PEARLS OF WISDOM

Think typical: using the culturally valued analogue

A common experience for people with disability is finding themselves in a situation that is 'sort of' like real life, but not quite. For example, if someone has a passion to learn to play the guitar then typically they would find a guitar teacher, attend class, as well as perhaps listen to music by great guitarists and go to concerts. For someone with a disability, the default thinking is too frequently that a support worker who is rostered on a shift would make time for a guitar playing as part of the weekly 'program'.

If the desired outcome is for the person to have a fulfiling life and be well regarded by others and if the wish is that people with disabilities have lives similar to that of others of the same age, gender and culture, then there is a technical concept that is helpful. The term 'culturally valued analogue' (CVA) comes from the theory of Social Role Valorisation. It refers to those ways and means that people with a valued status use to meet their needs. These ways and means are familiar, typical, valued and generally expected by someone with a valued status.

Sometimes it's helpful to think of a culturally valued analogue as the culturally valued parallel or the culturally valued alternative to traditional practices around people with disabilities that actually marginalise them from the rest of society.

One example is that the culturally valued analogue of a group home is 'home', such that 'home' might be a flat or a house, people might live alone or with friends, and that the home is a place where someone is 'king of their castle' and where their unique personality is expressed in the style of home and in the decorations and mementoes. In contrast, the experience of someone living in a home that is primarily run by a service is that they are sort of at 'home' but not really. Differences from the typical experiences of 'home' include that they might not choose who they live with nor even whether to live in that particular dwelling. The house might look like a typical house in a suburban street, but only if it is not over-size in order to accommodate a larger than usual number of people living there. It is the comings and goings of staff cars that might also indicate that this is not a typical home.

Using the culturally valued analogue is a way of 'thinking typical'. It grounds people with disabilities in ordinary life. It asks that the disability needs are set aside in the first instance. Instead, the question 'how would anyone else get X done?' is asked first.

For example, the range of culturally valued analogues to meet the needs for a meal for someone who can't cook would include buying takeaway, having frozen meals, eating out at a cafe, eating a meal at a friends house, or a friend bringing over a meal

If the need is to travel to a football game, the automatic thinking in a disability world is to employ a paid worker to chauffer the person or to use a taxi voucher. If culturally typical thinking is used, then the range of ways that anyone else travels to a football game would be identified. These include catching public transport, travelling with a friend or travelling with a family member. Once the range of ways that people with a valued status would get to the football game is thought about, then the additional needs related to an impairment can then be considered. For example if it's to travel with a friend, then an accessible vehicle might be necessary.

Starting the thinking with a focus on the disability narrows the sense of possibilities. Not using culturally valued analogue can lead to people with disabilities being grouped in unusual ways, doing activities that

somehow mark them as oddly different, in environments where people with a valued status would not spend time. For example, the culturally valued analogue for educating children is at (regular) school or through

home schooling. A segregated environment in a special school is not a typical educational experience for children.

The culturally valued analogue can also be a guiding concept when thinking about the roles of staff. Thinking of paid staff as 'carers' clearly gives the message to the staff and others that the role is 'caring' and even 'minding'. This excludes the important offerings of guidance, encouragement, role modeling and finding opportunities for valued roles and relationships. A relevant question is 'what is the closest role in ordinary land, as opposed to service land?' This was asked by one team in thinking about the tasks around keeping the person connected to their family and friends. The role of 'social secretary' for a staff member was created. Another team created the role of 'PA' for the tasks around organising the week and making sure the person's lifestyle was meaningful and fulfiling.

A further question to prompt 'typical thinking' could be 'Who and/or what would typically meet this need in ordinary land?' The answers to this question lead to an opening of possibilities. Rather than paid human service staff, the answer could be family, friends and generic services. Thus it would be that the first option for thinking about someone to go to the movies with a movie lover with a disability would come from the unpaid social network before using a paid worker.

Using ways and means that are outside of things that are typical, valued and familiar lead to people being marked as even more different, being less worthwhile and locking them even further into a service life.

In summary, the culturally valued analogue is an antidote to 'disability thinking'. To use 'typical thinking' that is, to use the concept of the culturally valued analogue, ask the question, 'what are the typical range of ways and means that anyone with a valued status would use to get that need met?' The results are more likely to lead a lifestyle that is more real, more valued and more connected to others not in service land.