

# SRV & NVA: Valorizing Social Roles Through Nonviolent Action

Brian Martin

## Introduction

WOLFENSBERGER (1998, p. 58) defines Social Role Valorization (SRV) as “the application of what science has to tell us about the defense or upgrading of the socially-perceived value of people’s roles.” This definition refers to *application* of knowledge, but in practice much material about SRV deals with *analysis*. For example, Wolfensberger (1998) gives much attention to the nature of roles, processes of devaluation, the benefits of having valued roles, methods of conveying social images and identifying role goals. A similar emphasis is found in other treatments (Flynn and Lemay, 1999; Race, 1999; Wolfensberger and Thomas, 1983).

Two areas where *action* is central to SRV are image enhancement and competency enhancement, which are the primary means for getting people into valued social roles (Thomas, 1999, pp. 358-360; Wolfensberger, 1998, pp. 62-77). Action is directly involved in, for example, valorizing a person’s current positive roles and enabling a person to enter valued new roles. Many methods of actualizing SRV have been proposed and used, including personal help for individuals, passing laws and promoting favorable media coverage (Wolfensberger, 1998, pp. 78-80; Wolfensberger and Thomas, 1983). The next section lists some examples.

## Some Methods of Actualizing SRV

- *Personal help.* A person helps a devalued individual with hygiene, dress, social skills and a host of other aspects of image and competency enhancement (Wolfensberger, 1998, p. 78).
- *Consciousness raising.* For example, voluntary groups hold discussions and organize actions that increase their members’ awareness of, commitment to and support for devalued people. SRV training is a method of consciousness raising (Reidy, 1999, p. 381).
- *Changes in the social environment.* The immediate situation of a devalued individual is changed, via culturally valued activities, image-enhancing settings and competency-enhancing groupings (Wolfensberger, 1998, p. 79).
- *Changes in practice.* People change their behavior, for example by involving devalued people in their lives and, on a collective level, creating “opportunities for constructive personal contact between a devalued person and others” (Reidy, 1999, p. 382).
- *Formal education.* SRV is incorporated into syllabuses.
- *Changes in policy.* Organizations, including governments, change their guidelines, planning and policies; for example, to integrate devalued people into standard employment

(Wolfensberger, 1998, p. 80).

- *Changes in technology.* Through appropriate design, technologies can help to increase competencies and image. For example, automatic garage openers, originally designed for people physically unable to handle garage doors, are now widely used and accepted.
- *Changes in laws.* Laws are passed to improve access, provide support, ban discrimination, etc. (Wolfensberger, 1998, p. 80).
- *Media coverage.* Sympathetic stories about devalued people can improve their image, as do portrayals, for example in films (Thomas, 1999, pp. 371-372; Wolfensberger, 1998, p. 80).

FOR SOME OF THESE METHODS, such as personal help, it is obvious what an individual actually does. But in others the mechanism is not specified. For example, changing the law is a method, but this does not tell how it is to be accomplished. If you are a lawmaker, then it might be proposing, drafting or supporting suitable legislation. If you are a legal scholar, it might mean publishing recommendations for law reform. If you are a concerned citizen, it might mean writing letters or organizing a pressure group.

The question of what to do is especially challenging when there are significant obstacles to action, typically when bureaucratic organizations, vested interests or entrenched behaviors are involved. For example, if a human service keeps a person in a dependent situation with no opportunity for competency development and with negative imagery, and opposes efforts to allow the person to learn new skills or move elsewhere, then SRV implies some form of action to challenge, transform or eliminate the service. But SRV does not specify the type of action to be taken for organizational

change. In principle, many options are possible.

One especially promising approach to social change that has received little attention in SRV writings is nonviolent action (NVA). The practice and theory of NVA will be outlined here, followed by preliminary comments on how SRV and NVA can be linked.

### Nonviolent Action: Practice and Theory

SOME FAMILIAR METHODS of NVA are public speeches, leaflets, meetings, rallies, vigils, picketing, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins and fasts. Other methods include mocking or insulting officials, emigrating as a form of protest, withdrawal of bank deposits, working-to-rule strike (insisting on following all formal procedures at work, to slow down production), sending large electronic files to clog an e-mail system, and occupying uncultivated agricultural land. Gene Sharp (1973, 2005) distinguished 198 methods of NVA, giving examples of each, and there are hundreds more.

NVA can be distinguished from three other modes of communication and action: violence, discourse and conventional politics (Martin and Varney, 2003). NVA does not involve physical force against humans, thus distinguishing it from violence. NVA is a method of action and thus is different from discourse, such as verbal persuasion. NVA is nonconventional political action, as distinguished from conventional political activities such as negotiating, lobbying and voting. NVA is most commonly used to struggle for a desired social goal outside of "formal channels."

There are two broad approaches to nonviolence, called *principled* and *pragmatic*. *Principled* nonviolence, associated with Gandhi, is based on a moral renunciation of violence. This

approach is often linked to nonviolence as a way of life, which means fostering both personal peace as well as harmonious and just relations with others. *Pragmatic* nonviolence treats methods of nonviolent action as instrumental tools to immediate ends. In the pragmatic approach, NVA is chosen because it is more effective than alternative methods of action. My focus here is on pragmatic NVA.

NVA is frequently used by social movements, such as when environmentalists blockade logging operations, feminists protest against rape and peace activists sail into nuclear test zones. NVA has been the primary means used by some liberation movements, most famously from 1915 to the 1940s by the Indian independence movement led by Gandhi and in the 1950s and 1960s by the US civil rights movement. NVA has been used to thwart coups such as in Algeria in 1961 and the Soviet Union in 1991, to topple authoritarian rulers such as in the Philippines in 1986, in Indonesia in 1998 and in Serbia in 2000, and occasionally to oppose military invasion such as in Czechoslovakia in 1968 (Ackerman and DuVall, 2000; Cooney and Michalowski, 1987; Crow, Grant and Ibrahim, 1990; Gandhi, 1927; McAllister, 1991; McManus and Schlabach, 1991; Randle, 1994; Schock, 2005).

NVA is not guaranteed to succeed, as shown by the failure of the 1989 pro-democracy movement in China and of the decade of nonviolent resistance in Kosovo to Serbian oppression (Clark, 2000). However, it has several advantages over violent methods. *First*, more people can readily participate in NVA than violence. Participating in a rally or boycott is possible for women, the elderly and children, whereas most soldiers are young, fit men. Greater participation is associated with greater internal democracy and greater resilience against attempts at control by vested interests.

*Second*, NVA is more likely to win wider support than violence, which often antagonizes targets and disgusts witnesses. For example, the first Palestinian intifada, 1987-1993, was largely unarmed and attracted considerable international support for the Palestinian cause, whereas suicide bombings in the second intifada since 2000 have alienated potential allies. *Third*, NVA usually leads to fewer casualties than violence. Armed liberation struggles, as in Vietnam and Algeria, have resulted in thousands or millions of casualties, whereas unarmed liberation struggles, as in India and Eastern Europe, have had relatively few. *Finally*, the means (nonviolence) are compatible with the goal (a nonviolent society). This is insurance that, should the struggle fail, society at least has not been taken down a damaging road.

Use of NVA does not mean there will be no violence, because opponents may, and often do, use violence against nonviolent protesters. However, this can backfire, since violence against those who are nonviolent often generates increased support from observers. Because of this process of "political jiu-jitsu" (Sharp, 1973), NVA can be effective against even the harshest repression, for example against the Nazis (Semelin, 1993).

Underlying NVA is the consent theory of power (Sharp, 1973, 1980), which in essence sees power as the result of subjects supporting or acquiescing to the actions and roles of rulers. When subjects withdraw their consent, by refusing to cooperate as usual, the power of the ruler collapses. NVA is a challenge to the normal acquiescence that allows dictatorship, war, genocide and systems of oppression to occur. One of the keys to this process is the role of agents of the ruler, such as troops. If they withdraw their support, for example as a result of persuasion or simply their instinctive refusal to harm defenseless people, the system will

collapse, as in the case of Eastern European communist regimes in 1989.

The consent theory of power is a reasonable model when there are obvious rulers, such as in a dictatorship, but it is not so helpful in complex systems of domination such as bureaucratic organizations or market economies, where there are many cross-cutting power relations and no single line of authority. Nevertheless, NVA can still be useful in challenging oppression in such complex systems, though a more sophisticated analysis may be required.

NVA may be taken *by* members of oppressed groups, such as by women or ethnic minorities, such as blacks involved in the US civil rights movement. NVA may also be taken *on behalf of* oppressed groups, by others, such as whites who participated in freedom rides -- buses with both black and white people -- during the 1950s in the US South. On some issues, much or all of the action is on behalf of a different group or category. For example, human rights activists, such as in Amnesty International, act on behalf of people, such as political prisoners and victims of torture, who seldom are in a position to take action themselves.

### NVA for SRV

NVA *BY* DEVALUED PEOPLE -- either on their own, or with nondevalued people -- raises a number of complex issues involving image, competencies and consent, discussed later. NVA *on behalf of* devalued people is less problematical.

In practical terms, NVA can be a tool for improving the lives of devalued people. Leaflets, rallies, sit-ins and a host of other techniques of NVA can be used to push for changes in policies, laws and practices. This may indirectly lead to improved social roles for deval-

ued people. More direct connections are possible too. Consider a devalued person for whom a job in a particular workplace would be both image- and competency-enhancing, and assume that some workers are sympathetic but the management is not. One way to proceed would be to use conventional methods such as meetings, submissions and formal appeals. If these are unsuccessful, or as an immediate alternative, NVA could be used, for example, office occupations, strikes, or bringing the devalued person into the workplace to undertake the job.

In an instance such as this, a careful assessment of the situation, of opponents, of supporters, and of the likely consequences, is vital. This is advisable for any use of NVA, but when devalued people are involved or may be affected, there is an extra dimension highlighted by SRV, namely the consequences of heightened vulnerability (Wolfensberger, 1998, p. 124) -- a point further discussed below. This does not necessarily mean NVA is less suitable, but it may affect the choice of methods.

When NVA is successful, it has a range of consequences, of which one of the most important is the psychological impact on the participants, who are very likely to be empowered (Sharp, 1973, pp. 777-799). By being involved in a collective struggle, people gain a sense of agency and solidarity. This is quite different from the experience of voting or lobbying, actions that rely on promoting someone else's agency. How this process of NVA empowerment would affect participants in actions in support of devalued people remains to be investigated.

As theories, SRV and NVA are largely complementary. SRV is primarily a theory of social roles and devalued people. It does not specify a particular method of action. NVA is a theory of action and politics. It makes no mention of social roles nor gives any special notice

to devalued people. Although the theories cover separate realms, they are mostly consistent and mutually supportive. NVA provides practical methods and a framework for developing campaigns to challenge systems of oppression that cause devaluation. SRV is a way of analyzing the situation of devalued people and associated institutional arrangements that can inform nonviolent activists. Both SRV and NVA seek to challenge oppression. Both provide tools to help those with the least power.

How effective is NVA? There are few studies of the comparative effectiveness of NVA, violence and working through formal channels. Certainly NVA has often been vitally important in helping bring about social change, for example in campaigns against slavery, for women's rights, against exploitation of workers and for environmental goals. On a more local scale, there are numerous cases where NVA has rapidly brought about change after little progress had been made after years of providing information, writing letters, making submissions and lobbying. In authoritarian political systems, formal channels such as elections do not have much capacity for bringing about change. A study of dozens of transitions from authoritarian rule in recent decades showed that broad-based nonviolent civic resistance was central to most of them (Karatnycky and Ackerman, 2005).

While there are some good manuals on the practice of NVA (Clark et al., 1984; Coover et al., 1981; Herngren, 1993), there is still much to learn about how to make it more effective. Compared to the vast resources long put into both violence (military and police weapons, training and strategies) and formal channels (including elections, laws and bureaucratic rules and regulations), little social investment has been made into NVA.

## **Tensions and Complexities**

ALTHOUGH SRV and NVA are complementary and largely compatible, especially in their orientation to empowerment, there are some areas where the connection between the two is more problematic. Three important areas where there are some tensions and dilemmas are competency enhancement, image enhancement and vulnerability.

### ***Competency Enhancement***

Competency enhancement is not central to NVA theory. However, in practice NVA participants build various competencies, such as in self-control (in the face of provocation), planning, group dynamics and collective decision-making. Partly this occurs through nonviolent action training, often provided for those preparing to engage in NVA, and partly it occurs through the experience of NVA itself. Thus, it could be said that NVA is compatible with SRV in relation to competency enhancement, but only in so far as devalued people are able to participate in NVA and noting that there is only a partial overlap in the competencies seen as most important.

There are also competencies related to particular nonviolent campaigns. For example, to join a rent strike, which involves withholding rent, an understanding of the function of rent, and the consequences of the strike for landlords as well as tenants, is vital. In general, participating in NVA fosters a greater understanding of the dynamics of power in society.

### ***Image Enhancement***

Image enhancement is not central to NVA theory. Furthermore, NVA in practice raises various thorny issues. A key question is whether devalued people should become involved in NVA. In particular, is the role of nonviolent

activist a valued one? In the community of nonviolent activists, it is certainly valued, with those taking the most sustained, principled, daring or high-profile roles in direct action commonly being accorded the highest status. But in the wider community, attitudes are more ambivalent, with some people deriding nonviolent activists as troublemakers, malcontents, "rent-a-crowd" (paid protesters), subversives or terrorists. While Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Aung San Suu Kyi may be accorded accolades, ordinary activists seldom receive such adulation. Many people do not see being arrested and sent to prison as a valued social role even when it is for civil disobedience. Therefore, whether devalued people should participate in NVA is a difficult question from an SRV perspective.

Participation is more likely to be image-enhancing when there are lots of nondevalued people involved, especially ones with high status. Joining a "pray-in" - analogous to a sit-in - with leading church people is more likely to be image-enhancing than joining a protest disrobing. The way an action is portrayed is crucial. Media reports on NVA are well known to give excessive attention to the slightest hint of violence and to bizarre appearances or behaviors: a single scuffle lasting a few seconds could be the television version of a peaceful protest march involving hundreds of people over a couple of hours. Devalued people might risk further devaluation if they were singled out for trivializing media portrayals. Therefore, in nonviolent actions it would be important to maintain appearances around devalued participants and to promote the organizers' own framing of events, including through alternative media.

There is a special image risk from NVA involving groups of devalued people if they are displayed as deviant and as behaving in peculiar or threatening ways. On the other hand,

image dilemmas are unlikely to arise in some sorts of NVA, such as boycotts.

Another image issue is that using NVA is usually not perceived to be as prestigious as using formal channels such as submissions, lobbying or courts. Using formal channels often involves interacting with high-status professionals such as lawyers or public officials. In contrast, most people can be involved in NVA. That is one of its greatest strengths, but it also means that the status of participants is not guaranteed to be high. So, although NVA is often far more effective than using formal channels, it may not seem an obvious choice in terms of using the most valued social roles.

The reason for this discrepancy is that formal channels are most effective for those with power, wealth and status, and are least helpful for those with fewest social and material resources. For example, in a court case between an individual and a large organization, the organization can easily use legal means to drag out the process over many years at enormous expense. NVA, in contrast, is a tool available to all on relatively equal terms, and thus can neutralize the advantages of power, wealth and status. For example, if an organization discriminates against devalued people, a court case is likely to be slow, expensive and highly reliant on legal expertise. By comparison, a campaign involving rallies, street theatre and office occupations can be undertaken at the initiative of the activists and involve many people at relatively low cost. Although the methods of NVA are not as prestigious as formal channels, there is more potential for participation and, as a consequence, image and competency enhancement through participation, assuming appropriate actions are chosen.

### *Heightened Vulnerability*

Another vexing issue in relating SRV and NVA

is vulnerability. For a person to make a solitary protest against a powerful organization may heighten the person's vulnerability -- this regularly happens to whistleblowers (Alford, 2001; Glazer and Glazer, 1989) -- and be especially inappropriate for a devalued person. For this reason, collective methods of NVA are usually more advisable, with greater participation reducing individual vulnerability, providing mutual support and increasing the likely impact.

However, even in collective NVA there are significant issues to be addressed about safety and social supports for participants. If people with disabilities are in greater danger, this must be taken into account. For people with severe or profound intellectual disabilities, the question of informed decision-making is vital. Is participation ruled out because a person cannot fully grasp the implications of being involved? Or is participation possible if carers or advocates believe it is in the person's best interests? These are practical questions that need to be considered carefully by all involved (Martin and Varney, 2000).

For example, few people with severe intellectual disabilities would be able to help plan actions, or perhaps even understand what was happening. Some would say that people with severe intellectual disabilities should never be involved in NVA. Others would say that involvement is possible, but only in low-risk and low-cost actions. Yet others would say that every opportunity should be given for their full participation.

People with severe disabilities are at risk of being manipulated by activists, for example being put on the front lines in a protest because police are expected to be worried about being seen to cause them any harm. The opposite risk is being prevented from joining actions because of an exaggerated concern about dangers. There is no easy answer to such matters, which

require discussion, careful judgment and assessment of prior experiences (Martin and Varney, 2000). There are fewer dilemmas when it comes to nondevalued people participating in NVA in support of devalued people.

## Conclusion

NVA AND SRV SHARE a concern about oppression, from complementary perspectives. NVA is a participatory form of social action. In contrast, participation in violence -- whether military forces, police or guerrillas -- is typically limited, with preference given to young men who are physically fit. Participation in some formal channels, such as writing submissions or presenting court cases, is largely restricted to those with suitable credentials and expertise. Participation in a boycott, strike or vigil is not nearly so restrictive. A high level of participation in NVA is important for success.

Issues of participation are not salient in SRV. There are no automatic answers to questions of who should take initiatives in helping people into valued roles, but it is important to ask the questions. Looking at issues of participation in relation to NVA can be a model for addressing similar issues in SRV.

Nonviolent activists can learn a number of things from SRV, including the processes of devaluation, the need to act against oppression of devalued people, and ways that image and competency enhancement can change people's lives. Nonviolent activists can also learn to look more carefully at the roles existing or created within their own organizations and by their own actions, for example to build or draw on roles that can make NVA more effective or attractive.

In summary, NVA and SRV have synergies both as theories and as practices, with each

having potential benefits for the other. There are bound to be some tensions, but these can be used creatively to probe assumptions.

### Acknowledgments

I thank John Armstrong, Raymond Lemay, Marc Tu-meinski, Wendy Varney and an anonymous referee for valuable comments on drafts.

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*BRIAN MARTIN is a social scientist at the University of Wollongong, Australia, and is on the board of Illawarra Citizen Advocacy.*

**The citation for this article is:**

Martin, B. (2006). SRV & NVA: Valorizing social roles through nonviolent action. *The SRV Journal*, 1 (2), 25-33.

## **The Citizen Advocacy Foundation of America: A Note on a New Citizen Advocacy-Related Organization**

### **From the Editor**

Citizen Advocacy (CA) is an advocacy model developed by Wolf Wolfensberger which in practice is informed by, and relevant to, Social Role Valorization. Citizen Advocacy arranges and supports relationships between socially valued and competent citizens, and individuals who are socially devalued. The intent is for the typical citizen to respond to, and to represent, one devalued person's needs and interests as if they were the advocate's own.

Established in 2006, the Citizen Advocacy Foundation of America is a non-profit, tax-exempt foundation. It solicits donations, bequests and other financial contributions to be used to make grants to CA-related projects, thereby providing a means for assuring the continuity of CA and CA programs. Historically, CA programs have had great difficulty finding initial and ongoing funding. The Foundation will only fund projects closely related to CA, striving to achieve the greatest benefit to the CA movement overall.

The viability of this Foundation depends on financial contributions made to it by generous donors. We ask readers of this Journal to please consider making a donation, and/or to share this information with others who may be able to make a donation. All contributions are exempt from US taxes.

For more information about the Foundation, requesting a grant, or making a donation, please contact Susan Thomas at: 231 Miles Avenue, Syracuse, NY 13210, USA. Telephone number 315 478 3797.

**To learn more about Citizen Advocacy, two excellent resources are:**

Wolfensberger, W. and Zauha, H. (1973). *Citizen Advocacy And Protective Services For The Impaired And Handicapped*. Toronto: National Institute on Mental Retardation.

Hildebrand, A. (2004). *One Person At A Time*. Brookline, MA: Brookline Books.