

Self-Determination Requires Social Capital, Not Just Skills and Knowledge

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Abstract: Curricula and programs designed to support students with disabilities to gain greater self-determination are typically rooted in individualistic values stressing independence and self-reliance. However, it can be cogently argued that the collectivistic value of interdependence is actually essential for self-determination in all cultures because interdependent social relationships yield the social capital that most people need to achieve their self-determined goals. Interdependent relationships should therefore be given greater weight and attention in self-determination theory and practice.

Key Words: social capital, individualism, collectivism

Editor’s Note: This article was anonymously peer reviewed.

Introduction

“The reason some of us are self-determined is that we are in interpersonal and social structural relationships that empower us” (Sprague & Hayes, 2000, p. 681).

Self-determination has emerged as a major focus of interest in disability-related fields, as reflected in numerous journal articles and conference presentations on the topic and in the many self-determination programs and curricula developed for students with disabilities (Browder, Wood, Test, Karvonen, & Algozzine, 2001). These initiatives generally have a narrow focus on specific aspects of self-determination theory or practice, which in turn are typically rooted in the values and assumptions of Western individualism. The aim of this article is to promote a broader understanding of self-determination by examining it from a cross-cultural perspective.

The results of cross-cultural research on a wide range of topics are frequently analyzed in terms of the individualistic-collectivistic continuum of values. The individualistic worldview is commonly presented as deeming people to be discrete entities who, as they transition to adulthood, should move from dependence to independence and self-reliance. In contrast, the collectivistic worldview considers people to be woven into the fabric of groups (e.g, family, village, tribe), and as they transition to adulthood they should move from dependence to interdependence. Individualism is often described as stressing individual rights, pursuing personal interests, setting and achieving personal goals, and being true to one’s own values and beliefs, and collectivism as stressing obligations that go along with one’s group roles, being an interdependent member of a group, working with others to achieve group success, and adhering to the group’s traditional values (Triandis, 1995; Yamauchi, 1998).

The concept of self-determination is a product of Western thought, so it naturally has an individualistic flavor that directs attention to the personal characteristics of individuals and away from the possible influences of their social contexts and relationships. This individualistic orientation is clearly reflected in this synthesis of common themes found across numerous

definitions in the special education literature by Field, Martin, Miller, Ward and Wehmeyer (1998):

“Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults.” (p. 2)

However, this perspective seems to overlook the essential importance of interdependent social relationships that potentially yield *social capital*, defined by Kanazawa and Savage (2009) as follows:

“*Capital* is any resource that helps individuals produce or achieve some goal. *Social capital* inheres in relationships between individuals, just as *physical capital* inheres in physical objects and *human capital* inheres in humans. Thus social capital is any resource that inheres in relationships between individuals that helps them produce or achieve some goal” (p. 873).

This definition’s focus on goals is congruent with standard conceptions of self-determination, which typically highlight goal setting and striving as prototypical self-determined activities. A substantial body of research confirms that people who are strongly socially connected are indeed more likely to achieve their goals and be “housed, healthy, hired and happy” than those who are not (Woolcock, 2001, p. 12). Practices that support people with disabilities to expand their social networks – such as person-centered planning that creates “circles of friends” or “circles of support” – are increasingly recognized as effective ways to build social capital that in turn fosters both greater self-determination and improved quality of life (Condeluci, Ledbetter, Ortman, Fromknecht, & DeFries, 2008).

I was led to delve into various literatures touching on self-determination as a result of my involvement in a research project on cultural influences on self-determination funded by the US Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs for the period 2002-2006. Our grant application made the case that because virtually all efforts to promote self-determination are guided by individualistic values, these efforts may not be as relevant or effective as they could be for people with disabilities from collectivistic cultural backgrounds (Bui & Turnbull, 2003; Greene & Nefsky, 1999; Leake & Black, 2005a, 2005b; Luft, 2001; Trainor, 2005; Wilder, Ashbaker, Obiakor, & Rotz, 2006). This is a matter of concern for many educators and service providers because people of ethnic/racial minority heritage, many of whom have collectivistic cultural backgrounds, are an increasing proportion of populations throughout the West. In the US, for example, people of ethnic/racial minority heritage are projected to increase from about a third of the population to over half by 2050 (US Census Bureau, 2008).

Our primary data source was 20 focus groups conducted in Hawaii and Washington, DC with a total of 121 participants, 32.2% of whom were Caucasian and 67.8% of whom were of ethnic/racial minority heritage, representing all the major categories used by the US Census Bureau (Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander). Groups consisted of youth with

emotional/behavioral disorders (55 participants), parents of such youth (39 participants), or special educators with experience teaching such youth (27 participants). As described by Leake and Boone (2007), a variety of cultural themes relevant to self-determination emerged in analysis of focus group transcripts, and these themes were generally understandable in terms of the contrast between individualistic and collectivistic values. For example, it was found that decision-making about further education in ethnic/racial minority families with traditional orientations is often parent-driven with youth giving priority to supporting their families, while in mainstream White families decision-making tends to be more in the hands of youth who are encouraged to follow their own dreams.

Interdependence and Self-Determination

If Westerners honestly consider the factors that have allowed them to choose and strive for their presumably self-determined goals, they will almost certainly conclude that other people in their lives have provided essential supports. This is in fact widely recognized, as reflected in the standard practice of people who receive awards or set athletic records acknowledging the contributions of their friends, relatives, teammates, and other supporters. Significantly, there is evidence that when Westerners remember or describe their experiences, they might well acknowledge the critical role of help from others while still considering themselves as meeting the individualistic ideal of being independent and self-sufficient. For example, White and Groves (1997) interviewed 80 elderly individuals in Queensland, Australia and found that they typically explained that they relied on helping networks in order to maintain their treasured independent lifestyles. These authors note that:

“...what has begun to emerge in the research literature is that successful interdependent relationships (with family, friends, neighbours and the local community) tend to respect and reinforce independence as a cherished component of an older person’s self-image. According to Linder-Pelz (1991), the ideal image of the aged should be of healthy independence, supported by family, friends and community – in essence, interdependence” (p. 85).

An important theme that emerged in this qualitative research was that of reciprocity: the elderly interviewees indicated that they did not consider themselves to be dependent (a particularly dreaded state from an individualistic perspective) as long as they could reciprocate in some way when receiving needed help from others. Based on this and other research, White and Groves (1997) conclude that “where assistance is mediated and perceived as being given within a reciprocal relationship or agreement, the perceived level of dependency is reduced and an increased sense of personal self-determination and perceived independence is reported” (p. 88).

The individualistic values and sense of being independent units typical of Westerners are likely to bias their understandings of social processes in particular ways. For example, research indicates that Westerners are more susceptible than people raised in collectivistic cultures to the “self-enhancement bias”, which is the highlighting of personal factors (such as intelligence, creativity, talent, or effort) when explaining success while downplaying supports from the social environment (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). The revealing findings of research conducted by Groyberg, Lee, and colleagues (Groyberg, Lee, & Nanda, 2008; Groyberg, Lee, & Abrahams, 2009) puncture what they call “the myth of the lone star”. They

followed 1,053 highly ranked financial analysts over a period of nine years in New York City, and found that they almost always suffered a decrease in performance if they were hired away by other firms, and the overall performance of the recruiting firms tended to suffer as well. A primary reason for such outcomes was found to be that moving analysts left behind crucial supportive relationships with fellow workers. They typically required at least two years to establish well-functioning teams at their new workplaces, although most never managed to regain their previous performance levels that had made them “stars”.

The point that individuals depend on social capital to succeed in their endeavors is encapsulated in the convoy model of social relationships with respect to the life course (Carstensen, 1992). According to this model, developed by Kahn and Antonucci (1980), people tend to move through life with a relatively stable “convoy” of friends and relatives who provide each other with emotional and instrumental supports, a sense of group and personal identity, and a comforting feeling of continuity.

The concept of social capital links the disparate messages above about the elderly in Australia, financial analysts in New York City, and “convoys” of friends and relatives. As indicated by Kanazawa and Savage’s (2009) definition quoted in the introductory section, social capital is a product of social relationships and is needed by people to achieve most of their individual or group goals. For example, research indicates that between 40-70% of employees in the general population find their jobs through social contacts (Parris & Granger, 2008). Potts (2005) argues that social capital is even more important for job seekers with disabilities, who are more likely to need mentoring and other supports in finding suitable jobs and maintaining employment. Parris and Granger (2008) therefore recommend that in addition to the usual focus on building vocational skills during the transition-to-adulthood phase, “focus must also be given to relationship building skills, as well as encouraging relationships formed between students with disabilities and community members” (p. 168).

Implications for Self-determination Theory

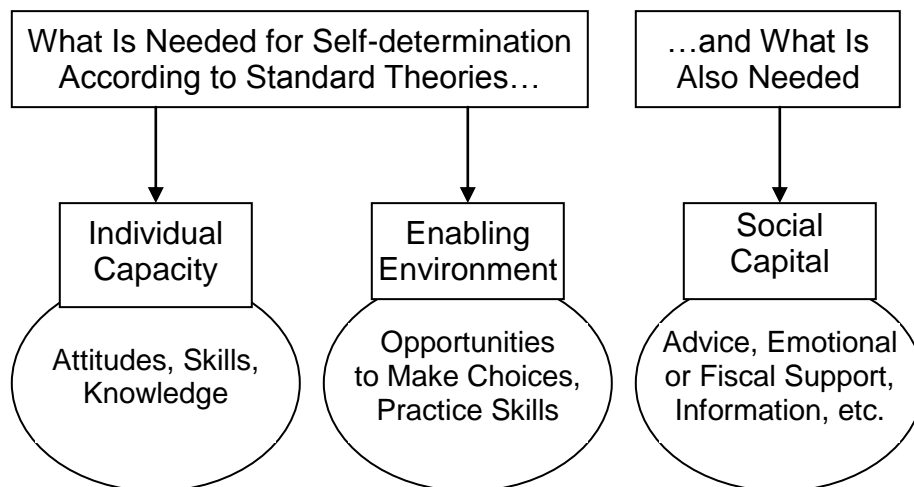
One message that clearly emerges from the above discussion is that *interdependence* is an essential concept that should be addressed in a comprehensive theory of self-determination. In this regard, Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory does posit “relatedness” as one of three universal needs that must be met for people to experience self-determination. However, they do not explicitly connect relatedness with either interdependence or the social capital produced by having positive social relationships. Rather, they view such relationships as important for self-determination because they promote psychological well-being and a secure emotional base from which people naturally develop intrinsic motivation.

Three other theories of self-determination (all with a disability focus) are presented in Wehmeyer, Abery, Mithaug and Stancliffe (2003), and to varying degrees each theory also recognizes the salience of interdependence. However, it appears that these theories touch on interdependence in order to address a conceptual problem that often arises when self-determination is promoted for people with intellectual and other significant disabilities. Self-determination from an individualistic perspective tends to be equated with independent decision-making and action, but people with intellectual disabilities, for example, tend to lack the capacity to act independently with regard to many important life choices. Self-determination thus needs to

be theoretically recast as a process in which people with significant disabilities take an active role but also rely on and heed the advice and judgments of people they know and trust, just as adults without disabilities may entrust their retirement savings to presumed financial experts. For people with intellectual disabilities, “shared or collaborative decision-making” represents an alternative interdependent avenue to self-determination (Abery & Stancliffe, 2003, p. 45).

Although the self-determination theories referenced above acknowledge relatedness and interdependence, they do not seem to take the next step of explicitly recognizing that all of us, with and without disabilities, require the social capital produced by interdependent social relationships for our self-determination. Abery and Stancliffe (2003) do begin to approach this conclusion in noting that “social skills” contribute to self-determination by promoting supportive social relationships and allowing greater independence in the community, but they give no greater weight to social skills than the other seven skills they deem to be essential self-determination competencies. By contrast, Sprague and Hayes (2000) perceptively argue that self-determination and the closely related concept of empowerment are too often conceived as composed of traits (such as specific skills) of autonomous individuals rather than as properties emerging from relationships. Indeed, all the self-determination theories I have come across in the disability literature specify sets of traits or capacities that should be targeted for training in order to foster self-determination, and also state that an enabling social environment is required. However, the case I have been making indicates that a third component, namely social capital, is essential (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Standard theories of self-determination identify individual capacity and an enabling social environment as key ingredients but neglect the importance of interdependent social relationships.



Implications for Self-Determination Practice

Theory, practice, and research guide and inform each other as they shift over time. The current state of self-determination practice is to a large extent an outcome of the US Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services's self-determination initiative launched in 1988. This initiative funded projects around the United States that sought to identify the component parts of self-determination and to develop and test ways to teach and support people with disabilities to gain those components. No one can doubt that this investment in self-determination has yielded returns many times over. There has been a flowering of self-determination curricula and programs that have touched a great many people with disabilities of all ages, which in turn has helped raised awareness of self-determination not only in the US but in countries around the world (Ward & Kohler, 1996).

However, these curricula and programs have sometimes been critiqued for their narrow focus on teaching specific skills – a focus that is to be expected given that they are designed for use in schools and other institutions with training missions. Virtually all curricula and programs seek to meet modern teaching standards by breaking “self-determination” down into its presumed skill and knowledge components and using formal assessments to track student progress (Turnbull et al., 1996). According to Mithaug (1996), this approach may not be effective for many students because “the perceptions, knowledge, and abilities comprising the process of self-determination are not easily deconstructed or task-analyzed, taught separately, and then reconstructed into the functional process of self-determination” (p. 150). Turnbull et al. (1996) criticize this “unidimensional emphasis on individual skills” for its lack of attention to addressing environmental barriers and collectivistic values like interdependence. In line with the individualistic ideal of people as independent and self-sufficient, the overall orientation is to give people the necessary skills and knowledge, after which they are more or less set loose to function as best they can, hopefully in an independent and self-sufficient way.

The limitations of the skills training approach are particularly evident if we seek practices that can meet the theoretical proposition that social capital is essential for self-determination. The general neglect of social relationships is reflected in research on effective self-determination practices in special education by Karvonen, Test, Wood, Browder, and Algozzine (2004). They conducted literature reviews, meta-analyses, and site visits to model programs that use “promising practices”. The strategies common to each of the model programs were found to include: (1) curricula to teach self-determination skills; (2) teaching and coaching students to increase their involvement in developing their own individualized education plans; and (3) noninstructional practices, such as discussing with students the pros and cons of their different choice options. However, none of the programs is described as having a focus on social relationship building.

For students with disabilities who have difficulty developing and maintaining social relationships, the natural response from the standard skills training perspective is training in social skills. Unfortunately, most meta-analyses of the relevant research indicate that such training for students with disabilities tends to generate only small gains, if any, in social skills that generalize to real-world settings (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Quinn, Kavale, Mathur, Rutherford, & Forness, 1999), although a recent meta-analysis did find more positive results (Cook et al., 2008). In addition, social skills training might be critiqued on the same basis that vocational skills training in segregated settings for people with significant disabilities often has been: their progress in mastering skills may be so incremental, and unlikely to generalize to real-

world settings, that they may never be judged ready for competitive employment, so supported employment is a more appropriate intervention (e.g., Wehman & Moon, 1988). Similarly, social skills training for many individuals may not lead to enhanced social relationships, so interventions that might be termed “supported friendships” might be more effective.

The idea of “supported friendships” is inherent in the well-established practice of person-centered planning that was developed particularly for people with intellectual and other significant disabilities. In this approach, friends, relatives, advocates, and service providers are brought together to support them to identify and achieve their own goals and to “be there” for them over the long term by creating committed “circles of friends” or “circles of support” (Cotton et al., 1992; Mount, 1997; Rainforth, York, & Macdonald, 1997). Person-centered planning is typically used with people with significant disabilities of adolescent age and older, but the same principles appear applicable for those with less serious disabilities and of younger age.

A notable development for practice is the promotion of the concept of social capital itself as a way to substantially improve services for people with significant disabilities (Bates & Davis, 2004; Cocks, 2007; Schalock, Verdugo, Bonham, Fantova, & Van Loon, 2008; Whitley & McKenzie, 2005). A relatively recent special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* was devoted to social capital, with guest editors Condelluci et al. (2008) asserting that social capital has the potential to “re-invent rehabilitation”, making this “one of the most important issues of the Journal” published to date (p. 139). Several of the articles describe how particular organizations have revamped their policies and practices to ensure a consistent focus on building social capital for those they serve, both by fostering relationships with other people in the community and by promoting greater social inclusion of all people with disabilities (Flaherty, 2008; Parris & Granger, 2008; Zimmerman, 2008). Schools and other public and private agencies should likewise consider making the building of social capital a guiding value.

Implications for Self-Determination Research

Condelluci et al. (2008) also note: “It is amazing that, as of this writing, there has been no major study or effort, either at the university or foundation level, that has scientifically studied social capital and disability” (p. 137). An initiative to fund and coordinate research on social capital seems to be called for, as a next step building on the research base developed for self-determination. In this regard it appears that rich sources of potential data are being created by relatives, friends, self-advocates, and professionals who recognize that the social networks of many people with disabilities are constrained by stigmatization and social exclusion. They are responding with countless informal and formal efforts to promote the social acceptance and inclusion of people with disabilities by organizing, for example, anti-stigma campaigns and inclusive sports leagues, clubs, proms, and summer camps. These efforts are described in the newsletters and websites of numerous disability-related organizations and increasingly in the broader media, as compiled for example in the Council for Exceptional Children’s daily on-line newsletter, *CEC SmartBrief* (<http://www.smartbrief.com/news/cec/>). Research is needed to identify the specific attributes of such initiatives that might be effective in increasing the scope and quality of social networks, and in turn to examine whether enhanced social networks in fact lead to greater self-determination, which is the underlying hypothesis of this article.

David Leake obtained both a PhD in anthropology and a Masters of Public Health at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, where he has worked with the Center on Disability Studies for over 20 years. He currently directs a federally-funded project demonstrating how youth with serious emotional/behavioral disorders can be empowered to envision and achieve their desired futures.

Author's Note: Funding was provided through Grant No. H324D020060 from the US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the US Department of Education, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

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