**The purpose of life is a life with purpose:
creating meaningful futures through valued roles.**

Conference paper by Jane Sherwin and Meg Sweeney

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Meg:

'Person Centered Practice', 'Self Direction', 'Community Inclusion' and 'Participation' are words we hear all the time. What does it really mean and how can we actually assist people have a life that reflects the rhetoric? I have seen many programs that sound great, using words such as these to describe what they do only to find, on inspection, that they are traditional, bland, provide grouped support and are wasting people's lives. To move forward, we need to look beyond the typical menu of programs that services offer. So, how do we assist someone craft a purposeful individual life for themselves that meet their most pressing needs and aspirations?

We have to start with the person, appreciating who are they, what their life has been like thus far, what they need to do now and in the future, and what strengths, gifts and capacities they have. Much person-centered planning now talks of these things, but how do we move this knowledge of a person beyond a document, into action? The knowledge of Role Theory and how to craft Valued Social Roles are wonderful tools to help us do that, so Jane will now explain this for us.

Jane:

Thanks for setting the scene Meg.

My contribution in this presentation is to draw the link between having valued roles and a life that has purpose, and secondly, to explain how we can use the physical and social environment to embed people in roles.

Positively valued roles give purpose

One of the ways that we live with purpose in our lives is through the roles that we have. Of course there are other ways that people derive purpose in life, such as through spiritual means. In this paper, we are focusing on the assertion that it is through the roles that we are in that we develop a sense of purpose in life.

The first point we would like to make is that roles happen on a continuum of value. If you imagine a bell curve, at one end of the curve are those roles that are negatively valued; at the other end are roles that are highly valued. The continuum of value exists because of the values of our society, where some roles are valued and aspired to and other roles are not.

In the middle of the bell curve continuum, we can think about roles that are positively valued because they are very typical and common. Examples would include roles like neighbour, team member, friend, taxpayer, club member, student, and volunteer. Relationship roles like son, brother, uncle, cousin, grandson and father are roles that are typical and valued. At the more highly valued end, we can think about examples like esteemed academic, award winner, brave rescuer, and wise elder. At the other

end of the continuum are roles that people do not aspire to. They are roles of low status and bring little purpose in life. Such roles would include the role of menace, the role of child-forever, burden on the family, and a drain on the taxpayer.

The role of client is interesting. It is a typical role and people with a valued status move in and out of this role. For example, they might be clients of hairdressers or accountants. The role of client however moves towards the negative end of the continuum when someone is a client for everything for all of the time. For example, a person who is a client of a group home as well as a day service as well as a weekend recreation service is in the role of client 24-hours a day; this would be considered to be at the negative end of the continuum. In this instance, the role of client becomes identity defining; that is to say, it occurs at the expense of other aspects of the person's identity.

At this point we would like to make three observations. Firstly, the more valued roles that a person has, the more reasons for the person to get out of bed each day. Secondly, a life that is lived with a mixture of typical valued roles is likely to have more purpose than a life that mainly consists of negatively valued roles and/or a life where the person is primarily in the role of client. The third observation is that most people with a valued status derive a lot of purpose through their relationship roles; a lack of relationship roles leaves a big gap in terms of possibilities for finding purpose.

Creating valued roles

There are many helpful things that can be done to enable someone to have a positively valued role. For example family roles could be built on, such as strengthening the role of son to 'good' son who contributes to the household and remembers birthdays. Existing roles could also be built on. For example, if someone is in the role of tenant, then it is possible to expand this valued role to include being a 'good neighbour'. Another helpful strategy to support someone into a valued role is to build on their interests and/or help them find work. Also helpful is building skills so that the person is both more competent in their current roles as well as having a skill base that enables them to move into more roles.

This paper focuses on thinking about the most helpful physical and social environments that are likely to embed people in positively valued roles. This is through using 'role communicators'. A communicator is something that sends messages to the person and to others about what role is expected of the person. Communicators can also be thought of as role signifiers or indicators.

In other words, it is possible to shape the roles that someone is in, through shaping how people typically get into these roles. There are six communicators that we will refer to today. They are: where, when, what, with whom, language and appearance.

Role communicators

Let's consider how we all got 'shaped' into the valued role of conference participant. Firstly, we came to the venue. We entered a room in which there were rows of chairs and a stage and screen at the front. This is the communicator about the '*Where*' of a role. We came at a time when conferences are typically held. This is the communicator about the '*When*' of the role. We've been engaged in a range of behaviours and tasks like sitting, listening, note taking, networking, and having morning tea and lunch. These are the communicators about the '*What*' of a role. These are also referred to as the '*Activities*' of the role. We have spent time with other conference participants and with presenters. And vice versa. A presenter

needs conference participants; participants need presenters. These are the '*With whom'* role communicators. We've heard '*Language'* particular to this type of conference-participant role, such as 'disability', 'transformation', 'community life', 'valued role', et cetera. We all wore clothes appropriate to attending a conference. I noticed that no one turned up in their pajamas or sports gear. This is the '*Appearance'* communicator.

Role communicators craft people's roles, either positively valued roles and a life with purpose or negatively valued roles where life has little purpose or meaning. For example, consider the following role communicators: a clinical setting, unbreakable crockery, locked doors; behaviours such as queuing for meals, high levels of being monitored, being assessed, being talked about, and having little meaningful activity; staff who wear blue shirts, big boots, lanyards and have keys in their pockets. What role would you expect that people are being crafted into here? The role of menace. These role communicators are found in some hostels for homeless men, living arrangements for people with challenging behaviour or mental illness, and of course in prisons.

When we understand the power of role communicators, we can start to understand how very difficult it is for people to break out of a negative role because of the role communicators. Similarly, an understanding of role communicators guides us about those things we need to think about in order to embed someone in a positively valued role.

There are two major implications if we are trying to enable someone to be authentically in a positively valued role. The first implication is that if we are going to use 'role thinking' and if we want to assist someone to be authentically in a role, then we need to have all of the role communicators in place. Even one inaccurate role communicator might shake whether someone is truly perceived and treated as if they are in a valued role. For example, in the mornings I pass a man at a bus stop waiting for a bus with other people who are going to work. He is at the bus stop at the time that other people typically go to work. One might be inclined to conclude that this person is in the role of employee. However the *Appearance* role communicator conflicts with the other role communicators: he wears tracksuit pants pulled up to just below his armpits and carries a child's lunchbox. Another example is a scenario were a child with a disability spends time out of the regular classroom setting: the other students might begin to wonder whether their classmate with a disability is truly a class member since the child partially lacks the *Where* and the *Activities* role communicators. A further example would be to think about a person who loves art but who only does art with other people with disabilities who might or might not like art, in a building for disability programs and where that art group is taught by a worker who knows nothing about art. All of the role communicators, except possibly the activities communicator, are absent.

The point here is that all of the role communicators need to be coherent with the valued role in order for the role expectations given to the person and to other people to be potent and convincing.

One strategy that will help with getting all of the role communicators in place is to think about how any other person moves into a particular role and gets to be taken seriously in the role.

A scenario could be, for example, to identify how to strengthen the role of art student. To be authentically in the role of art student, we would need to think about how

anyone else (without a disability) learns to do art. We need to think about where people learn art and who art students spend time with. We need to think about the qualities and skills of the person leading the group. We also need to think about whether there is a particular appearance for an art student.

Not only is this helpful for assisting someone new in the role of art student, but there are also implications here for how one might work with someone who is only 'sort of' in a valued role because not all of the valued role communicators are in place. If someone is surrounded by role communicators that signify the role of client or dependent person rather than art student, then it is important to try and move each of the role communicators to a more valued point on the continuum. Could the setting be changed to where others do art? Could the grouping of people be changed? Could someone who knows about art teach the individual who loves art? And so on.

Using role communicators is not just about helping someone look the part; it is about helping someone be taken seriously in a role and having others treat the person as if they are in the role, so that the person can learn the role.

We'd like to emphasise one more implication from using roles-thinking as a way of assisting people to have purpose in their lives. Roles-thinking is more than just activities. A friend and colleague, Lynda Shevellar, said 'If we start with filling time, all we'll get is activities. If we start with filling roles, then time looks after itself.'

We will now hear from Meg about how the role communicators were used in positive ways and in a very practical way.

Meg:

My daughter Joscelyn has many valued roles in her life however I'm going to focus on how we went about her gaining the valued role of Crèche Volunteer at our local Bay and Basin Leisure Centre. Jos has always had an interest in children and pursued this as a vocational direction during high school by choosing subjects such as Early Childhood Studies and Community Services at TAFE. Work placements in childcare settings were required with the studies and she was very successful in those. Upon leaving school one of the things she wanted to pursue was her interest in Childcare as a vocation. A paid work role was already happening in the Hospitality field so volunteering in Childcare was a good option to pursue her interest while she decided which career direction to take.

Communicators as filters for the decisions

We used role thinking to plan for a role in childcare by firstly thinking of all the places in the community that children would be. We came up with seven Preschools, two Before & After School Care programs, two Playgroups, Several Mums and Bubs Exercise groups, many Family Day Care providers and the Crèche at the local Leisure Centre. I'm sure there are more places where children are, however this was enough to get started on the '*Where'* she could volunteer. We have a fairly small population where we live so we were very happily surprised to find all these opportunities just waiting there. Each setting would have its own appearance depending on who it was designed for and what was to happen there. Typically there would be safety posters, allergy warnings, perhaps fencing, little tables and chairs.

'When' the role would happen was different in each setting. For instance Day Care was all day Monday to Friday; Playgroup, two hours once per week and Before & After School Care, Monday to Friday from 6am-9am then 3pm-6pm. We needed to

think of these differences, not just to check that this was indeed a childcare role but also to find a right fit for Jos that had consistency and that she could commit to in the longer term.

Reading, cleaning, putting out and packing away toys and equipment, vacuuming, nappy changing, hand washing, homework, games, talking to families, singing, rhyming, dancing, taking care of safety and learning activities are many of the '*What*' things that could be happening depending on the setting.

Each setting also has different people so the '*Who*' would be different too. Preschool has an age range of children, parents only pick up and drop off. There is staff such as Teachers, Cooks, Assistants, Cleaners and a Director, perhaps a Management Committee whereas parents attend playgroup with their children. Before & Afterschool Care has children between 5 and 11 years of age and staff.

The '*Language*' we would hear would be the children's names like Jake, Jordan and Jackson, Mia, Milla and Mikayla. There would also be the parents such as Julie, Sharon, Michelle & Bill. There would be the setting name, such as 'Sanctuary Point Child Care Centre' or 'Huskisson Playgroup Association'. You would expect to hear positive language reinforcement such as 'well done', 'good for you' and developmental language like 'your turn', 'jump up' and 'clap hands'. Safety language like 'stop', 'get down' and 'we don't bite' would also be heard.

The '*Appearance*' of adults would demonstrate appropriate clothes for the work. It includes runners, not stilettos or thongs. You would see smart casual clothes or perhaps a top with a logo or uniform, hats and sunscreen outside in summer and warmly dressed outside in winter. Children would be in hats, smocks, comfy clothes ready for play and perhaps uniforms depending on the *'Where'* of the role.

The decision

When we considered all the role communicators together, the Crèche at the local Leisure Centre was our first choice for being the right fit with Joscelyn's volunteering goals.

Where: Jos could ride her bike to and from The Leisure Centre giving her further independence.

When: Being 9-12 Monday to Friday it had flexibility to fit into her schedule but also was consistent with the opportunity to do the same day each week.

What: The role is to 'mind' the children so the activities are flexible and spontaneous, very hands on. All the adults are there in a voluntary capacity so every person's contribution is valued in the same way

With Whom: Two other volunteers assist running the session on a week about basis so Jos would have the opportunity to get to know four other women really well over time. Children generally come the same time each week so she would get to know them and their parents. Everyone attending is from the local area so Jos would get to know a lot of younger parents who drop off and collect their children.

Language: is typical friendly, kids, parents and family stuff.

Appearance: Neat casual, sporty type of clothes that you would wear to the gym are easy for Jos to manage independently and look the part.

Setting up the role

Once this was decided I approached the manager of the Crèche on Joscelyn's behalf and arranged a meeting. As the role was so well thought out, we didn't approach this meeting cap in hand. We were confident that this was an opportunity for the Leisure Centre as well as Joscelyn. She could demonstrate her commitment to pursuing childcare through her past studies and was a young local woman who wanted to make a contribution to her community. Our approach was not on a whim or looking for a time filling activity but a very well thought through valued role to fit Jos and her individual circumstance.

They were delighted to have Jos on board. We offered some support however they didn't want any. They were confident that Jos would be fine with the natural support provided to all new volunteers and indeed she has been fine.

If support was desired by the Creche, we had already thought through the '*By whom* of that role. We would have recruited a current or past Crèche volunteer to help Jos learn the role. An experienced Crèche volunteer would have communicated the right message to others about Joscelyn's role. A disability support worker with uniform and lanyard would have communicated an entirely different role for her, such as client or program recipient. If I, as her mother, supported her it would have communicated dependent daughter, perhaps forever child rather than autonomous capable adult.

In her role of Crèche volunteer, Jos is not only gaining new skills such as using the photocopier, she is also meeting lots of new local people and is making a valuable contribution to her community. A few weeks ago she was going to be away so I assisted her to ring the two other volunteers for that day to let them know she wouldn't be there. One of the ladies said they were so happy she rang because they would have missed her and worried if she didn't arrive. Although it is early days, the indications are that Joscelyn and others see her as a fellow Crèche volunteer and this may lead to other opportunities in her life.

Final thoughts

Enabling participation in the community with a focus on Valued Roles gives a firm foundation for planning and action. As demonstrated by Joscelyn's story; roles start with the person, who they are, what their passions and interests are, what makes sense in their own individual life in their own local community.

The crafting of valued roles is highly individualised. A particular valued role is not a program that can be implemented on mass or transferred from one person to another because every individual's life will be made up of different roles as we are all unique.

Social Role Valorisation (SRV) is the theory that informs the thinking and planning framework for the development of individual valued roles.

Further learning about SRV is available in each State; Foundations Forum is the organisation in NSW that coordinates SRV learning opportunities.

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A little about the conference presenters

Jane Sherwin is a Senior Trainer in Social Role Valorisation, one of two working accredited teachers in Australia and New Zealand. She has been involved in the teaching, learning and application of SRV since the early 1990s. Based as a

consultant in Queensland, Jane has been involved in the lives of people with disabilities and older people since the late 1970s. When not teaching at accredited SRV events, she works with groups and organisations on matters to do with values based quality, person centred approaches, leadership development, and planning for better lifestyles and support arrangements with individuals. Jane is well regarded for her teaching, writing and facilitation work. Her social change efforts since the early 1990s have used organisational change, training, mentoring, evaluations and writing as key strategies. sherwinconsulting@gmail.com

Meg Sweeney is the parent of three young adults, one of whom has a significant intellectual disability. She is a passionate advocate for people with Developmental Disability to live their own authentic life embedded in community. Meg has served as a member of the Disability Council of NSW, as a Community Visitor with the Community Services Commission and is a Life Member of Family Advocacy. She has extensive experience in engaging with people through writing and teaching on topics such as Advocacy, Inclusive Education, Community Building, Inclusive Lives and Social Role Valorisation. Meg is committed to the teaching and implementation of SRV as she has witnessed the improvement in vulnerable peoples lives when SRV strategies are at the centre of planning. sweeney@internode.on.net