ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING CITIZEN ADVOCACY

A BRIEF OUTLINE OF SOME OF THE MOST IMPORTANT CONCEPTS AND ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING CITIZEN ADVOCACY

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This article is an edited and expanded transcript of a presentation first given at a Citizen Advocacy workshop in Adelaide, Australia, in September 1992. This material can be understood freestanding, as presented here, but the majority of the Australian audience had just attended a 5 day workshop on Social Advocacies in which there was a one-hour presentation on the nature and role of assumptions in advocacy, and another half-hour review of those assumptions that we believe to be valid and adaptive for all kinds of advocacy. Thus, most of the audience was already familiar with these basic concepts, and the material presented here was meant to elaborate these concepts more specifically as they apply to Citizen Advocacy. I am indebted to Tom Doody for suggestions in the revision of this manuscript. W. Wolfensberger.

Certain painful realities (reviewed earlier during the workshop) inform us of three things.

1. Social stratification and social devaluation are true universals, found everywhere at all times.
2. These things are most painful reminders of human imperfection, and what traditional Christianity used to call the human "inclination to sin."
3. In addition to the harm that gets done to people by other people, there is the harm that comes to us by nature, as via accidents, disease, genetic "mistakes" and mutations, and aging. These things are also signs and reminders of our imperfection and vulnerability.

Now in contrast to the above, there also exists in humanity a capacity to (a) try to escape from the dreadful burden of our moral weakness, and from our doing harm to others, and to (b) be good to others, including those who have been afflicted either by nature or by human malefaction. It is rather instructive for those willing to be instructed that human efforts along these lines are vastly more likely to succeed on the individual level than the societal one. In other words, individuals can go a long way in overcoming their own devaluations, extricating themselves from societal harm-doing, and being good to their neighbors - even as their very own society as a whole continues to do all sorts of massive harm to its devalued and oppressed classes.

There are, of course, many morally valid ways to be good to others, and to combat humanity's inhumanity of humanity. Even systemic ways of doing it may be morally valid, and there are many personal ways of striving to do it. But we can also say with certainty that systemic efforts in the absence of extensive personal effort are bound to fail. Failure to perceive this has been the error at the heart of many social theories and political systems, such as Marxism, which proposed that a good society could be built by force so as to

eventually make people more moral, rather than that it takes moral people to build a better society.

Among the many personal moral strategies to pursue, Citizen Advocacy (Wolfensberger & Zauha, 1973) is merely one. Whatever systemic elements it has are focused first and foremost on the promotion of individual humans being good to other individual humans.

We will now review a set of twenty- two assumptions that come together to point to, suggest, and support Citizen Advocacy rather than some other valid moral strategy. Prior to September 1992, these assumptions had never been collated, but could be identified here and there in the conceptualization of Citizen Advocacy, in the way it was taught, and in the Citizen Advocacy literature.

1. Human beings not only are interdependent, but should strive to interdependence. In other words, they should acknowledge such interdependence as both a fact and a desirable characteristic, and not be ashamed of it or make war against it as the modernists are doing in the name of individualism, self- determination, self-advocacy, and "choice." This means that people should be prepared to help each other, give help when it is needed, seek help when they need it themselves, accept help graciously when it is given, and hopefully give it as graciously as they should accept it.

   A corollary to this assumption is that it is very bad for people's moral identity if they cut themselves off from a close walk with needy or suffering people generally, and especially with the lowly people of the world. In fact, some of us go one step further (though this is not needed as an assumption for Citizen Advocacy); namely, some of us have come to believe that people who cut themselves off from a close walk with the lowly will in time suffer a form of moral death, with all sorts of bad derivative consequences.

   Another corollary seems to be that the expressive element in Citizen Advocacy must always be expected to play a major role, because personal interdependence rests at least in part on mutual positive feelings, and helping people whom one does not like is almost impossible to (a) do right, or (b) sustain over the long run.

2. Many people who are afflicted or in the lower societal strata need help – some to merely survive, some to lead a less wretched life, and some to break out of devalued status. A corollary to this point is that if the relevant help is not forthcoming, a lot of people will die, will lead more wretched lives, and/or will never escape devalued social identity.

3. People will differ widely in terms of what help they need, the amount of help that is needed, and its duration.

4. In at least a certain proportion of cases where help is needed for the reasons already mentioned, this help has to come from people who have competencies or resources in which the needy person is lacking.

5. Among the competencies or resources that helpers need is the ability to extract from third parties whatever is needed. Therefore, competencies that will often be relevant are skills of communication and persuasion. Resources of helpers that will often be relevant include a positive image in the eyes of those parties from whom one needs to extract something, because it will often get action that positive images alone would not elicit.

6. While there are all sorts of ways to help people, some situations are such that very special power adheres to a committed one-to-one way of helping.

7. All people – including handicapped people – have some important needs which can only be addressed by or within a freely – given, voluntary relationship, i.e, a relationship in which neither party receives outside motivators or incentives for engaging in the relationship, and especially not payment, because this would denature and degrade the relationship, and reduce, or even nullify, some or all of its potential benefits. Eight needs along these lines are the following.[2]

a. The need for acceptance, affection, and love. If someone is getting paid to " be accepting" and to "act lovingly," then the recipient is apt to question - and rightly so - whether the acceptance and love are for real, or whether they are just a sham that the person is pretending to feel because it is part of the job. For instance, if someone needs a friend, and needs to be convinced that the friend is for real, then it simply will not do to have paid social workers or therapists trying to meet the need. Paid friends are a bit like paid lovers, and we have a nasty word for paid "love."

b. The need for continuity of relationship, and especially in important relationships. While continuity can never be guaranteed, the potential for it is more likely to exist in unpaid relationships than in paid ones, because in paid ones, the very nature of the relationship contract is that the relationship continues only as long as the employer's or payer's mandate and payment continue. When payment ceases, neither party is obligated to continue the relationship. In paid human services, this tends to be exactly what happens: once a service worker is no longer paid to relate to a client, then the server almost always ceases to have contact with the person. The fact that turnover rates in human services today are so very high adds another reason why it is even less likely that paid relationships will have much continuity. Even where a paid worker continues in a specific job slot, the relationship rarely lasts, often because the paid worker gets mandated to do other things instead.

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[2] In other contexts, we elaborate at much greater length on each of the following points.

c. The need for membership in an intimate communality, of which the family is one example. Without this, people can end up very ill-socialized and maladapted for social intercourse. Again, such belongingness takes on a very different when the group of which one is a member is paid to accept one, than when the group takes in the person voluntarily. As long as there is payment, there remains the doubt whether one's place in that group is certain, or whether one would be extruded when payment dries up. Indeed, this is precisely one of the issues that can make it very difficult for foster children to feel secure, and to become well-integrated into foster families, even if they live in such families for many years.

d. The need for security. In part, this need can be addressed by ongoing acceptance and continuity, as covered earlier. It is especially when a person is freely and voluntarily chosen by someone else that the person feels, "I am worthwhile; I am valuable; someone chose me out of everyone else in the world for a friend, spouse, companion, etc." This is an especially crying need for so many devalued people whose life circumstances have usually rendered them deeply insecure about many things: where their next meal is coming from, if they will have shelter for the night, whether they will get moved about and "transferred," whether anyone loves them, etc.

e. The need for a valued social role; including positive valuation by others, respect, prestige, and valued membership in society. As is explained in much greater detail in both teachings and writings on Social Role Valorization (e.g., Wolfensberger, 1992), if a person fills valued roles in society, then the person is apt to be granted the good things in life, Thus, societally devalued people need to have valued roles in life: family member, aunt or uncle, students, worker, home-owner, good neighbour, choir member, club president, athlete, etc. It is true that paid services can foster some valued roles, but there are yet other valued roles that are only valued if they are freely given, and freely supported. The clearest examples are the roles of family member and friend. However, in addition, other people are more willing to extend positive valuation and respect to a person, and therefore must see the person as valuable. If no one wants to be a person's friend, or to otherwise voluntarily spend time with a person, then observers will conclude that the person is not very valuable, and that they too should stay away from the person.

f. The need for competence and mastery. People need to gain competence over their environment, to be able to act effectively, and to accomplish things. Again while many competencies can certainly be learned in paid contexts, yet others cannot, the most clear-cut ones being relationship competencies. For instance, one cannot learn how to be a friend unless one has friends. Paid friend- substitutes may be able to teach one many things, but not how to be a friend, And so it is with any number of relationship competencies, such as the give-and-take of getting along with others, how to relate to people in different roles, some elements of etiquette, how to show affection, how to resolve interpersonal disagreements, etc.

g.   The need for self-respect. One's self-image largely derives form the messages about oneself that one gets from one's environment, including the people in it. If one has experienced much rejection, bed treatment and abuse, then one is apt to come to see oneself as not very valuable, perhaps even as un-lovable. But if other people treat one with respect, and especially, if they freely and voluntarily extend relationship to one, then one is apt to see oneself as someone whom other people enjoy being with, someone who has something to offer to others, someone who deserves to be treated well.

h.   The need to be protected from neglect, abandonment, abuse, and exploitation. Particularly for people who are especially vulnerable to these things, it is important that other people who are competent, and who have value and prestige in society, stand by them, advocate for them, and protect them form the bad things that are very likely to happen to them. At least some of this protection must be freely extended, because any that is paid for is apt to be controlled by the parties that render the payment. This means that if those parties themselves engage in destructive policies or practices, then the paid protectors will be constrained in their ability to advocate for the ill-treated party, because doing so might jeopardize their payment. People who offer such protection and advocacy voluntarily have much less reason to be afraid for their income if they confront any parties, because they are not beholden to these parties for their income.

To jump ahead a bit, we are not implying that all of the many kinds of advocacy should be concerned with meeting these needs, nor that none of the other advocacy or helping forms can address them effectively- but only that those advocacy or other helping forms that are freely-given can do certain things that the paid ones cannot, or can only do in attenuated ways.

8)   The previous point is even more true for deeply wounded people, and above all for people who have built up an expectancy to be rejected because of their previous experiences of rejection, and/or who have a long history of disappointments with paid service functionaries. Therefore, it is people with such wounds who have particularly intense needs for freely-given, unpaid, committed one-to-one relationships.

9)   For many needs of the lowly, it is not sufficient for another person to step in on a one-time basis to address the need, and then step out of the person's life again. Rather, there is often a need for an ongoing, perhaps life-long relationship commitment by the helper to the afflicted person. Indeed, we must assume that for many people, continuity in a relationship freely given to them is of vast-even decisive- importance.

A corollary of this point, and of No.3, is that one cannot (as some people have done) look to Citizen Advocacy as merely a fix to a problem from which one can then walk away. While this may be possible in some instances, there are also people who will need vast amounts of help until the day they die, and one should work toward Citizen Advocacy relationships with them in which the advocate will remain faithfully attached to the protégé at least for as long as

needed. I say "at least" in the sense that in ordinary life, one does not necessarily cut oneself off from all people who do not- or no longer- need one. Hopefully, many persons needed in a certain advocacy role for a certain length of time would-even if the advocacy need vanished- continue their involvement with their former protégé in a different kind of role, perhaps as old friends.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, this is not to deny the importance and the benefits of what in the Citizen Advocacy scheme is called "crisis advocacy" and "crisis advocates." However, the Citizen Advocacy scheme as a whole rests on the assumption that one-time problem-solving is insufficient many ways to address the needs of many impaired and otherwise vulnerable people.

10. The kind of commitment that can be so crucial in so many cases requires that the helper set aside all sorts of his or her self-interests that might get in the way of the commitment. So a t least in respect to what needs to be pursued, the helper's conflicts of interest should be as low as possible; such interests as remain should be of a nature that create the least possible conflict with the interests of the person helped. In at least some cases, this means that a helper has no significant conflicts of interests to start with; in other cases, it could mean that the helper surrenders certain interests that could become sources of conflict.

11. For any conceivable kind of help that might be needed by an individual, there is someone willing to respond. However, by this statement we are not implying that all needs actually will be met by human helpers, only that there is no such thing as a need that no one would ever be willing to address.

12. While not everybody who is willing to be a citizen advocate has the prerequisite competencies, there will always be people who do, and who will respond to the challenge to become citizen advocates.

Both number 11 and 12 are now almost self-evidently true, and yet it was these assumptions that were rejected by so many people when Citizen Advocacy was first proposed in the late 1960s. Even parents of handicapped children often rejected Citizen Advocacy on the grounds that no one but they themselves would ever want to relate to a child who was as bad off as they thought their child was.

13. While there will always be people willing to engage themselves with the lowly and needy, many more people would do so if they were personally (i.e. directly) challenged to do so.

14. More people will engage themselves if they are challenged to do so by people who are comfortable and confident in their role as challengers, and confident that there are people ready to respond to the challenge.

15. More people will respond to a challenge if they are offered the kind of engagement that appeals to them, and for which they are suited.

16. More people will respond to a challenge if they are confident that they will receive support in their engagement when they need it.

17. Relatedly, people are much more likely to endure in a challenging helping role if they are reinforced in it, and if they receive support when they need it. Several of the above assumptions form the rationale for the existence of a staffed Citizen Advocacy office.

18. There will be people who can be called forth into voluntary engagements with the lowly or needy even though they will not be compensated for it, even though their life is apt to be made harder in certain ways for it, and even though they have no prior obligation to the person in need.

19. There will also always be people who, though they are not entering Citizen Advocacy roles themselves, will support Citizen Advocacy in other ways.

20. Citizen Advocacy-even more than most other kinds of advocacy-will be marginalized or even under attack. All over the world, the experience has been that Citizen Advocacy offices are tenuous in their existence and-because of pressures to be something else-in their orthodoxy. All of this is explained in more detail in a monograph under preparation, entitled Safeguarding the Identity Quality and Viability of Citizen Advocacy Enterprises: Volume II of a Series (Wolfensberger, in preparation.)

21. Despite the great difficulties that have always beset Citizen Advocacy, and despite the rise of modernistic values and the increasing decadence of modernistic societies that make the operation of Citizen Advocacy programs increasingly difficult, it is still possible to initiate and operate such programs, and to do so with most gratifying results.

22. Finally, we make the assumption that societies will be better societies if their individual members voluntarily take care of each other in a direct, personal, concrete way, in contrast to either not taking care of the needy at all, or mostly doing it impersonally, indirectly, distantly, involuntarily, or on a paid basis. Of course, this assumption would point to many different measures, of which Citizen Advocacy would only be one. However, improvement or building of community must be clearly seen as a benefit of Citizen Advocacy, rather than as a primary rationale for its existence. Helping individuals in need on a one-to-one (or near one-to-one) basis is the primary rationale of Citizen Advocacy, which should never be made subservient to community-building efforts. There are myriads of other ways to build community, but few alternatives to Citizen Advocacy.

Later (in the workshop) when we explain Citizen Advocacy itself, you will see how all these assumptions play themselves out in it.

One should note that many of the points stated as assumptions could actually be reworked as conclusions drawn on the basis of strong empirical evidence.

In other contexts, we review some of these facts and assumptions in vastly more detail. Indeed, we have days of workshop material on these. Nor do the facts and assumptions that we have briefly reviewed here explain Citizen Advocacy; they merely provide a significant proportion of its conceptual background.

People already in Citizen Advocacy, or thinking of promoting it, really need to think deeply about the facts and assumptions that we have presented, and ask themselves whether they believe them whole-heartedly- and if not, why not. After all, an indifferent attitude toward any of these points, or even an outright rejection of any, is apt to result in the rejection of any number of the important, or even essential, elements of Citizen Advocacy, or of the disciplines of its implementation. It is therefore very important that people who want to "do Citizen Advocacy" or support it bring out to full consciousness, and openly debate, any concern with the posited facts and assumptions.

As I was finalizing this paper, it occurred to me that so many "perversions" of Citizen Advocacy derive from actions of Citizen Advocacy staff (and sometimes board members) that reveal that they do not hold one or several of the above assumptions. For instance, if one does not really believe that people will help each other without compensation, then one is apt to offer advocates some kind of compensation, or even switch to some form of paid advocacy altogether. Similarly, if one doesn't not believe that advocates will stick with an advocacy engagement over time, then one is apt to recruit people only to solve current problems but not to make a commitment to protégé, or one may fail to interpret to advocates the ongoing needs of their protégé. If one does not believe that people will undertake difficult and challenging advocacy tasks, then one is apt to recruit advocates only for those protégés who are easy to identify with and relate to, or whose problems are relatively minor. And so on.

Accordingly, it also occurred to me that a review of the above assumptions might be (a) a good way to screen candidates for Citizen Advocacy office positions, especially those positions most responsible for recruiting, matching, and supporting advocates; (b) a good medium for teaching Citizen Advocacy to staff and board members of Citizen Advocacy offices; and (c) a useful component of the evaluation of Citizen Advocacy programs.