A QUARTER-CENTURY OF NORMALIZATION AND SOCIAL ROLE VALORIZATION: EVOLUTION AND IMPACT

Flynn, R. J. & Lemay, R. A. (Eds.)
Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press
1999
571 pages
ISBN 0-7766-0485-6
Price $35.00

As I read this book, I attempted to address four main questions: (1) Does it tell me anything new about normalisation/social role valorisation? (2) Does it present a clear and understandable exposition of the principles for the uninitiated? (3) Does it provide a balanced and critical overview of the principles? (4) Is the impact assessed in a valid, unbiased and rigorous manner?

Rather than answering the questions at the beginning of the review, I will first describe how the volume is constructed and provide a short comment on each contribution. I will then return to the questions and assess how each has fared.

The book consists of a collection of papers that were presented at the Ottawa Conference Twenty-Five Years of Normalization, Social Role Valorization, and Social Integration: A Retrospective and Prospective View, held in May 1994. The papers have been revised for the book. I did not attend the Conference but have spoken to several people who did, and this no doubt shaped my preconceptions about the book. I was expecting a volume of self-congratulatory, homage-paying, and uncritical writings on normalisation and social role valorisation (SRV), and, to a certain extent, I was not disappointed. However, I still found the volume captivating, interesting, and useful.

The book is organised into eight main parts. The first is an introduction by the editors in which they outline the origin and purposes of the volume. The second begins with two chapters by Nirje and then Wolfensberger in which they recall their particular journeys to formulating normalisation and SRV. I was fascinated by the stories of how both Nirje and Wolfensberger recalled the development of their own ideas and writings. I was particularly interested to note incidents they felt had greatly influenced them. For example, Wolf Wolfensberger recounts a visit to the late David Norris in Essex in 1967. I worked with David from 1979 to 1986 and I remember his version of this visit. The two stories were more similar than different, however, it remains, for me, a wonderful example of how we each create our own version of knowledge and the ‘truth’. There are then two further chapters by Jack Yates and Susan Thomas & Wolf Wolfensberger, who complete the picture of how the ideology has developed in North America.

The third section is titled ‘Critical Perspectives on Normalization and Social Role Valorization’. This, I was hoping, would prove to be a measured outline of the various critical stances that have been made since these ideas were first introduced. The section begins well with a chapter by Michael Oliver in which he sets out his materialist critique of the normalisation principle. As though it could not be left ‘unanswered’ and to guard against ‘contamination’, the next chapter is a reply from Wolf Wolfensberger to Oliver’s position - two committed
academics who appear to believe their own view is the ‘correct’ version of reality. However, this is clearly a book for those who are friendly towards the normalisation/SRV stance, which is only to be expected given that the original Conference was in celebration of 25 years of normalisation/SRV. So, unsurprisingly, the next two chapters, which are part of this ‘critical perspectives’ section, are contributions that contain the underlying message that if you think you have found something false with normalisation/SRV, then it is you who are mistaken. The first is a chapter by Burt Perrin who reiterates the original Scandinavian version of normalisation and stresses the difference between this and Wolfensberger’s later version. The difference is suggested to be that the original Scandinavian version showed respect for the individual person by making available various patterns of ordinary living and did not involve the manipulation of social images or competences as did the Wolfensberger account. He then implies that the original normalisation version has more in common with the social model of disability in as much as the environment rather than the individual has to change. Indeed, he concludes his chapter by emphasising that normalisation is about rights: “consumers with disabilities want the right to full inclusion in society - but with their disabilities and their differences.” (p.194). This use of the first set of ideas to identify a difference with the subsequent set of ideas, is, I feel, hardly a telling critique of the normalisation/SRV ideologies. It is rather like criticising baseball as a game by pointing out that it is different from cricket, from which it developed. There then follows a chapter by Laird Heal where the question is posed, ‘are normalisation/SRV limited by competence?’ The answer appears to be, possibly, particularly if one employs Quality of Life measures as an indication of the implementation of normalisation/SRV.

The fourth section attempts to link normalisation/SRV principles with social science theory and empirical research. The first chapter in this section, by Raymond Lemay, provides some links with social science theory, while the next four, by Sara Burchard, Robert Flynn and Tim Aubry, Judith Sandys, and finally Robert Flynn, explore some of the empirical research with regard to particular service sectors. One of the criticisms that is levelled at the writings of Wolfensberger is that he does not always acknowledge the original source of his ideas. This section, and in particular the chapter by Lemay, goes some way towards rectifying this. The other chapters in this section provide useful reviews of some of the studies that have been conducted exploring community living, integration and supported employment.

Part five explores the dissemination and impact of normalisation/SRV through education and training. The three contributors are all from the USA, though at least two, I believe, have worked and taught extensively outside the States. Susan Thomas begins by recounting the history of training in normalisation/SRV and is very open about the fact that her sources are restricted to her own knowledge gained through working for Wolfensberger since 1973 (with two small breaks), the archives kept at the Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agentry at Syracuse University run by Wolfensberger and, finally, the oral history, as told by Wolfensberger. Hardly a wide lens and one that is unlikely to discover or, indeed, be open to initiatives that sit outside the
remit of the Institute. For example, there have been numerous variations on the Syracuse style of ‘training’ that have been developed for the purpose of introducing people to these principles. Certainly these concepts have been part of most human service courses in the UK for the past 25 years. It would have been interesting to have a comparison of how the material is presented when the objective is to develop a critical understanding of normalisation/SRV as part of a package of human service ideologies rather than to uphold the guiding principle that it is the ‘right’, the ‘best’ and the only ‘valuable’ one. To be fair, she does mention the different forms of normalisation education and training that have taken place on college and university courses. However, when it comes to SRV, Thomas claims the Institute has restricted the dissemination of these ideas by insisting people are ‘properly’ trained before they can pass on the knowledge. I don’t believe that learning works that like. There may be an original version that receives the Institute seal of approval, however that version is not sacred and others may obtain it without attending any ‘official’ training. I remember in the early days of normalisation in the UK trying to persuade my boss to go on one of the CMHERA workshops that I had attended and found to be so useful. He didn’t want to go and asked for the books as “that is how I learn”. A few days later he helped me understand some of the implications of the conservatism corollary that I had been confused about. People learn in different ways.

In the next chapter, Deborah Reidy explores how SRV may be taught to the general public. She links what Preece (2001) would call ‘radical pedagogies’ to this goal stressing the importance of ‘ordinary people’ in the lives of those with learning disabilities. Part five finishes with a chapter from John O’Brien who, it seems to me, has been the most influential figure in bringing normalisation/SRV into the practices of services in the UK. Many services with which I am familiar will not claim to be using SRV or normalisation but rather the ‘Five Accomplishments’ framework (O’Brien & Lyle, 1986). His chapter concentrates on ways of using normalisation/SRV to creatively change support services from ‘unconscious devaluing’ to being an integral part in the ‘desirable futures’ of disabled people.

Part six examines the international impact of normalisation/SRV and is divided into three sections. The first has three contributions on the impact in Scandinavia, the second has four (one from USA, one from Canada, one from England and one from Australia) on the English-speaking world, and the third has two (both Canadian) on the French-speaking world. I do think this was a difficult task that was tackled admirably. However, as might be expected given the nature of the original Conference, there remains for me, an overriding impression that the principles of normalisation/SRV are afforded too much importance in the debate regarding the influential factors on service and societal change.

The seventh part has the attractive title of ‘Personal Impact of Normalisation/SRV’. Unfortunately it is also the smallest section. The first contribution is an account of how life has changed for Peter Park, Director of Information and Resources for People First of Canada, and his perception of the important influence normalisation/SRV theory played in this transformation. The second is from Joe Osburn on the impact of normalisation/SRV training on the individual. The final contribution to this section is from David Schwartz who
writes about his perception of the influence of normalisation training at a State level. I found the most interesting comment here was that he felt most influence was ‘engineered’ when there were no regulations, just training.

Part eight consists of one chapter by Wolfensberger in which he delivers some concluding remarks and predicts some future developments. He does embrace more of the critiques of normalisation/SRV than are covered in the section on critical perspectives, and he provides a clear exposition of how he sees normalisation/SRV (particularly his latest version of SRV) being of relevance to the 21st century. It is possible to encounter a certain arrogance in his writing (e.g. ‘In this context I will only mention five shortcomings - actually absurdities - of the radical right orientation’. p492; ‘... the Wolfensberger formulation would derive yet additional ones and is vastly more powerful in offering resolutions of conflicts between competing or incompatible prescriptions”. p.494), but he does construct some forceful arguments. I guess I am more of a normalisation/SRV aficionado than I like to admit.

There follows a useful section that contains a fairly comprehensive bibliography on normalisation/SRV, PASS and PASSING from 1969-1999.

So what are my reflections on the questions posed at the beginning? Well, I do not feel I have learnt anything new about normalisation/SRV, although I enjoyed discovering how some of these ideas were formulated. I cannot but agree that the book contains a comprehensive exposition of the normalisation/SRV principles. How accessible these are for those new to the concepts I am uncertain. Certainly the language may be difficult given the tendency to invent new words and use jargon. I feel the overview of the principles is not balanced or critical (where, for example, is a feminist critique other than a brief mention in the final chapter?). There is, as I anticipated, a great deal of promoting the virtues, importance and ‘correctness’ of normalisation/SRV, with limited reflection on critiques or other influences on the changing pattern of services for people with learning difficulties. In the UK, for example, there is little doubt that these principles played a part in shaping services, but so has the changing economic climate, the increased inclusion of disabled people in planning etc. Kendrick, in his chapter on the impact in USA does acknowledge the range of other movements that may well have influenced the direction and nature of change. It is not possible to predict what kind of services would be here without the normalisation/SRV influence, but it is equally unrealistic to claim that they are the shape they are solely because of them.

Despite a clear recognition by Kristiansen of the multi-faceted nature of societal change, the book tries to persuade us that normalisation/SRV is the most important and even the sole ingredient in developing our services. Assessing the impact of these ideas is fraught with difficulties. The methods described in the book tend to be those that are based on normalisation/SRV principles so it is not surprising that there is support for the hypotheses that normalisation/SRV have had various positive outcomes for people with learning difficulties. I feel other influences have been somewhat ignored.

Overall I found the book informative and useful, although not without its uncomfortable moments, and I think students on human service programmes will find it a very helpful source.
References


Barry Gray