Understanding Social Devaluation and the Service Worker’s Role:

A Social Role Valorization Approach

September 2016

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1934-2011
### Some Facts About Social Devaluation

- Human perception is evaluative by nature
- With devaluation comes negative treatment
- Devaluation does not equal “not valuable”
- Can be conscious or unconscious
- Can be personal and/or systemic
- Devaluation is expressed through all societal structures
- Devaluation is a true human universal

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- Society devalues certain qualities and conditions
- People with these qualities become devalued
  - Certain devalued people experience fixation on impairment
A Definition of the Social Process of Devaluation

a person becomes perceived or defined as devalued...

• by being different from others...

• in one or more ways...

• which are considered to be significant by the majority or a ruling segment of the society...

• who value this difference negatively

being different is not equal to being devalued

what characteristics/elements does the culture value?

what are the opposite of those valued characteristics/elements?

who is perceived to represent those opposite (devalued) characteristics?

they will tend to be the members of a devalued group
Our society today places high value on

- wealth, material prosperity, material goods
- health, beauty of the body
- youth, newness
- competence, independence, intelligence
- productivity, achievement
- individual autonomy, unrestrained choice-making
- hedonistic sensual pleasure

Some groups widely devalued in western societies

- those with few or unwanted skills
- the poor, especially those without a home
- those impaired in
  - senses: people who are blind, deaf
  - mind: people with mental retardation, mental disorder
  - body: people with cerebral palsy, seizure disorders, chronic illnesses, paralysis
- those unassimilated for other reasons due to
  - age: unborn, teenage, elder
  - race, nationality, ethnicity, religion
the most common “wounds” of devalued (especially impaired) people

1. physical impairment  
2. functional impairment  
3. relegation to low status  
4. rejection, by family, community members, service workers  
5. cast into one or more devalued roles  
6. being stigmatized, surrounded by negative images  
7. being multiply jeopardized, scapegoated  
8. distantiatioin, usually by segregation and congregation  
9. loss of autonomy, even total loss of freedom  
10. discontinuity with the physical environment / objects  
11. social and relationship discontinuity  
12. loss of freely given relationships/ boughten relationships  
13. deindividualization  
14. involuntary material poverty  
15. impoverishment of experience  
16. exclusion from participation in higher order value systems  
17. having one’s life wasted  
18. being brutalized / the object of deathmaking

major common socio-historical role perceptions of devalued and/or impaired people:

Non-human
   a) pre-human
   b) no longer human
   c) sub-human: animal, vegetable, object

Menace, Object of Dread

Object of Ridicule

Object of Pity

Burden of Charity

Child
   a) eternal
   b) once again

Sick/Diseased Organism

Dying, Already Dead, “Better Off Dead”
Common Ways of Negatively Imaging Devalued People

- putting services into value-tainted locations and buildings
- placing devalued people in image impairing ways to each other
- applying value-impairing methods, activities, and structures
- giving people negative names and labels
- giving services negative names and labels
- neglecting personal appearance and/or emphasizing negative elements
- funding services with image tainted money or with negatively imaged fund raising

Distantiation is Expressed:

Physically:
- exclusion / architectural barriers
- segregation and congregation
- locking people up, confinement
- ejection, banishment, exile
- destruction

Socially:
- avoidance
- status degradation
potential indicators of social distance in human services

- uniforms, tags, badges, insignia
- separate physical space
- better food, amenities for staff
- different forms of address
- “off limits” areas for service recipients

People Most Likely to be Socially Distanced:

- People who don’t look like one’s image of human beings
- People who do not reciprocate relationships
- People who are seen as deliberately and habitually violating major societal value structures
- Service recipients who make severe / sustained emotional demands upon workers
- Mildly impaired people who are not different enough to evoke workers special concern and consideration
Examples of Contemporary Deathmaking

denial / withholding / withdrawal of non-extraordinary treatment
interpreting food and water as treatment, & then withdrawing it
excessive & abusive use of psychoactive drugs, esp. long term
deinstitutionalization into unsupported community living where people end up as victims of violence
marginalization to the point of abject poverty
outright violence committed by families, service workers, members of society
outright killing through abortion “euthanasia” “assisted suicide”

Common Responses to Wounding

Insecurity
Development of failure mindsets
Testing new relationships
Seeking & demanding physical contact
Withdrawal from human contact
Searching for the abandoner
Creation of invented &/or fantasy relationships
Resentment toward benefactors, privileged citizens
Rage, even violence
Exhaustion to the point of lowered intelligence & impaired functioning