a (devalued) person, in a culturally normative quantity of contacts, interactions, and positive relationships, with ordinary citizens, in normative shared activities, that are part of recognizable roles, and carried out in valued (or at least ordinary) physical and social settings [33].

Additionally, formal SRV theory provides cautions about practices often confused with social integration such as:

1. "Dumping" a socially devalued person into society (a) when the person lacks adequate abilities to cope; (b) without support systems; and (c) into community areas already saturated with other services to devalued people.
2. Denying people needed special services; and
3. Serving a wide variety of devalued people within the same setting [33].

Early in the development of supported employment, there was an underlying assumption that placing people with disabilities in "regular" jobs would automatically result in their acceptance and social integration within those businesses. Over time, it became apparent that there are many dimensions to successful social integration and the need to be very intentional about it in the design of jobs and in fostering helpful workplace supports for it to succeed. Novak and Rogan [23] describe universal facilitators for social integration at work for socially devalued people, building on Allport's [1] intergroup contact theory for changing attitudes of socially valued people toward people who are negatively stereotyped.

Similarly with SRV, employment related social integration is not a number or a specific ratio. Rather it is a set of conditions:

1. *Are relevant, personalized supports or adaptations provided for the worker in ways as typical as possible?* In order to be integrated, the worker needs to be able to perform job responsibilities and be involved in social aspects of work. Does the

typical supervisor supervise the worker? What is the image projected by the supported employment specialist? Is there confusion or clarity regarding employment specialist roles? Are supported employment personnel knowledgeable and professional, and are they attentive to what needs to be in place to fit in with the business culture?

2. *Are there opportunities for a normative quantity of interactions with non-disabled employees while involved in the typical work and social functions of the business?* For people who are vulnerable to being perceived in a negative way, ample opportunities for establishing positive relationships are essential [23]. Emphasizing common interests among employees and promoting shared work and social roles within the business provide a natural channel for positive relationships and interactions. Is the worker part of the natural routines and rhythms of the work place (e.g., taking breaks, eating lunch, and attending social gatherings with other employees)?

3. *Is the person clearly in the role of a valued employee?* It is essential that the work reflect personal talents and interests. Even though responsibilities may be adapted, it is necessary for others to genuinely value the person's contributions and that his/her involvement in work and social facets of the company is apparent [23]. Or, another way of looking at this is, if the worker with a disability is absent, is his/her contribution missed?

4. *Are the particular work responsibilities and place of employment socially valued?* Society has the tendency to impose the work others don't want to do on devalued people. Therefore, the social status of work responsibilities as well as the place of work affects the ways employees are regarded and integrated within the business and the community at large. An integration-building job would be one about which others might comment, "That's an interesting job;" or, "That must be a great place to work."

5. *If multiple people with disabilities are employed in the same business, are they working in fitting, personalized jobs and not grouped together?* Caution is needed on the issue of multiple people with disabilities working in the same business since people with disabilities are highly vulnerable to others congregating and segregating them and collapsing their individual identities to that of the "disabled person." In other words, we need to

be intentional about addressing head-on the perception, "They're happier with their own kind" and other similar rationales for social segregation. There are many variables to consider around the issue of assimilation of multiple people with disabilities working in the same business including: a) the obviousness of their disabilities; b) their proximity to one another; and c) the similarity of the kinds of work tasks performed by an employee with a disability when compared to tasks performed by non-disabled coworkers as well as other workers with disabilities [33].

6. The culture of congregation, segregation and "special" lives is one of the most insidious obstacles to gaining the role of employee, to being perceived to be "like everyone else" rather than being perceived principally as being different in a negative way. Furthermore, the benefits of integration resonate with many in very practical ways. For example, learning on the actual job does not require skill generalization or skill transfer from an artificial or simulated environment, and the actual job will naturally provide opportunities for the supported employee to learn by imitating non-disabled coworkers. Where valued social participation is thoughtfully sought and supported in relation to work, many parties can potentially benefit, including the person with the disability, family members, associates such as co-workers, neighbors, or fellow community members. Therefore, defining and achieving high quality social integration is one of the most important issues for teaching, understanding and practice in the field of supported employment.

2.4. The belief that the same set of circumstances affects everyone the same (e.g., types of work and associated imagery, failure with employment)

The SRV theme, the *Conservatism Corollary,* has an unusual name, but holds important implications for addressing the "heightened vulnerability" of people with disabilities [33]. Its premise is that the same life occurrence or personal characteristic (e.g., a specific failing at work or wearing a Mickey Mouse t-shirt) can impact people very differently depending on their social statuses, life experiences, and related stereotypes. In particular, it recognizes that what might be overlooked, minimized, and even valued for a person with a valued status can often be perceived in a negative way if the

person has a devalued status and is surrounded by negative stereotypes. In response to this problem, the "conservatism corollary" and its associated remedy, the use of the CVA, quite regularly offer an essentially common sense approach for sorting out some of the complexity of decisions these situations provoke, while resisting easy responses. It does this by advising that people bend over backwards to reinforce whatever roles, perceptions and beliefs are highly valued so that whatever personal characteristics draw negative attention will do so in the most minimal way possible.

Additionally, it is important to note that embracing principles of the conservatism corollary means offering information about socially valued ways and options. Never does the conservatism corollary involve imposing values or taking things away from people. For example, Bill, a 22-year-old man who has Down syndrome decides to wear a Mickey Mouse t-shirt to his construction site job. Since Bill lives with the heightened vulnerability of being perceived as an "eternal child," the Mickey Mouse t-shirt is certain to perpetuate this negative perception, even though the same t-shirt would not have the same impact on a 22-year-old man who does not have Down syndrome. Recognizing Bill's vulnerability, a suggestion is offered to Bill that he consider changing to a different shirt (i.e., appropriate to the job site and without child imagery). However, the t-shirt advice is not imposed, but rather recommended and tactfully explained.

The following is a general framework for the conservatism corollary:

1. The more vulnerable a person is, the greater the need for, and the positive impact of: (a) preventing additional devaluation; reducing existing devaluation, impairment, or other vulnerability; and providing positive compensation – even bending over backwards – to balance off the vulnerability or devaluation.
2. When there is a range of available options for enhancing social image or personal competency (or alleviating vulnerability), the most valued and least "risky" measure is the adaptive one to prevent, reduce and compensate for vulnerability [33].

The concept of understanding and compensating for people's heightened vulnerability has not always been fully appreciated in the field of supported employment. For instance, some may say "Everyone fails at work; that's how people learn." Certainly there is truth in people learning from errors. However, it is also true that people learn and grow from success, and that these experiences of accomplishment help balance life's failures. If one's life has been defined by failure, to the extent that envisioning successful employment is impossible, then this characterizes the person's heightened vulnerability. Therefore, the conservatism corollary would require a high level of effort to reduce, prevent, and compensate for this vulnerability – taking all reasonable measures to put things in place for employment success. Doing otherwise could be the cause of the person giving up entirely on employment, deciding to collect Social Security benefits instead, losing the opportunities for the many benefits employment offers, and even becoming depressed with life circumstances.

The same lack of awareness to the issue of heightened vulnerability is evident when people susceptible to being perceived as "throw-away people" are placed in jobs dealing with garbage and recycling, as if there would not be a dangerous reinforcing of the underlying negative perceptions that they struggle to overcome by being surrounded by images of garbage and other devalued images. The issue at stake is *not* whether a particular type of work has virtue, or whether it is needed, or "normal." Rather, the issue is one of recognizing the negative stereotypes and perceptions surrounding a person, and then countering these, as powerfully as possible, using the *most* valued option, rather than an option that reinforces the negative point of view.

The conservatism corollary supplies a process for being proactive, that is, predicting the negative roles a person is highly vulnerable to having imposed upon him or her and responding accordingly. For instance, if it is well known that a person is highly vulnerable to being perceived as a menace or an eternal child, then actions for preventing, reducing and compensating for this vulnerability should be in place from the beginning.

2.5. Lack of organizational intentions and values coherent with desirable practice

Formal SRV theory offers the theme of *Model Coherency* as a way to analyze people's needs in relation to specific service designs and life situations. Who are the people to be served and what do they uniquely need at a given moment? How should what they need be delivered – using what methods and technologies, in what settings, in what kind of grouping or social context, by what service providers and/or supporters – and how should all of this be woven into a

coherent whole from the vantage point of a given person? Is the person's employment situation authentically and coherently "person centered"? [33].

Beginning with the relatively rapid expansion of supported employment in the US instance in 1985, there have been at least three broad motivating factors for initiating supported employment services: 1) Fiscal incentives to agencies, funders and possibly others (e.g., "It's financially advantageous for our agency to do supported employment.") 2) Inevitability (e.g., "Supported employment is the coming trend. The days of sheltered workshops are numbered. Either join or get left behind.") 3) Ideology (e.g., "We need to provide supported employment because it's the right thing to do."). Whatever the originating reasons or combination thereof, much of the organizational structure of supported employment has been built within human service systems that are not clearly aligned with supported employment's overt principles. In some instances other services offered alongside supported employment even run counter to its purpose and contradict the overall intent of employment support strategies and programs. So, the assumption that there were, or are, precisely shared purposes in supported employment, may be greatly misleading, notwithstanding the seemingly similar use of various terms within supported employment circles.

The majority of supported employment services nationally are provided as an add-on service by organizations who are also decidedly involved with substantial and sustained segregated employment programs, day programs, or residential programs that clearly do not result in valued social participation in the workplace [4, 13]. A given organization may claim on the one hand, "We provide supported employment because everyone with a disability who wants to work can work and is ready to work. It's up to us to provide supports." On the other hand, the same organization may defend its possibly largely custodial day programs claiming "these are options for people with disabilities who are unemployable, or who need to get ready to work" [13].

Confusion of intention and purposes within an organization will spread to its staff, people served, their families, employers and members of the general community. The possibly unexamined conviction that employment is simply not "realistic" for some individuals is critical in determining whether these individuals will ever be given the chance to attempt something approaching "normative" employment. It may be the decisive assumption that separates people with disabilities from their untapped potential, as so many systems

with substantially more enlightened views have now demonstrated.

Given this context, formal SRV theory offers the decidedly complex, but highly useful, assumptive and analytical theme of Model Coherency Analysis [33] as a way to analyze people's needs in relation to specific service design and life situations. The essential question is whether a service is precisely aligned with the actual needs of the person, or whether it has been shaped to meet the needs and agendas of others who are close to services, but whose needs are not acknowledged as being a factor in how the service operates. In this sense, any service may prioritize the needs of persons other than the person the service is ostensibly supposed to focus on. Such an arrangement is "model incoherent," that is, its practices are inconsistent with what the intended beneficiary actually needs. In contrast, a "model coherent" service arrangement is one where the person gets precisely what he or she fundamentally needs from a given service arrangement, i.e. it is authentically "person centered."

For example, Mary, an adult with a disability, has needs during the day that center around having valued social roles, opportunities for contribution, fair compensation for work performed, and association with other citizens in areas of mutual interest. Therefore, a model coherent service would devote time to getting to know Mary, negotiate a job that provides opportunities for utilizing her talents and allow her to meet like minded people while earning a fair wage. On the other hand, given the same needs, a service would be model incoherent if Mary attended a program 9:00-3:30 daily, staying busy doing crafts, talking about current events and going on outings with others who have disabilities. (It is possible that the latter service would meet the needs of *others* for Mary to have something to do or stay busy during the day, but it would be an incoherent service in terms of *her* needs).

To take this analysis another step, a given individual's employment situation might be incoherent with the person's needs, *not* because the needs of others are distorting its focus, but rather because of a misfit between the needs of the person and his or her job situation. Personal needs can be infinitely varied, but a job situation will be less than desirable if the worker's personal needs are poorly met, whether due to poor prospects for social integration, work that does not suit the person, lack of the support the person actually needs or another reason. This might relate to the fit between what is offered to the person and what that person needs as well as to the fit between how and by whom the

person is supported. All of these factors contribute to the overall *personalized* model coherency (or lack thereof) of a given employment arrangement [16].

There are supported employment approaches that have potential to be highly personalized and meet the needs of job seekers with disabilities. Much has been learned about devoting time to getting to know people with disabilities, discovering their interests and talents, and matching these interests and talents with employer needs [6]. Likewise, "customized employment" provides new ways to think about making a match between the interests, and competencies of an individual with the needs of a business – providing new opportunities for individual contribution without being limited by job descriptions [24].

Formal SRV theory's theme of model coherency raises important philosophical and related organizational questions for the present and future of supported employment, some of which could require a radical realignment of ways services are currently provided.

3. Conclusion

Supported employment has a thirty-year history with mixed results regarding impact on the lives of the people being supported. Significant advancements have been made, at times and in specific locations, in the numbers employed. A sizable body of knowledge has been developed around the discovery of personal talents as well as in ways to negotiate jobs – transcending formal job descriptions and developing positions matching employer needs with a particular area of talent and interest of the job seeker [24]. On-the-job support approaches have been refined – providing personalized employment supports in ways that maintain the integrity of typical employer and employee roles [5].

However, there is considerable evidence of less than ideal, and even contradictory, practice [19]. People continue to be "placed" in jobs that are not fitting for employee or employer – perpetuating negative stereotypes about people with disabilities that maintain low expectations for their contributions as employees. The "presumption of employability" is routinely ignored and the notion of "employment readiness" has been resurrected. A new generation of congregated and segregated day programs is on the rise with apparently little opposition to their resurgence [4].

An unfortunate reality in supported employment that has been present since its inception is a failure of many supported employment professionals to stay abreast of

the latest developments in the field [19] and to maintain a tradition of critique and dissent when it comes to how supported employment is practiced. Understanding formal SRV theory and its relevance to supported employment could lead professionals to a new level of curiosity, inquiry and analysis that might encourage the active seeking of better ways to promote the role of valued employee for people with disabilities.

Formal SRV theorys' themes and principles offer many suggestions for improving supported employment approaches including:

1) Providing genuine choice. One cannot have authentic choice in the absence of valued options. Since many people with disabilities have been socialized into negative social roles, learning these roles and unwittingly "choosing" them, it is essential to offer the valued social role of employee, harnessing its richness and many dimensions.

2) Building on the valued social role of employee. "Employee" is a broad role that can serve as a platform for establishing many valued sub-roles and related roles such as coworker, mentor, confidant, company softball team member, and friend.

3) Recognizing and addressing a person's heightened vulnerability and related needs. Much attention in our field has rightly been focused on "discovery," devoting time to getting to know people prior to helping them seek employment. However, one essential and often overlooked aspect of knowing a person is appreciating his or her heightened vulnerability and offering suitable responses. For example, a person who has been underestimated and believed to be incapable of work especially needs good instruction in personally engaging work. An adult who has been treated like a child and whose life has been trivialized especially needs opportunities for exploring valued adult roles, ways to contribute, and encouragement to build a personally meaningful life. People who have been congregated and segregated with others with whom they have nothing in common except a disability label especially need opportunities to be included and involved in valued aspects of everyday life.

4) Choosing the right work for oneself. Those assisting people with disabilities to find good jobs must be grounded with a clear sense of purpose in their own work. Much of the work of supported employment extends beyond technologies

and strategies. What is required is quite personal – aligning oneself with job seekers who are socially devalued and understanding there will be significant opposition on many levels to ways that challenge societal norms.

One pivotal piece of learning is this: A job in itself is not enough. Employment can be liberating or oppressive. It can be a great equalizer and unifier, or it can be a divider and unjust discriminator. Employment can be a joy. It can fulfill one's sense of calling or vocation, or it can be a way to keep people down and "in their place."

Job seekers are undoubtedly affected by the quality of supports provided, but they are not the only people whose lives are influenced. Their family members, employers, supported employment professionals, as well as people throughout society will form impressions, positive or negative, about the rightful place of people with disabilities in the world. Employment specialists are especially significant since their efforts are instrumental to the cause. They may come to define their work as vital and life enhancing or as futile and disheartening.

The authors' personal experiences reflect that SRV provides a new level of clarity about the impact of social devaluation, addressing people's needs, designing relevant and potent supported employment services approaches, and promoting the valued social role of employee for people with disabilities who are too often excluded from valued work. We encourage others to study formal SRV theory as a way of building their competency and understanding while improving supported employment service quality.

Acknowledgments

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