
Mobility As A Means To An End: Acquiring Valued Social Roles

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"It is not length of life, but depth of life."

R. W. Emerson

While mobility is a challenge in the lives of people with vision impairment, it is greatly overshadowed by the persistence of socially devaluing perceptions of who people with a vision impairment actually are. In many instances, this has resulted in stigmatisation, social exclusion, negative and low expectations and other forms of mistreatment. The consequences for people who are socially devalued are largely in the direction of a diminishment of their life possibilities and standing within community. Though such conditions have eased in recent decades as people with vision impairment have become a greater presence in the mainstream of communities, it would be fair to say that various forms and effects of social devaluation are still a factor in far too many peoples' lives.

It is of course possible to see mobility enhancement as largely a technical question focused principally on improvements in functioning. This may be a much too narrow focus in light of the fact that one seeks mobility not merely for its own inherent rewards, but also because it can play a significant role in expanding people's life opportunities and the enjoyments that might come with them. Apart from these important existential benefits, there is also the opportunity to occupy valued social

roles within community. Valued social roles are roles that enable people to more fully participate in all aspects of community life that might interest them. Occupying such roles brings people the additional benefits of a greater likelihood of being seen as being like all other people rather than being understood largely in terms of one's impairment. It also gives people standing, status, and value within community and moves people from the margins of community into the mainstream.

These many benefits of having routine access to valued social roles within community are neither accidental nor unexpected, as they are well described in social role valorization theory, authored by Wolf Wolfensberger the recently deceased professor emeritus at Syracuse University. This theory, which has had considerable influence on many matters affecting people with disabilities as well as other persons and groups who are at risk of social devaluation, essentially posits that human beings are constantly making judgments about others, some of which are devaluing. These devaluing perceptions of people may be so entrenched in the culture of a given society that they can permanently place the people seen in such negative terms in devalued social roles. These differences that have

been historically seen in negative terms have included such diverse human characteristics as skin colour, age, religion, health status, ethnicity, language, appearance, clothing, gender, and class.

It is not the specific human difference that is important, but rather how this difference is evaluated by people. If it is seen in largely negative terms it increases the likelihood that people seen this way will be placed in devalued social roles. On the other hand, if this perception is challenged and changed, it is also possible that these devalued social roles can diminish and make way for people to occupy valued social roles. In concrete terms, we can see this transformation in terms of such prominent examples as President Obama in the United States. There was a time in that society when people of mixed racial heritage would not have been able to occupy such a highly valued social role. Nonetheless, this example helps illustrate that deeply held attitudes can be changed, though it obviously is not easy to do so.

For the person or group experiencing social devaluation, the first and foremost effect is that they are placed in what social role valorization theory refers to as devalued social roles. In historical terms, this has included being placed in a variety of recurring devalued identities such as child, sick, sub-human, burden of charity, menace and so on. The effect on the person or group of being seen this way is in turn reflected in how they get treated. This can include being rejected, excluded from community, deprived of normal life opportunities, mistreated, abused and subject to violence and even death, impoverished, denied basic rights and necessities, experiencing

the imposition of distorting and degrading stereotypes and so on.

Obviously, social attitudes and perceptions are present as underlying factors at every level in society. Social role valorization theory recognises this and describes actions that can be taken at various levels of society that can help address, challenge and replace these devaluing views of people. In all likelihood, those involved in enhancing a given person's mobility will tend to see these forces play out one person at a time in all sorts of community settings. What may not always be apparent is that these everyday life situations frequently contain the possibility of creating opportunities for given individuals with a vision impairment to acquire valued social roles and to change many attitudes and perceptions.

This challenge of changing community thinking and behavior at a "micro" level is helped considerably if those involved have become familiar with the key contents of social role valorization theory. The value of having theory of this kind is that it can provide a guide to both seeing the potentials of situations and being able to act decisively with regard to emerging possibilities. It can also help point out what not to do, thereby providing a preventive dimension about how action is taken. It will also mean that the aims of mobility enhancement can be linked to other important needs in the lives of people that are inevitably intertwined with mobility. This more holistic view of people, their lives and their needs, in turn means that we can each do our part to make a positive difference in the ways our communities see and relate to people. What follows is a brief description of some of the more salient advantages of acquiring valued social roles.

Valued social roles and the meeting of one's needs

Most of our everyday needs will more likely be suitably met the more we are able to access the many resources within our communities. Persons restricted from accessing the benefits of communities through imposed segregation and social isolation will obviously be deprived in terms of meeting their needs. Being excluded from 'community' can impact all aspects of daily life including employment, relationships, education, leisure, income, community group membership, and so on. On the other hand, through the acquisition of valued social roles such as employee, acquaintance, student, club member, leisure program participant, taxpayer etc., it then becomes possible to participate more fully in community life and thereby enable people to better meet their personal needs at a given moment. Since people with vision impairment share all of the normative needs of their fellow citizens irrespective of the specific additional needs generated by living with vision impairment, it also means that they can more realistically enjoy a 'normal' life within community.

In contrast, if we are unable to get our needs met, we will experience deprivations of all kinds and the distress that can come from doing without what we genuinely need. For instance, if we live a socially isolated life because our access to community is limited, then we will lose many of the benefits of community including such important personal needs as friendship, careers, income, education and community membership to name a few. Any persistent deprivation of our needs increases our levels of stress, vulnerability and potential suffering. Consequently, it is prudent to link

the acquisition of valued social roles to a person's overall well-being.

Valued social roles and the pursuit of one's life interests and passions

Though many people might think of "community participation" in somewhat general terms, the term actually plays out in practice in quite unique and personal ways for each person. We normally do not extensively participate in elements of community life that do not coincide with our personal life interests and passions. On the other hand, our points of attachment to community reflect our personal life interests throughout our lives, be they religion, sport, pastimes, recreation, employment and so forth. These points of attachment to various components of community contain within them many varieties of valued social roles. When we acquire these roles, we then gain whatever benefits they provide us in terms of being able to pursue and enjoy our life interests and passions. As many people would recognise, having passions and interests in life that engage and satisfy a person, are part of what they would consider an important element of "the good life" they seek for themselves.

Valued social roles can be considered pathways not only to community resources and connections, but also to their benefits in terms of the enjoyment of activities, involvements and connections that come with specific life interests. If the person does not have access to these roles associated with their life interests, then they will lack the means to pursue important forms of engagements with their enduring interests in life. In other words, it would be very difficult

to have a fulfilling life if one is constrained from successful access to valued social roles. This underlines the importance of acquiring valued social roles to one's eventual quality of life.

Valued social roles as a fundamental safeguard against the potential impacts of social devaluation

As previously stated, persons with disabilities share in common with many other groups in society a heightened risk of being evaluated negatively by others due to whatever is believed by the perceiver about the worth and value of a person with some sort of human condition or trait that they see as significant. Valued social roles act to insulate people from many of the devastating impacts of social devaluation in various ways. Most notably, it is hard to sustain misleading stereotypes of people once you actually meet them. This kind of opportunity for people to more accurately understand each other is in turn made possible because the occupation of valued social roles tends to significantly strengthen people's valued social participation throughout all of the community.

Valued social roles also act to prevent the mistreatment of people by enfranchising them with expectations, legal standing and the normative protections of society. Having access to these roles also tends to enable people to develop and mobilise the alliances that lead to vigorous advocacy against instances where a given person or group has been subject to discrimination or mistreatment. As people are enabled to enter and succeed in valued social roles, their true abilities and nature are revealed, thereby

breaking down the damaging stereotypes that create so much false understanding of who people are and what they are like. It is also the case that occupying valued social roles makes it more likely than not, that people can make positive contributions to their communities thereby undermining negative expectations and presumptive prejudices.

Mobility as a component of obtaining good lives in the community

It is very difficult to imagine people with mobility challenges optimising their conceivable life opportunities within community if they are not supported in their pursuit of the various valued social roles that are pertinent to their lives, interests and engagements within community. The task of facilitating people's enhanced mobility can be envisioned at one level solely in regard to a given person gaining greater proficiency with mobility. On another level, if a given individual seeks more in his or her life, it can mean that those involved pursue improved mobility with the further agenda of seeking changed life circumstances for that person in the direction of a fuller and more satisfying life. This second purpose would then enable those involved with mobility support to potentially have significant impact on the broader challenge of assisting people to obtain valued social roles and the benefits that come with these.

Taking up this second challenge at the request of the person concerned would mean that mobility is now linked to and possibly subordinate to the achievement of targeted lifestyle changes. At a minimum, this would require that those involved

become more aware of what may be involved in obtaining and succeeding with these new roles and experiences. It may also require the development of a set of skills appropriate to supporting people with these new opportunities. It may also require that mobility be seen as a key strategy that needs to be integrated and coordinated with other change strategies not only in regards to individual efforts at acquiring both valued social roles and improved life circumstances but possibly also for more collective instances of social changes of this kind.

Obviously, by linking mobility assistance to these more extensive agendas, it adds considerably more responsibility and demands to the roles of mobility supporters. While this challenge can understandably be disconcerting, they may nonetheless appeal to many people because of the potential to add considerable value to people's lives as well as helping restrain the tendencies in people and communities to devalue and reject people whom they see as being different for whatever reason. It is very unlikely that these tendencies will ever be eliminated, so the real promise will rest both in the reduction of their presence as a damaging factor in people's lives and the facilitation of enriching life opportunities. These ambitions, while taxing in many ways, may also yield important and even profound gains for the persons involved and for the health of the larger society.

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