The Paradox of Self-Determination for Marginalized Individuals

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1 Introduction

Self-determination is a Sine Qua Non of human rights. The ability to make choices concerning the development and direction of life should be the right of all human beings; however, the simplicity of this statement does little to embrace the reality in which this seed is planted. While the right to self-determination is insisted upon, debated, regulated, denied, and enforced in international politics, nation rights, states rights, and individual rights, the elements necessary to be self-determined remain less apparent. Self-determination is a complex construct consisting of self-directed behaviors and environmental influences not accessible to all people. It becomes the paradox of those marginalized individuals seeking to be self-determinant by the very act of demanding or choosing, will often be further marginalize and excluded, enclosing them into a never ending cycle of social exile.

The right to make choices is proposed as the cornerstone of self-determination. The extent of what those choices are varies as seen in different definitions concerning self-determination. Stancliffe, Abery, & Smith (2000), present a militaristic and self indulgent definition of self-determination, stating "the degree of control that individuals have over their lives, including areas they value and wish to exert personal control over; in other words, self-determination implies absolute control over what happens to the individual" (p . 432) It is this absolute issue of control over life and death that individuals may use to exert their will on others as they are further removed from the social group. This form of self-determination is often seen in terroristic activities. E. L. Deci (1997), an early author of the psychology of self-determination purposes self-determination and free will are homogeneous constructs, further developing and supporting the relationship of power and right. Webster (1993) addresses within its definition of choice, the environmental conditions of self-determination such as "the power, right or liberty to choose …." (p. 246). In stark contrast to these definitions of self-determination, Serna and Lau-Smith (1995), crafted the following description noted for its lack of introversion and fatalistic decision-making processes:

Self-determination refers to an individual's awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses, the ability to set goals and make choices, to be assertive at appropriate times, and to interact with others in a socially competent manner. A self-determined person is able to make independent decisions based on his or her ability to use resources, which includes collaborating and networking with others. The outcome of a self-determined person is the ability to realize his or her own potential, to become a productive member of a community, and to obtain his or her goals without infringing on the rights, responsibilities, and goals of others. (p. 144)

This definition represents a humanitarian and tolerant concept of self-determination while the former defines self-indulgent, exclusive behaviors and views. While somewhat Pollyanna in

content, this definition does offer a framework from which to discuss successful, not destructive components of self-determination. The humanitarian and tolerant concept of self-determination is self-preserving in nature and offers growth in comparison to the isolation and seclusion of the introverted and exclusive form of self-determination. As discussed in the remainder of this theoretical paper, marginalized individuals will have inherent issues in making choices toward the process of self-determination. The process of marginalization has a funneling effect, resulting in decreased resources and truncated collaborative and networking capacity – hence making options more diluted and limited.

2   Components of Self-determination

The development of an all inclusive construct of self-determination is beyond the scope of this theoretical paper. Rather, it is the intent of this theoretical paper to provide framework of components of self-determination for discussing the issues of marginalization as a possible causal variable in undesirable outcomes of self-determination. As proposed earlier, self-determination appears to have both self-directed components and environmental influences. To begin the discourse, the individual capacity to participate in the decision-making process of self-determination should be supported by what Gerard Egan (2007), describes as social – emotional intelligence. Egan (2007), incorporated within the definition his of social-emotional intelligence components of Goleman's (1998, 1995) construct of emotional intelligence "as a broad set of cognitive and behavioral skills individuals need to live life fully" (p. 9) Farnham (2007), further comments on these behaviors stating: "The ability to regulate one's self and to postpone jumping to conclusions is required to engage in thought prior to action" (p. 4). Recognition is also given to Gardner's (1983) conceptualization of different types of intelligences as described in his book *Frames of mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. Intelligence in this venue is not limited to the traditional pairing of intelligence with IQ rating, rather it is an individual's ability to evaluate a situation and make decisions that allow them to participate fully in their lives. Marginalized individuals are placed in a difficult situation here - not due to their intellectual capabilities, but due more so to limited choices available resulting in narrowing the development of capacity. They can readily articulate their needs and state the problems they face. Where these individuals differ resides with the choices or lack thereof available to them. The ability to problem solve coupled with poor options (and even poorer outcomes) can drive an individual to desperate measures and fatal behaviors.

An equally important component of self-determination is exposure to the critical thinking process. The critical thinking process is taught in formal education; however, this does not preclude its presence in the day to day teachings of everyday life. The ability to process information correctly is an essential component for successful self-determination and necessary for sound decision-making. It is quickly apparent the destructive results when good information is usurped and replaced by political agendas, religious dogma, or the whims of misanthropic leaders. Bad or deceitful information can lead to poor decisions and further marginalization which in turn reduces the connectivity of the marginalized individual – driving them further away. The manipulation of information for self-indulgent reasons can have disastrous consequences. Knowles (2008), points to research originating in the Institute of Psychological Research at the University of Indonesia that collected information on the personality profiles of terrorist, found most had psychologically normal dispositions lead astray and conditioned by leaders who are psychopathic. Thus marginalization creates a 'pocketing effect 'which limits access to education and necessary information, locking the individual in a downward cycle.

The aforementioned components of social – emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and access to good information are of little benefit unless the individual is motivated to carry their decision to fruition. Albert Bandura (1998) writes in *Self Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* that:

Most human motivation is cognitively generated. In cognitive motivation, people motivate themselves and guide their actions anticipatorily through the exercise of forethought. They form beliefs about what they can do, they anticipate likely positive and negative outcomes of different pursuits, and they set goals for themselves and plan courses of action designed to realize valued futures and avoid aversive ones. (p. 122)

The motivation to sustain one self allows for great freedom. It is not difficult to summate the erosion to personal freedom when one does not have the drive to care for their basic needs. At the critical juncture where motivation and poor options meet, manipulative individuals can re-route the motivation of the marginalized person by providing economic incentives to do the manipulative individual's bidding. As the deterrent to this type of manipulation, the motivation of marginalized individuals must be protected by good leaders and advocates.

Finally, the ability to be altruistic is an essential governing aspect of humanitarian self-determination. Altruism is defined by Barker (1995) as "unselfish regard for the well-being of others" (p. 16). Altruistic thought processes allow the individual to see how the impact of their decision resonates – much like the pebble changes the surface of the pond. This is not to say that the well-being of one should be disregarded for the well-being of many; instead, consideration of the interrelatedness of the one with the many must be considered. Oftentimes, marginalized individuals have experienced such horrific insults (assimilation, torture, rape, terrorism and death), altruism is neither developed nor fostered, and decisions are made with little hope for a future or care for others.

3 Environmental Influences of Self-determination

The environmental influences impacting the capacity to be self-determinant proposed for discussion are government structures, economic structures, and cultural structures. First, the rule of land in which an individual resides will have a tremendous weight on the personal freedoms and decision making processes. Authoritarian, rigid and prescriptive governments do not allow for certain personal freedoms. In contrast, free and open societies allow for more experimentation and personal freedoms. In free societies, marginalized persons have more options available for accessing self-determination. These options include laws already in place, judicial systems, and advocates. Next, economics is strongly stressed as an external component of self-determination. An economically strong environment will support many more forms of individual freedoms and a recessed or depleted economic environment will not. The more interpretation and intervention required or allowed by government, the more eroding of self-determination will occur. Within an economically strong environment, the ability to provide for one's needs defends against predatory behavior on macro, mezzo and micro levels of existence. Finally, cultural structures have a great environmental bearing on self-determination. Cultural structures that are authoritarian, rigid, prescriptive, and role bound are not tolerant of individual needs or personal freedoms. Assimilation is a necessary function to maintain the status quo. The hardiness of these highly structured cultures relies on the assuming of roles and the preservation the rules and the ruling class. Within rigid structures Gurr (1993) reports that marginalized people "….. may be at risk of facing cultural oppression, economic deprivation, physical oppression, forced assimilation, and even worst –

genocide" (pp. 34-35). Open and free cultures thrive on a cross pollination of traditions, variety and diversity with a healthy level of tolerance to sustain the collective culture.

The capacity to be self-determinant relies on multiple components both internally and environmentally. In the best of situations, an individual would have the resources, motivation and stable environment to make good decisions. There is a very narrow opportunity for this best case scenario to occur as the world population reaches a staggering 6,670,035,270 people (retrieved April 2008 from http://www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html. As the population increases and the distribution of land, water and resources becomes increasingly competitive Falk (2002) succinctly sums up the difficulty of self determination stating "the claim by one people of a right of self-determination can often be satisfied only by its denial to other people, largely because ethnic and other identities are increasingly intermingled in relation to geographical space" (p. 31). On a global level, the interconnectedness of humanity and our reliance on the limited resources of the earth to survive are largely determined by our approach to self-determination.

4   Promoting self-determination

The exercise of free will and self-determination is a serious situation. For some, the right to be self-determined can simply be the right to live. For others, the right to be self-determined can be so misguided, exclusive and narrow there is a willingness to take their life and the lives of others to subjugate their will. As an integral part of humanity, we do not occupy vacuous space. The resources we consume, the pollution we create and the manner in which we are productive resonate beyond our personal space. Being a good steward means more than recycling and reducing our material consumption – it means being humanitarianly self-determinant. The first step in this process should include an understanding of what it means to be part of the human race. This type of understanding is often called cultural competence. A deeper understanding of others perhaps would give pause in the quest of destructive self-determination. The provision of good information to others – especially as it concerns marginalized individuals would help eliminate the negativity and misinformation that spans the gap of diverse cultures. Cultural competence is often mistaken for cultural acceptance. Cultural competence is defined by Cross (1994) as "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in a cross-cultural situations" (p. 5). Acceptance, on the other hand, is agreement with the behaviors, attitudes and norms of a culture. Often the demand is the acceptance of 'the way things are' as being culturally competent in an effort to bypass the discussions of human rights violations, lack of parity, and subgroup genocide. As is often the case with marginalized individuals, behavior toward these individuals is an accepted aspect of the dominant paradigm – the argument then being one of disrespect and disregard for the dominant culture in an attempt to intervene on behalf of the marginalized individuals. Teaching cultural competence and stressing its delineation from the demands of carte blanche cultural acceptance will promote humanitarian self-determination.

Another powerful mechanism for the promotion of self-determination can be found in the empowerment model as described by Holosko, Leslie, and Cassano (2001). Also, Gutierrez (1994) proposes that "….empowerment involves the processes of increasing personal, interpersonal or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations" (p. 202). The act of networking and collaboration is the fuel that feeds empowerment. This is a particularly difficult juncture for marginalized individuals – their ability to network and collaborate is limited or non-existent. In addition, they may be forced to collaborate and network with the very groups that are responsible for their

marginalization. It is the act of recognizing one's right to voice that will empower the marginalized individual and bring them to action. In some situations, external intervention may be needed to assist with this process. Diplomacy, political pressure, sanction enforcement, external policing and war are some of the measures employed to protect the self-determination of marginalized groups. While empowerment is used to promote self-determination, it is not without a dark side. As discussed earlier, the act of self-determination by one group of individuals may negatively impact another group of individuals. These dualities also exist for the process of empowerment. As one gains in power to improve their situation, the living conditions of others may deteriorate. It is again stressed that empowerment be tempered with humanitarian influences.

5 Conclusion

The processes by which self-determination is achieved are complicated and imbedded in the very fiber of humanity. For some, self-determination is a birth right –easily accessed and never questioned. For others, self-determination does not exist based on the power of others to exclude. There are important individual traits and environmental influences that influence the ability of an individual to be self-determinant. Individual traits of social-emotional intelligence, critical thinking capacity to accurately processing information, the motivation to complete a decision, and the altruism to make a good decision are offered as important building blocks of self-determination. While there are many ways for an individual to insist on the right to self-determination – some of these ways are indulgent and destructive to others while other choices can preserve and improve life. Marginalized individuals are faced with a complexity of issues in their struggle to gain access to the right to choose their way of life. Rights for one group may mean denial to others. Resources gained are also resources taken away. Marginalized individuals may have to collaborate with others who are responsible for their oppression. Marginalized individuals often do not have choices which can corner them into fatalistic behaviors. Mechanism such as empowerment, diplomacy, political pressure, sanction enforcement, external policing and war are some of the measures employed to protect the self-determination of marginalized groups.

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