CHATS WITH
PEOPLE WHO USE SRV

asrva
AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL ROLE VALORISATION ASSOCIATION

HARVEY MUNDAY

JUNE 2025

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How did you become interested in SRV?

I must start with a confession. I started in the sector supervising slave labour gardeners (aka supported employment). I still felt a lot of the things that I do now, but I bought into a lot of the propaganda and lies. Luckily for me after only a couple of years, I moved to Melbourne to work at a service provider called Inclusion Melbourne. An opportunity came up to become a Community Inclusion Officer (CIO), a full-time job that involved crafting roles in the community. One of my interviewers was Carmine Laghi, the person who introduced me to SRV and became a mentor for the next five years.

I can't remember what the interview question with Carmine was. But, I do remember talking about how one of our contracts was mowing lawns for pension card holders (householders) as part of the HACC program. Whenever we went to a new householder's house, they would treat the crew as if they were disabled (or as I learnt later, they were casting the crew into deviancy roles), but after a while, they started treating them like gardeners. I think a lot of the reasons why this shift in perception occurred was because almost everything the crew did, communicated '*they are gardeners*'.

We were all working together. Crew members were often a lot more competently skilled in the mechanics of gardening, and they were involved in the decision making around task allocation, so there was no obvious hierarchy. I also rarely had a one-on-one conversation with the householder; there was almost always a crew member involved. The householders were inclined to chat; they were often retirees and sometimes faced a little social isolation.

Reflecting now I can see that this fostered a lot more interpersonal identification. The more that the crew members were seen as a) gardeners (we were in uniform, using all the right equipment), b) competent and c) individuals with a unique rich personalities, the more the preconceived notions of a 'disabled person' were challenged.

After I waffled through that answer, Carmine asked me if I had heard of SRV, and suggested I may be

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interested in it. It was the first time I had heard of it, and naturally, I forgot what the V stood for, and so didn't Google it. Luckily for me a few weeks later, just before I started the CIO role, Inclusion Melbourne held a training session with John Armstrong. I then had the pleasure of working for five years under Carmine, and having everything we did as a Service Provider be analysed through an SRV lens. As the majority of my SRV practice is as a paid person, a lot of what I have written is under that guise.

What do you really like about SRV?

Being able to work more potently and more effectively with people. And finding the SRV community.

What did you not expect about SRV and its use that you have found to be true?

Another confession. I used to misunderstand 'Choice and Control'. I used to think people should be able to do and wear whatever they want. SRV helped me understand a few things:

· I am not the one who holds the risk, and as a socially valued person, I needed to learn to understand what the real risks were.

· Image is a thing.

· Reputational damage matters and further wounds a person, making the journey to equal value more difficult.

· When you are supporting people, assume that most community members do not readily welcome people who are different, will pre-judge people negatively based on visible devalued markers, and do not have positive perceptions of people with disabilities. Assuming the worst does not mean you have to be pessimistic about society, it is just being conscious of the fact that the consequences of devaluation impact the other person. You are always a little bit more careful when you are driving someone else's car, so, surely even more care should be given with someone's reputation.

Your recommendations to someone new to SRV?

Don't beat yourself up for too long/at all if you used to get it 'wrong'. It is what it is; it's in the past and I'm sure you were

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motivated by the right things. The longer you dwell on it, the longer it will take to start making some positive changes. With all the respect in the world, you don't really matter too much; it's all about helping people access the good things of life[1], everything else is about administration and funding (that is, non-programmatic issues).

Respect family members, they will always be around longer and they will always love the person more. The more you can bring the whole family on the journey, the better it is for the person you are supporting, and the more likely you are to succeed. You behave differently towards your parents ... so will the people you work with. Don't just assume it's because they are bad parents[2], and don't just assume that they are portraying someone badly because the person you support 'behaves' with you. Everyone is capable of being a ratbag to their parents, and nothing makes me trust a practitioner less than when I hear them complain about family members.

Understand which deviancy roles you unconsciously cast people into. There will surely be some, because you are a product of society and societal conditions. My main one was to put people into the role of eternal child. The fact that I know that means that I can concentrate really hard on doing the opposite and treating people in an age-appropriate manner. Occasionally, I still slip up[3] because of societal influences, but I can catch it and make amends when I do.

Seek supervision. I was so lucky that I worked around seasoned practitioners who taught me so much. Some things will make sense to you on an intrinsic level; some things will be the polar opposite of what your gut says. Trust the theory and consult with people who are more seasoned in their practice.

The more you understand SRV the more everything about the way that people with a devalued status are treated is going to suck. The more you watch Support Workers, the more infuriated you are likely to get. The really hard thing is that the practice of others is beyond your control. Acquaint yourself with the serenity prayer[4], and do not get bogged down in things out of your control. Just concentrate on one person at a time. Lead by example and work on how to let go of what is beyond your control.

Think of yourself as a capacity builder in everything that you do.

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Someone is always in a role; think about the competencies associated with that role and try to support people to achieve these competencies. You will always have something proactive to work on during supports. And if you are unsure then go and speak to your SRV Supervisor.

If you believe in the value of SRV, talk about it and share it; that is one way that we can make a larger change.

Editor's Notes

[1] Harvey, it's great that you refer to 'the good things of life'. This is the phrase that Prof. Wolfensberger used in relation to SRV. Unfortunately, some people in Australia have moved to saying 'the good life', which is not the same or, at least, not as specific as 'the good things of life' – breaking down 'good life' to its components helps us work out what is likely to be desirable for people.

[2] This thinking illustrates 'situational bias' rather than 'dispositional bias'. For example, you see a parent at the local supermarket yelling at their child and so it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking 'there's a bad parent' (dispositional bias). Instead, you can think in ways that don't blame the person, such as 'there must be a lot of pressure on that parent just now'. After all, what do we know of their life? Let's hold judgement. This is alert and ethical practice.

[3] Recognising one's mistakes and then seeking ways to do better is part of the cycle of reflective practice – see SRV Matters no. 4 on this topic here.

[4] The serenity prayer's first paragraph: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.*