

Understandings of Empowerment: Little clarity but good intent

Greg Mackay has had significant involvement in disability issues for over thirty years in a range of roles. He is currently Chair of the Brisbane SRV Group, called Values Action Assoc. Inc., and is a PhD student at the University of Qld. He has worked in the government and non-Government sector. Since writing this article he has taken up the position of Director, Centre for Social Justice, UnitingCare Queensland. Greg explores how the concepts of autonomy, empowerment and self-determination have emerged, and some of the problems associated with these concepts.

It could easily be said that each person wants and needs to be part of the social world. This need is something that people with disabilities have had to continuously strive for using their individual and collective energy. Numerous concepts are used, often confusingly, to describe this struggle: empowerment, autonomy, independence, interdependence, choice, rights, self-determination, self-governance, human agency. This article explores a little of the history and beliefs of several of the concepts at the heart of the struggle.

For a long time people with disabilities have been seen as 'other', as people apart. Furthermore some individuals came to be seen not merely as people apart but as non-people. Such beliefs led inexorably to people being set apart from others within society. From the mid 1800s, these beliefs gave rise to the establishment of institutions. Such initiatives, along with latter efforts to improve service delivery, have been shrouded in a cloak of good intention since that time.

By the 1970s the Community Living Movement had arrived. Largely fashioned from the theory of Normalisation, it was used to show how institutional responses reduced people's dignity and cut people's connections with ordinary society. The notion of inclusion arose in the following two decades. This included a rejection of support arrangements that saw people with disabilities preparing for work and community living, but rarely actually gaining real employment or belonging to community. Importantly it was out of this period that citizen advocacy and self-advocacy arose: self-advocacy for those who could speak for themselves; and citizen advocacy that was targeted at the most vulnerable citizens who were not, at least not fully able, to speak for themselves.

In the 1990s social movements variously known as the community living movement, the independent living movement, disability rights, and self-advocacy all contributed to the rise of concepts of self-determination. Self-determination is said to consist of five principles. The first principle is 'freedom', including deciding where and with whom to live, how to earn money, deciding on relationships, and so on. The second principle is 'authority', including a person having control of his or her own funding. The third principle is 'support' through the unique arrangement of resources by and for the person. The fourth principle is 'responsibility', for example the use of resources wisely and in a cost effective manner. Finally the fifth principle is 'confirmation' whereby individuals must be part of public policy changes to support self-determination.

Along with self-determination there arose ideologies of consumer direction, autonomy and empowerment. All of these generally work towards changes in the design of human service systems, and have an influence on how people with disabilities are perceived.. All then, have a part to play in creating better lives with, and for, people with disabilities. However, problematic interpretations and odd notions accompany each of these concepts and can confound the very best efforts of all involved. Two concerns are outlined here: firstly, dependence versus independence; and secondly, individualism and choice.

A person's desire for a say in his or her own life is often narrowly framed according to the dichotomy of dependence-independence. It is common to talk of people being dependent on services, family, or friends. It is also common to hear of a person striving for independence from those same services, from family, and even from friends. Unfortunately this way of talking emphasises one-dimensional, dichotomous thinking which can be limiting and unhelpful.

Additionally, notions of 'dependence' and of 'independence' tend to be used and understood as absolutes. For example, a person is seen as being either dependent or as independent, although it takes just a few moments thinking to realise just how dependent each of us is on others for so many things. In the extreme it would be nonsensical for any of us to claim to be truly independent in the absolute meaning of the word. We all rely on others to varying extents to meet our needs, from our emotional needs through to practical matters such as the production and distribution of food. Between these two extremes of dependence and independence lies the more constructive notion of 'interdependence'. Without cooperating and relating with others we are less able to do many things; we are less able to be. Interdependence is the human condition.

How then does interdependence inform self-determination, consumer direction, autonomy, and empowerment? This requires recognition that in being autonomous and in choosing our own lifestyles, we rely on others for various forms of assistance, but we are also principally able to exercise our own direction, with minimal constraint by others. This is true for all of us; interdependence should not be one thing for the general population and another, more restrictive matter, for people with disabilities.

The second concept that can confound the very best efforts of anyone is that of 'individualism' and 'choice'. Clearly modern day perversions of individualism that lead too easily to unfettered choice have been fostered by the notion of consumerism. Our society currently places high value on the achievement of individual interests; 'choice' is idolised as a yardstick for freedom and control over one's life. Therefore it is not surprising that we frequently hear of people with cognitive impairments making a 'choice', sanctioned by others, to do something that is not in their best interests and may even be life-threatening. Clearly people grow as people when they have autonomy; one learns, becomes more competent, can enjoy more of the world, is given more positive regard, and is better able to relate to and with others. But autonomy without thought of others, choice beyond a level of safety, these do not present opportunities for human growth, for self-actualisation. The autonomy to choose is situated within the context, the setting and the relationships that define our being. The parameters of what may be chosen are determined by the context in which the person finds him or herself, and thus are largely defined by their context.

Regardless of the terms empowerment, autonomy, and self-determination having many values, beliefs and nuances inherent in them, they do share one important foundation. They all reveal a sense of individual people striving to have, at the very least, as much say over their own lives as does anyone else in society; they are about individual people wanting and needing to be part of their social world.