

Making the Most of Autonomy and Choice

John Armstrong is one of Australia's senior trainers in Social Role Valorisation. He travels extensively both throughout Australia and internationally teaching, consulting and conducting evaluations. He has much contact with families and support workers and gets to see the trends in services that impact powerfully on people's lives.

Ideas for *how* to support people frequently come from our culture. Our culture provides a language about how we should behave and therefore how best to 'support' others in our services.

In recent decades the notion of exercising choice has attained ascendancy over many other long-held and important qualities for citizens to exercise; so much so, 'choice' is frequently thought of as *the* single most important ingredient in a secular and 'progressive' society. Fuelled by consumerism, having or exercising choice is now seen by many people as more important than the quality, content or context of the choice. Foolish choices no longer exist; the illusion of autonomy can easily be met by the action of choosing, irrespective of its impact.

Thus the exaggerated emphasis currently given to choice-making is almost wholly driven by ideology rather than a considered examination of its likely results.

Yet in some respects it should not be surprising that by living in this culture, whether paid and unpaid, supporters of devalued people seem to interpret their role in a similar fashion; to 'provide choices'. This support provides choices to disabled people with little consideration of what it is the person is actually choosing or the likely impact such 'choices' will have on them.

Choice is part of a much larger concept of autonomy. Autonomy is the moment by moment freedom we typically have as adults; to change position, get a drink, take a nap, grab a banana, watch television, get to work on time or visit the bathroom. Autonomy implies the responsible exercise of free will. The degree of autonomy one might exercise depends on the role and context one is in. Some social contexts, for example being a passenger on an aircraft, do not permit a great deal of freedom, but do require a great deal of compliance.

Choice refers to the considered selection of a relatively superior option over another option, having anticipated and compared the likely outcomes of both selections. The process of weighing up the relative merits of predicted outcomes between (at least) two alternatives is challenging enough for most people, and especially so, if a person has a cognitive impairment or limited experience.

When carefully considered, choice consists of several factors that must be acted on together, much like an aircraft that requires the two actions of lift and thrust in order to fly. Each force is dependent on the other; if one fails, so does the other. In the case of choice, opportunity and capacity are the required forces; if either is missing, beneficial outcomes fail to materialise. In some situations a person may lack both an opportunity as well as a capacity to make choices.

Rather than choice being seen as something one has, it is more helpful to think of it as something one develops. The content of a choice is brought into relevant perspective, rather than the fanfare of merely choosing. Plane crashes occur whenever there is a failure of either lift or thrust. What happens when there is a failure of capacity or opportunity?

A lack of autonomous opportunity has pervasive long-term impacts; lack of confidence, fear of the unknown, little knowledge of the broader culture, continued dependency on others, fear of failure and insecurity. In

other words, people become and remain less capable and are likely to be seen as childish, dependent and incompetent. Without opportunity a person cannot develop capacity; the lack of opportunity to be self-determining is simply crushing.

A lack of capacity typically means that people have a hard time perceiving the true nature of the options and accurately predicting the consequences of one selection over another. This can be due to deficient abilities to fully deconstruct events and predict outcomes – something young people may have difficulty with. In other words, the distinction between a cause to its resultant effects is not always fully appreciated, leading to faulty problem-solving and poor judgement. The implication is that people will typically require feedback about the likely impact of their choices given that such choices may have been made on incomplete, unnoticed or distorted information. Supporters who unconditionally promote choice-making under these conditions are also failing to predict and pre-empt the disasters that are likely to happen – perhaps because their ideology surrounding choice leaves them blinded to the above realities.

Opportunity without capacity-building often leads people to do one or a combination of three things: select what they have always chosen; select things that make others happy; or select the last option offered. This can produce an illusion of choice-making that may not only fool many observers, but also keeps people locked into a very narrow range of experience; they are neither having real opportunity to explore new things, nor are they growing in capacity. They and their supporters just live an illusion of 'choice', which becomes a proxy for expressing real autonomy and decision-making in one's life.

Of particular importance to the question of capacity is the person's ability to be responsible for the implications their decisions have for themselves and others – including any negative repercussions. Responsibility is a significant milestone that marks maturity, purpose and self-discipline. It also signals the person's capacity to delay gratification, to make sacrifices and accept one's role in meeting the needs of other people. These things too have to be chosen and speak to the real nature of autonomy as self control and mastery; the capacity to control one's immediate urges so that long-lasting beneficial outcomes can be achieved. Examples of such choices are things like practicing a skill until mastered, to *not* eat something to maintain one's health, to allow others to do things that please them or meet their desire, or to suspend one's own comfort to do things that essentially serve and benefit others.

No wonder when these qualities are missing, that falling for what is in fact an illusion of 'choice' is tantamount to abandoning people and conveniently blaming them for the results they produce, often with the mistaken assumption that the 'consequences will teach them'. There *is* a 'dignity of risk', but there is no dignity in seeing people make mistakes they cannot foresee, nor see any connection to their original decision, destined to repeat the error and not know why these awful events are happening.

An additional perversion is the promotion of assertiveness, often named as empowerment or 'self advocacy'. Such approaches can arouse an adversarial attitude and an obsession about one's own rights and entitlements, which do not encourage people to remain or become openly friendly or unselfish; qualities that are much more endearing to others and encourage one's broader acceptance.

Perverse approaches such as these are likely to create further wounding as well as a lost opportunity for developing real capacity and successful relationships.

Some unintended and unforeseen outcomes of our choices can become detrimental or even life-threatening. Wisdom partly refers to the capacity to foresee consequences well into the future and to take appropriate pre-emptive action. Success, in its many forms, results from such foresight and the ability to shape one's own actions accordingly. Cultures have typically admired individuals with such capacity. Today our culture is

captivated and amused by the lack of wisdom expressed by certain celebrities which sometimes inflicts inevitable misfortune, even catastrophe.

Clearly, mastery of the self and self-restraint result when wisdom is combined with good conduct. Without concerted efforts to assist people obtain such mastery, many devalued people will end up simply 'dying with their rights on' because they have been given the opportunity without the investment in capacity. Such neglectful approaches – when 'supporters' fail to respond to the impending calamity and misery which poor decision-making creates in people's lives – are a true expression of devaluation.

In contrast, true independence is the mature exercise of responsibility; real love and concern is shown in the willingness to assist people see things they may not realise are there. Duty of care is a useful construct for thinking how an average person might respond to a given situation; it fundamentally suggests an ordinary requirement to act with good intention towards those in one's care. We all know that some people are not very experienced and require assistance to get through the complexity of ordinary and sometimes daily life decisions. Let us be equally as clear about our 'duty of care' to ensure that the people we support receive from us the same type of opportunity and investment in capacity to make good choices and decisions.