

Joe Devine, Laura Camfield, and Ian Gough Autonomy or dependence – or both?: perspectives from Bangladesh

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**ESRC Research Group on
Wellbeing in Developing Countries**

WeD Working Paper 13

**AUTONOMY OR DEPENDENCE – OR BOTH?
PERSPECTIVES FROM BANGLADESH**

Joe Devine, Laura Camfield, and Ian Gough

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WeD - Wellbeing in Developing Countries ESRC Research Group

WeD is a multidisciplinary research group funded by the ESRC, dedicated to the study of poverty, inequality and the quality of life in poor countries. The research group is based at the University of Bath and draws on the knowledge and expertise from three different departments (Economics and International Development, Social and Policy Sciences and Psychology) as well as an extensive network of overseas contacts and specific partnerships with institutes in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand. The purpose of the research programme is to develop conceptual and methodological tools for investigating and understanding the social and cultural construction of well-being in specific countries.

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SUMMARY

The idea of personal autonomy is central to many accounts of eudaimonic well-being. Yet it is often criticised as a Western concept celebrating individualism and independence over group obligations and interdependence or dependence. This paper rejects this view and argues that coherent accounts of autonomy must always recognize the interdependence of people in groups, and that autonomy can coexist with substantial relationships of dependence. It illustrates this drawing on evidence from Bangladesh, a poor country usually absent from cross-cultural studies and one where personal relationships of hierarchy and dependence are endemic. Argument and evidence is presented showing the coexistence of personal autonomy and dependence, and the relationship between collective action and autonomy. We also address some of the specific problems encountered in researching autonomy in a social context where it is mainly expressed in relational forms. We conclude that autonomy can be directed toward both personal and social goals, and can be enacted individually, or by participation in groups. Autonomy is a universal psychological need but its expression is always contextual.

Key Words: - Autonomy, relationships, Bangladesh, eudaimonic wellbeing, individualism and collectivism.

Key Readings:- Doyal, L. and Gough, I. 1991, *A Theory of Human Need* (MacMillan, Basingstoke).

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The notion of autonomy features in many philosophical conceptions of well-being, though it goes under different names. Finnis (1980) includes 'practical reason' or 'authentic self-direction' as a basic human value; for Griffin (1996) 'agency' is a core prudential value; for Nussbaum (2000) 'practical reason' is a central human functioning capability; for Sen (2002) 'process freedom' is of equal importance to outcomes in evaluating well-being; for Doyal and Gough (1991) 'autonomy' is a basic human need, a universal precondition for any individual action in any culture.¹

Autonomy is also central to those psychologists exploring eudaimonic conceptions of well-being, the subject of this Special Issue. Ryff (1989), providing a 'parsimonious summary' of the stream of writers on psychological well-being, contends that the notion of positive well-being comprises six dimensions, including 'autonomy', and the related notions of 'environmental mastery' and 'self-actualization'. Ryan and Deci (2000, 2001) go further and firmly distinguish eudaimonic well-being from hedonic well-being, the former comprising notions of meaningfulness and self-realization. Three universal psychological needs are identified for such psychological growth and integrity, one of which is autonomy - the evolved propensity to self-regulate one's actions, a propensity that is experientially associated with feeling integrated and acting with intention. One crucial feature of the distinction between eudaimonic and hedonic well-being is that 'from the eudaimonic perspective, subjective happiness cannot be equated with well-being' (Ryan and Deci, 2001, p.146). This parallels the arguments in Doyal and Gough and other writers on autonomy: to say that autonomy is a basic need, or a basic human value, or a basic psychological need is to say that human well-being cannot be entirely captured by notions of happiness, life satisfaction, or subjective well-being. It implies that a person can be happy but experience low levels of autonomy, and conversely that a highly autonomous person can be anxious, troubled, dissatisfied, unhappy. In order to better understand this interaction, the nature of autonomy must be explored and clarified and, just as important, its extent operationalised and measured.

One powerful challenge to its status comes from writers who argue that it is a Western concept with little applicability to the lives of people across much

¹ Alkire (2002, chapter 2) supplies an exhaustive account and insightful interpretation of Finnis, Griffin, Sen, and other philosophical writers on well-being).

of the world. The fact that all of the above approaches derive from Western intellectual traditions underpins challenges that question its coherence and suitability as a concept for understanding well-being in developing countries. It is claimed *inter alia* that the notion fails to capture the cultural specificity of these settings and rests on an assumption about independent man (sic) that sits awkwardly with the reality of life in many societies (Christopher, 1999). In particular, more collectivist societies and cultures are claimed to value interdependence or even dependence and pursue group obligations rather than individual autonomy (Diener and Suh, 2000; Rozin, 1999; Uchida et al., 2004).

The purpose of this article is to address this issue and to set these arguments alongside evidence from Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world². It draws on research ideas and findings from the ESRC Research Group on *Well-being in Developing Countries (WeD)* at the University of Bath, and is the outcome of an ongoing debate within the group³. We draw mainly on primary data collected for the Quality of Life (QoL) component of the WeD research. This is supplemented with secondary data and analysis that have emerged from ongoing research into a collective action group in Bangladesh (Devine 2002, 2004). The QoL component entailed three distinct phases. In the first phase, the primary aim was to identify key categories and components of quality of life for different individuals in different locations. The second phase was conceptual in nature and sought to reflect on the findings of the first phase. In the third phase, a specific measure of QoL was developed by WeD researchers and applied in all the research sites⁴.

During the first phase of the QoL work in Bangladesh, a variety of research tools were deployed including semi-structured interviews (n = 73), focus

² The choice of a South Asian country like Bangladesh is interesting in its own right as the majority of comparative studies on autonomy are between the USA, and the supposedly collectivist societies of Japan, Hong Kong, China, or Korea (Oyserman et al 2002, Uchida et al 2004).

³ See www.welldev.org.uk for more details of the Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) research program.

⁴ WeD carries out research in four countries: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand. While different countries adopted different methods in of exploring and defining quality of life (QoL), the QoL instrument developed from this data was administered in all the sites.

group discussion (n = 240), the Person Generated Index (n = 42) (Ruta et al, 2004), and a Global Happiness Question (n = 73). The research for phase one took place over a period of one year (January to December 2004) and was developed in iteration with findings emerging from other aspects of the overall WeD research program⁵. The main criteria used to select respondents and participants for the QoL research were gender, age, rural and urban residence, religious affiliation, and economic differences. The data used specifically in this article relate to two broad areas of enquiry of the first phase:

- An exploration of the goals, values, motivations, and future aspirations of young urban Bangladeshi women (Choudhury, 2006), supplemented by responses to the semi-structured interview schedule by a sample of urban Bangladeshi women aged 20 to 65.
- People's responses to interview and focus group questions about characteristics of households and individuals living well or living badly; individual experiences of happiness and unhappiness; individual hopes and fears; and finally, people's views on what constitutes an ideal village or community (Camfield et al., 2006).

The article proceeds in the following stages. First, the opposition between autonomy and interdependence is set out, focusing on theories of universal basic needs as well as critiques and alternative propositions derived mainly from literature on South Asia. The next three sections develop the counter-argument, supported with evidence from prior studies and from our fieldwork in Bangladesh. Section two develops our central argument that the antinomy between autonomy and interdependence is a false one. Drawing on approaches to basic needs and psychological needs, and on arguments and evidence from South Asia, we develop the idea that autonomy can only be realised through interdependence, and show that people can value both autonomy and dependence. The third section argues that an environmentally contextual notion of autonomy requires, and is best

⁵WeD research involves a number of survey type instruments as well as more process-orientated work. During the initial phase of the QoL research, researchers were also consolidating community profiles for each of the research sites, administering a Resources and Needs Questionnaire, and collecting data through observation and other participatory techniques. One of the characteristics of the WeD program is that the research components are not treated as stand-alone projects, but are considered interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

evaluated across, different domains of life. In the fourth section we consider the role of collective action in enhancing the autonomy of individuals. The final section concludes by confirming that autonomy is a universal goal, but is to be conceived and appraised as multiple situated autonomies. In poor, collectivist societies such as Bangladesh it is frequently expressed and achieved through significant horizontal and vertical relationships. The need is to move beyond the sterile autonomy-interdependence opposition to explore the choice of alternative goals and of intentional actions to achieve them within specific contexts.

Autonomy, Interdependence, and Needs

We begin with the analysis of autonomy presented by one of us in *A Theory of Human Need* (Doyal and Gough 1991, henceforth THN). At the most basic level, autonomy (deriving from the Greek 'self' + 'rule') refers to "the ability to make informed choices about what should be done and how to go about doing it. This entails being able to formulate aims and beliefs about how to achieve them, along with the ability to evaluate the success of those beliefs in the light of empirical evidence" (THN, p. 53). This minimal level of autonomy is labelled 'autonomy of agency'. It begins to develop within children at an early age and is possessed to some degree by all humans.

THN (p. 63) goes on to present a more detailed list of components. Generally speaking, the existence of even minimal levels of autonomy will entail the following:

- a) that actors have the intellectual capacity to formulate aims and beliefs common to their form of life;
- b) that actors have enough confidence to want to act and thus to participate in some form of social life;
- c) that actors actually do act by seeking to achieve their aims and beliefs ;
- d) that actors perceive their actions as having been done by them and not by someone else;
- e) that actors are able to understand the empirical constraints on the success of their actions;
- f) that actors are capable of taking responsibility for what they do.

THN also argues that autonomy of agency will be impaired if three conditions pertain: firstly, if people lack sufficient understanding of their

culture and its expectations; secondly, if they lack the psychological capacity to formulate opinions, as in the case of severe mental illness; and thirdly, if their opportunities to participate in significant social activities are blocked. At this abstract level everyone, except those in long-term coma and with advanced degenerative conditions such as Alzheimer's, possess some degree of autonomy. But differences of degree can be established according to how far these six characteristics are present and how far the three preconditions are absent. This account is broadly in line with other accounts of autonomy in the philosophical and related literatures, such as those listed above. For example, Sen (2002) defines agency as the ability of persons to act on behalf of goals that matter to them (see Robeyns 2003).

However, THN goes on to recognize a higher-order level of autonomy, labelled *critical autonomy*. "Critical autonomy entails the capacity to compare cultural rules, to reflect upon the rules of one's own culture, to work with others to change them and, *in extremis*, to move to another culture" (THN, p. 187). Compared with autonomy of agency, critical autonomy entails some questioning of normally taken-for-granted rules, habits and practices – a person's habitus, in Bourdieu's terms (1977). This draws on Dworkin, who distinguishes between autonomy as "a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires, wishes, and so forth" and "the capacity to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values" (Dworkin, 1988, p. 20).⁶

Such concepts of autonomy have been described as encapsulating a dominant Western conception of 'the person' (Geertz, 1984), as a product of Western individualism (Markus and Kitayama, 1991), and as inscribing a Western normative conception of the good (Christopher, 1999). According to some scholars these biases limit the applicability of the notion of autonomy to other cultures. This is especially so in South Asia where hierarchical and collectivist values appear to be stronger, and where 'adherence to controlling pressures' is associated with greater satisfaction

⁶ THN's distinction between autonomy of agency, which is often 'critical', and critical autonomy proper, which requires political freedom, now seems too static. Empowerment often comes through struggle and the process of struggle in unfree societies can expand critical autonomy in major ways. Indeed, apathy in formally free societies can constrict it. In practice critical autonomy as defined above can occur in unfree societies.

and adaptive outcomes than the 'absence of all exogenous influences' (Miller, 1997 in Chirkov et al., 2003). This line of reasoning has been pursued in discussions of Bangladesh. For example, Wilce (1998) argues that autonomy is not an ideal goal that people value and strive after. Instead people are far more aware of and concerned about the effectiveness of their interpersonal, intergenerational, and inter-group relations because these represent the crucial locus of power and identity and pervade the entire gamut of life activities. Crucially for the argument presented here many of these relations are underpinned by values of deference and hierarchy, and often foster subservient behaviour. This raises the important but as yet unexplored question about the extent to which levels of constraint or coercion in particular cultural contexts (and this does not only apply to so-called collectivist cultures) impinge on the way people endorse or enact the need for autonomy (Madhok 2005). In her analysis of gender relations in Bangladesh (undoubtedly a specific context where the level of constraint is marked), White (1992) proposes that the notion of 'centrality' may be a more appropriate idiom than autonomy to understand the way people conceive of and strategize around their needs. Unlike autonomy, the notion of centrality gives analytical priority to people's inter-relational milieu, and assumes that people - and indeed life - are fundamentally defined in relationships. From this perspective, autonomy can even be seen to characterize a bereft condition in which the opportunity for meaningful participation in life is thwarted (Devine, 2004).

The argument that we should privilege more the inter-relational and interdependent milieu in contexts like South Asia recalls an older debate highlighted in Dumont's notion of *homo hierarchicus*, in which the self is regarded as part of a fixed hierarchical order and not as an impermeable person with individual needs. The oft-quoted statement of Dumont puts the case succinctly:

To say that the world of caste is a world of relations is to say that the particular caste and the particular man have no substance: they exist empirically, but they have no reality in thought, no being...at the risk of being crude...on the level of life in the world the individual *is* not (Dumont, 1970, p. 272, emphasis in original)

Dumont's assertion is also a classic central reference point for a wider debate about what of human nature and experience is universal and what is

culturally specific.⁷ In examining the expression of self in other cultures, some scholars have raised concerns about the notion of the individual understood as an autonomous and bounded self (Ewing, 1990; Geertz, 1984; Marriot, 1976) and explained “in terms of either shared *biological* or *psychological* processes of the organism” (Murray, 1993, p. 6, emphasis in original). This conception of self is strongly associated with Western philosophical and theological traditions that prioritize an essentialised and individualist notion of person (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). In the alternative Dumontian perspective, individuals are subsumed in the social whole - hierarchically embedded as opposed to autonomous actors, socio-centred beings as opposed to ego-centred ones (Shweder and Bourne, 1984). The basis for behaviour, action, and aspiration therefore arises from the position one holds in the social order, which not surprisingly is manipulated to ultimately serve the interests of super-ordinates. While there is much to criticize in ideas associated with *homo hierarchicus*, there is no denying that in contexts like Bangladesh ‘knowing one’s position in the social order’ is foundational to being and doing. Self therefore is socially constructed and “can be conceived of as an unequally distributed privilege rather than as a biological given” (Wilce, 1998, p. 40).

Thus at some level, we seem to be confronted with an irreconcilable opposition between Western notions of and moral claims for autonomy as a universal human need, and non-Western ideas and endorsements of interdependence or even dependence. In the next section we address these ideas further and explore in some detail the possibility of a synthesis.

Reconciling Human Autonomy and Interdependence

Immanuel Kant, who first coined the word autonomy, also coined its opposite ‘heteronomy’ (derived from the Greek ‘another’ + ‘rule’) (Kant, 1948 [1785]). This referred to situations where moral imperatives either come from without (in the form of a deity, the state, or other people) or from contingent drives or personal delusions (Honderich, 2005; Lindley, 1986). The re-introduction of the notion of heteronomy offers an important

⁷ Dumont’s assertion that the ‘individual’ self does not exist is germane to our discussion because of the proposition that autonomy is a universal human need (Doyal and Gough 1991).

corrective that helps structure our subsequent discussion. While it is true that some interpretations of autonomy do seem to equate autonomy with radical independence and self-sufficiency,⁸ for most writers such an interpretation of autonomy cannot be sustained. It is therefore erroneous to equate autonomy with radical independence or individualism.

The argument that autonomy implies a degree of dependence on other actors and external environments is made clearly in THN. To quote it at length:

The individualist interpretation divorces the actor from the social environment within which their personal identity evolves. All individuals discover who they are through learning what they can and cannot do. Individual action is social to the extent that it must be learned from and reinforced by others. Actors are socialised into following rules - expressions of collectively held and enforced aims and beliefs. These range from the obviously public (e.g., how to exchange one set of goods for another) to those which seem essentially private (e.g., bathing, toilet etiquette). Such rules constitute the parameters of our sense of self and of others - our individual vision of what (formally) is and is not privately and publicly possible. Thus the autonomy necessary for successful action is not compromised by the necessity to follow rules – quite the opposite. It is precisely the normative constraints of our social environment which make the specific choice to do x rather than y a real possibility (THN, p. 77).

However, the argument that autonomy is constituted relationally and contextually is not an endorsement of the kind of cultural determinism suggested in Geertz's contention that "the shapes of knowledge are always ineluctably local, indivisible from their instruments and their encasements" (Geertz, 1984, p. 4). Rather it endorses a structuration approach, which highlights the essentially recursive character of social life (Archer, 1988; Giddens, 1984). In other words, without individual capacity for action there can be no social structure, and without social structure there can be no individual capacity for action. It is for this reason that individual autonomy

⁸ Wolff, for example, appears to associate autonomy with independence: "the autonomous man, insofar as he is autonomous, is not subject to the will of another" (Wolff 1970: 14).

must always be achieved in an institutional context, and this assumes interdependence. Any concept of autonomy, which does not begin from this ontological fact, is worthless.

Chirkov et al. (2003) offered another perspective that is relevant to this discussion in their examination of the relative autonomy of cultural practices in South Korea, Russia, Turkey, and the United States. Working within the framework of Self Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000), they oppose autonomy and heteronomy, as well as independence and dependence, arguing that these two dimensions are orthogonal. Autonomy is defined in a more experiential way, as “when [a person’s] behaviour is experienced as willingly enacted and when he or she fully endorses the actions ... and/or the values expressed by them” (Chirkov et al., 2003, p. 98, after Deci and Ryan, 1985). This allows them to bring autonomy and dependence together in a synergistic manner. Thus, they argue that in certain circumstances “one can be autonomously dependent on another, willingly rely on his or her care, particularly if the other is perceived as supportive and responsive” (Chirkov et al., p. 98). They distinguish various motives for action, which lie along a continuum of relative autonomy, using four major categories that are drawn from Deci and Ryan:

- *External regulation*, where a person acts only to obtain external rewards or to escape punishment
- *Introjected regulation*, where a person acts to experience approval by self or others, or to avoid feelings of guilt or self-disparagement
- *Identified regulation*, where a person consciously endorses a given behaviour or value as having personal significance and importance
- *Integrated regulation*, where the behaviour or value is integrated into everyday life and coordinated with one’s other identifications.

The distinctions implied in these categories are useful for our discussion because they implicitly acknowledge that in specific circumstances different people will exercise different degrees of autonomy. In turn this reinforces the need for more empirical investigation. Thus, in the Chirkov et al. study, undertaken on university students in four different countries (Korea, Russia, Turkey, and the US), participants were asked to register their agreement or disagreement with a variety of statements. The study found that participants rated their countries differently as predicted along individualistic-collectivistic and horizontal-vertical dimensions. However, they also varied considerably in the degree to which they internalised these ambient orientations. Thus

people articulated a desire for authenticity within so-called collectivist cultures (suggesting the possibility of autonomy), and heteronomous desires within individualist cultures.⁹

The Self Determination Theory framework therefore offers important insights that are relevant to our argument here. First, it explicitly differentiates independence and individualism from autonomy. Second, it acknowledges the possibility that people can be autonomously interdependent (as the first point implies). In the context of South Asia, we can find much evidence that the synthesis of autonomy and interdependence is possible. In one review, Appadurai (1986) examines the contribution of three different authors who demonstrate in different ways how people - often through struggle and collective action – create a more positive conception of self for themselves. This conception then becomes a stronger basis upon which to exercise autonomous action. Thus one of the books reviewed (Khare, 1984), explores the way Untouchable communities in Lucknow use their social dependence to construct a coherent voice that facilitates autonomous action. In contrast to the Dumontian *homo hierarchicus* that privileges an underlying and foundational ideology of hierarchy, unity, and karma, the Untouchables of Lucknow construct and build upon an ideology that Khare identifies as 'equalitarian' and 'individualistic'. Admittedly the conception of the individual used here is different from that assumed in Western traditions,¹⁰ but it enables the Untouchables to establish and achieve defined goals in a more autonomous way. In this process, they effectively convert their social dependence into a radical political resource that not only becomes an ideological critique of their present situation, but also allows the

⁹ Chirkov et al's findings (2003), however, may relate more to the problematic nature of the binary distinction between individualism and collectivism. For further details see Oyserman et al (2002) and Matsumoto (1999).

¹⁰ To summarize Khare's argument, his conception of an individual has a more spiritual or transcendental sense. At this level, all individuals are equal. This sense of individual contrasts with the figure of the 'caste person' that is pivotal to the ruthless hierarchical world depicted by Dumont and others. The transcendental self becomes a cultural ideological construct that offers the Untouchables strategic opportunities for social redress in their everyday lives.

communities of Lucknow to participate more fully in their respective social contexts.¹¹

Thus we have good evidence that despite the prevalence of hierarchically structured relationships that determine the basis for all human action, people do achieve goals at interpersonal (del Franco, 2005), inter-familial (White, 1992) and inter-group (Devine, 2006) levels. By recognizing the co-existence of autonomy and interdependence, we implicitly accept therefore that there will be differences in the extent to which people can exercise autonomy. This is anticipated in the philosophical literature and elsewhere. For example, Raz (1986) introduced a notion of significant autonomy, understood as the ability of people to shape their lives and determine their course, and argues that the ability of people to acquire it 'is a matter of degree' (Raz, 1986, p. 154). Also and as discussed above, the framework offered by Self Determination Theory presents a continuum of relative autonomy that ranges from external regulation to integrated regulation. In a recent study of Brazilian and Canadian students, Chirkov et al. (2005) apply this thinking further and find that even where hierarchical or vertical cultural arrangements dominate, there is evidence that people still exercise relative autonomy. Appadurai uses his review to argue that the value attached in the Indian context to hierarchy, interrelationship and dependence does not preclude the possibility that people can articulate goals and have the autonomy to act upon these. This is a position that resonates well with research carried out in Bangladesh. It is thus possible and indeed crucial to assess the *degree* of autonomy possessed by individuals – at least in theory. We now turn to whether it is possible in practice.

Evidence from Bangladesh

Two questions need addressing to provide evidence on the co-existence of personal autonomy and substantial social dependence in modern-day Bangladesh:

1. to what extent do Bangladeshis value autonomy?
2. how is this expressed within relations of dependence?

¹¹ Khare's observation of increased social participation among untouchables is important since Dumont claimed that real autonomy was possible only for those who figuratively 'leave' or do not fully participate in society such as holy men, drop-outs, and so forth.

To what extent do Bangladeshis value autonomy? Although respondents never explicitly used the word autonomy, they expressed an appreciation of the idea of autonomy in other terms. Thus in the urban data set (women aged 20-65), women talked about the importance of having individual independence (“to be able to go where I want, to be free”, “fulfill [my] own hopes in life”). Independence was facilitated by (1) remaining physically fit, (2) continuing to work outside the home, and (3) having self-sufficiency at the household level (having your ‘own’ house, “not going to others to borrow something”). Similarly many women emphasised a desire to be educated, have a job, receive recognition from their family and community, be able to help others, live according to their principles, and have their own income and/or assets. What unites all these statements is a strong sense of women seeking to have greater control over their lives.

A very similar pattern is discernible in the data from rural and peri-urban sites (men and women aged 19 and over). Here we find significant commonality with all groups stressing the importance of key autonomy characteristics, albeit with different degrees of emphasis (see Table 1). For example, potential indicators of autonomy are being able to work and provide for your family’s needs, leading or managing your household, being able to bring your children up well, being able to support your parents in their old age, having some degree of financial independence and/ or mobility, and not being dependent on others. For some groups these could be expanded to include participation in social assistance or community development, social status within the community, and involvement in household decision-making.

Table 1: Autonomy Characteristics Identified From the Data From the First Phase of the QoL Research in Rural Bangladesh

Older men	Younger men	Older women	Young women
Can provide for own and family's needs	Can provide for own and family's needs		Can provide for family and children's daily needs
Able to work	Able to work; can concentrate on work	Able to work	Can work independently
Not dependent on others (physically or economically)		Not dependent on children (physically or economically)	Self sufficient within the home (e.g., own latrine) (household not dependent on others)
Acknowledged and effective leader of household (e.g., able to maintain joint household after sons' marriages)	Manages household well	Able to manage home (e.g., can concentrate on many tasks at once) Children listen to her	Knows how to perform household chores and manage home Consulted by husband ; doesn't live in joint household so autonomous decision making and/ or participates in household decision making
Able to bequeath property to children			
Brought children up well – now good, respected members of community	Brought children up well – now good, respected members of community (not source of shame) and prepared to provide for parents in return	Brought children up well – now good, respected members of community (not source of shame) and prepared to provide for her in return	Brought children up well – now good, respected members of community (not source of shame) and prepared to provide for parents in return

Older men	Younger men	Older women	Young women
Respected by community (e.g., frequently consulted, participates in community development)	Respected by community		
Good social networks (e.g., with extended family)			
	Pleases parents	Husband alive and acting as 'autonomy support'; takes care of husband	Maintains good relationship with children
	Financially independent; able to travel Earns a good income	Own income/ savings, which enable her to meet her needs	Able to come and go as she wishes Can make purchases of her choice; can buy things for children and support natal home from own income
	Educated		Can tutor children and/ or be involved in their education

Bold indicates specific to this category of respondent

For older men it was also important to be able to leave an inheritance to their children, be respected by their community, and participate in community development. Being respected by their community was important to younger men, who also wanted to please their parents, and be able to study and travel. Younger women similarly wanted “to come and go as she pleases”, and also to work independently and be able to purchase things for their children and their parents (whether they had their own

source of income or not). In terms of interpersonal autonomy, they wanted to be consulted by their husband, participate in household decision-making, be involved in their children's education, and have a good relationship with their children. In contrast, older women only wanted to be listened to by their children and take care of their husband (they were also the only group who didn't mention providing for their family's needs, presumably because this isn't a realistic expectation).

Autonomy within dependence. A clear gender difference was evident: women's autonomy needs were more focused on other people and the quality of their relationships with them. For example, older women wanted to be physically fit so they wouldn't be a burden on their children, and younger women wanted independent incomes so they could contribute to the household. Women's experiences of autonomy were also centred on the home, rather than say the market or community. This meant that even when the scope of their autonomy extended beyond the home (for example, through reciprocal links with their natal family), the actual engagements still took place in a domestic setting.

In contrast, men's autonomy needs appeared to be more focussed on themselves, and stressed much more the importance of developing personal competence, self-efficacy, self-mastery, and so on. Thus more than any other group young men emphasised their own education, even above that of their children. They also expressed a desire to be acknowledged leaders of their households, which implies some form of social recognition that they have amassed particular qualities and skills.

Interestingly, in the peri-urban/ rural data set young women only talked about education in terms of being able to educate their children better, although it was clearly intrinsically important to young urban women. This apparent difference in the value accorded to education may be artefactual, but it may also represent a more fundamental gender difference of seeing, or at least talking about autonomy and other practices in terms of their instrumental rather than their intrinsic value. For example, young women wanting to be educated in order to educate their children, or worshipping Allah so that he will take care of their families.

These findings were supported by examples of autonomy experienced within relationships ('centrality') from the urban dataset. For example, the

importance of being consulted by one's sons and the 'psychological insecurity' caused by not having children to look after you when you are older. The family network appeared to be one of the main arenas in which people exercise their autonomy and meet their basic needs, even the ones that relate to autonomy (e.g., the importance of having a husband who "takes her consent for everything", i.e., who asks her to endorse every decision, Choudhury, 2005). This integration was described by one female respondent as the way "families where people are expressing their own views stay unified and happy as no one is subject to the power of another". Although this appears rather idealistic, it is important to note that families are also the arenas where accommodations to individual needs are most commonly resolved. This of course may not be fully evident to 'the public view' (Ewing, 1991).

Critical autonomy within dependence. Some of our data convey the importance of *education* in encouraging wider reflection and moral reasoning ("[less educated people] do not know which is good and which is bad"). It may stimulate flexibility in traditional roles ("education makes men sympathetic and helpful") and the development of wisdom. Implicitly it can also help prevent uncritical acceptance of the messages transmitted by the mass media where "the serials [*natoks*] show such things like daughter-in-laws and households living separately which influence young people today."

The benefits of awareness and consciousness extend to the family, although it's possible that knowledge of how things work in Bangladeshi society may support traditional practices rather than challenge them ("members of [uneducated] families create conflict among themselves because they are not conscious about their role in the family"). This knowledge is most beneficial when coupled with an empathic awareness of others so that "members of an educated family can understand each other and avoid conflicts when they realize the facts of the situation." However, education may be a resource that needs to be managed carefully as "on the other hand, an educated person can create all kinds of problems in his family; he can understand as well as compromise everything".

Assessing Domain Specific Autonomy

Implicit in the argument thus far is a recognition that autonomy results from the combined effect of internal and external factors. Recently Diener and

Biswas-Diener explored in more detail the interplay of both factors in determining subjective well-being (2004). In their discussion they introduced the notion of empowerment and made a distinction between external and internal forms of empowerment. While external empowerment refers to external conditions (income, status, and collective power) that permit or inhibit effective action, internal empowerment refers mostly to personal traits and characteristics (competences, skills, and abilities). Perhaps not surprisingly they make the argument that both external and internal empowerment are necessary for effective action, and that outcomes will reflect the complex interplay of external circumstances and people's skills and resources.¹² Crucially however they suggested that the assessment of outcomes can only be made in reference to specific goals or circumstances. This is germane to our discussion because it alerts us to the need to look at specific contexts or domains *separately* to assess the scope for and practice of autonomous action in each. Again each case will require, as we have argued, close consideration of internal and external factors as well as an examination of how both factors influence each other.

Whereas THN advocates overall measures of the absence of autonomy, notably mental ill-health and poor socially-relevant competences, Alkire strongly advocates a disaggregated approach (2002, 2005, 2006), although she acknowledges the possibility of 'spill-over' effects between the domains (2006). In a disaggregated approach, a person's agency is assessed with respect to different functionings or broader domains of life. Thus a woman may be empowered as a citizen in the political sphere, but prevented by her gender or lack of education from getting a job, or be unable to make crucial decisions in the household. The advantage of such an approach is that it allows for a stronger appreciation of the embedded nature of autonomous action, and offers fascinating insights into how people are both constrained by, and able to manipulate their social contexts. In short, it facilitates the measurement of situated autonomies. However, the risk of such approaches

¹² Ewing (1991) explores the relationship between external and internal empowerment at the individual level in an intriguing analysis of young Pakistani women that rests on a distinction between interpersonal and intrapsychic autonomy. She argues that the latter, akin to Diener and Biswas-Diener's internal empowerment, enables them to deal effectively with the common stresses encountered in their new in-laws' homes.

is that they become so fixed on a specific set of domains that the interconnectedness of domains across people's lives is lost.¹³

Rahman and Rao (2002) provided a powerful example of an investigation into domain specific autonomy. In their study of women's agency in north and south India, they considered kinship, labour markets, and public action to be the three most important domains, and developed indicators of autonomy within each. Thus, in the kinship domain they selected two key indicators: women's ability to move freely outside the home and their participation in household decision-making. In the labour market domain, they focused on options for earning outside the home and control over the household budget. Finally in the public action domain they found that the presence of public goods such as electricity, schools, and roads strongly enhanced women's autonomy.

Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) undertook a related study of women's *empowerment*, defined as: enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and achieve desired actions and outcomes. To do this they adopted a rigorous methodology that gave strong insights into domain-specific autonomous action. In their study they measured different degrees of empowerment by assessing:

1. Whether a person has the opportunity to make a choice. So for example if a woman wants to send her daughter to school, is there a school for the daughter to go to?
2. Whether a person actually uses the opportunity to choose. So if the answer to (1) is yes, does the woman actually make the decision to send her daughter to school?
3. Whether, once the choice is made, it brings the desired outcome. So if the answer to (2) is yes, does the daughter actually attend school?

These aspects of empowerment were then operationalised within three domains of people's lives – the state, the market, and society – and at three different levels – macro, intermediary, and local. This yields a rich matrix of empowerment options, which may or may not be open to groups of women,

¹³ The assumption that people's lives can be divided into discrete and quantifiable domains may be a reinscription of Cartesian dualism, as explored in Camfield and McGregor 2005 (see also Nilsson et al 2005 in a Bangladeshi context).

and allows for an analysis into the interplay of external and internal conditions. For example, societal level indicators from Ethiopia are: women having an equal say over the spacing of children, or investment in household durables. Commenting on this study, Alkire (2006) concluded that the research enables us to make a crucial distinction between having the capability to do something, and choosing whether or not to do it.

A final study worth mentioning here is offered by Madhok (2005), in which she moves the analytical lens away from actions per se to the thought processes through which people arrive at decisions to act or not act. This comes very close to Doyal and Gough's idea of 'critical autonomy' entailing the capacity of self-reflection. Madhok's work examines the various personal attempts of *sathins* (workers within the Women's Development Program in the State of Rajasthan) to transform the dominant discourse of political rights. Her account details the creative ways in which women selectively absorb and identify with rights discourses in an attempt to create a new and alternative moral framework that increases their participation and influence in the political sphere. Although Madhok's work illustrates the exercise of autonomy in a specific domain of life, her invitation to focus more on ideas than actions advances our understanding of autonomy, especially in adverse environments. In adverse contexts, where freedoms are often constrained, the exercise of autonomy may only be expressed cautiously in public, if indeed at all. However, and this is crucial, a lack of public expression (or action) does not mean that people do not exercise or value autonomy.

This raises an important question regarding the whole issue of researching autonomy in conditions of subordination. Madhok takes as an example the indicator of small family sizes, which is typically used to indicate greater women's autonomy in relation to fertility. She argues that this indicator may be inadequate in certain contexts because it fails crucially to tell us whether the decision to have a small family actually belongs to the woman, her husband, or some other external actor such as an extended family. In other words the 'indicator' may not be indicating women's autonomy at all. This leads Madhok to propose that in order to make conclusive arguments about autonomy it is vital to determine women's ideal preferences rather than rely solely on those expressed in action. By examining ideas and preferences, we gain a fuller understanding of choices that are made and also the

reasons (social, political, economic and cultural) that determine whether choices are then translated into action or not.

At a more general level, we can conclude that there are cultures and contexts where the public endorsement or enactment of autonomy may be difficult or even impossible. However this does not mean that autonomy is less valued and this represents a fundamental challenge to those seeking to carry out research into autonomy in contexts like Bangladesh where patterns of subordination and deference are more evident in everyday life.¹⁴

Evidence from Bangladesh

The majority of rural respondents identified four key domains that they considered important in a discussion of autonomy: (1) family (household decision-making), (2) employment, (3) finances, and (4) community (ability to participate in community development). However older women were less ambitious in identifying domains and emphasised much more the importance of achieving autonomy in their finances (by having a small income or some savings). Additionally, older men and women were concerned with physical autonomy, while younger ones wanted access to education and mobility.

Female respondents from the urban data set are also exercising autonomy, or trying to exercise it, in the domains of (1) family, and (2) employment, but they added a third domain of education. For example, they cited control over the timing of their marriage and choice of partner, and having control over a sum of money that they could use to fulfil their family's needs. Younger (but not older) women wanted to be consulted by their husbands and for their household to be physically autonomous.

One issue for younger women was having control over a sum of money that they could use within the context of their relationships, for example, to fulfil the needs of their children, or provide support to their natal home. This did not need to be a large amount, or even entirely their own, as the expressed goal was not financial independence or having a good income, as was the

¹⁴ We are indebted to one of the reviewers for drawing our attention to the wider research implications of Madhok's study.

case for young men. Their sense of achievement was derived instead from sources like advising and assisting others, and maintaining their principles (“I have led my life according to Islam. This gives me peace in my mind”). This illustrates the operation of autonomous values within dependent relationships.

Education was a key personal resource for younger women and was described as a “wealth”, which “no one can take away” (not having education was like “having eyes and being blind”). It was seen as strengthening their capabilities (“they can perform their tasks well so they are an asset for their family”), developing “a cool mind to tackle problems”, and giving them access to “office” jobs, income, and respect (“a girl who is educated is regarded differently”). It also provided “social acceptance as an unmarried woman” (removing the pressure to marry young), and a stronger position with their in-laws when they did marry (“if she were a graduate she would not have to ask her husband for everything”). These dimensions of education were confirmed by a recent study in rural Bangladesh (Nargish, 2004), which examined how it functioned to increase access to higher paying jobs, and improve marriage prospects, friendship, social status, and other valued outcomes.

Collective Action and Autonomy

Finally we want to consider the link between collective action and autonomy. This is particularly pertinent to the context of Bangladesh where there is a proliferation of community based organizations and non-governmental organizations working with the poor. Interestingly, the most positive presentation of ideas synonymous with autonomy is by development organizations. ‘Independence’ and ‘self reliance’ therefore are projected much more as goals of organizations than they are of individuals (Wilce, 1998).

Early development analyses in Bangladesh highlighted a key link between what was perceived as traditional patterns of relationships, based essentially on deference and subordination, and the reproduction of poverty. Typically but not exclusively, these relationships took the form of patron-client networks – a system of organization where vertical relations across class lines are forged between poorer clients and richer patrons. The relationship between patron and client has been described as a moral or

benevolent one (Devine, 1999; Maloney, 1988; McGregor, 1994) because it triggers a series of expectations and obligations that determine the chances of entitlement demands ever being satisfied. For the poor, both survival and upward mobility depend on the ability to secure the sympathy of a reliable patron. This however was never guaranteed, and in most cases clients were obliged to demonstrate personal loyalty and allegiance. Subordination and coercion were therefore written into the very fabric of patron-client relations, an inevitable outcome of what Wood (2003) has aptly termed the Faustian Bargain.

As a consequence of this analysis, the majority of early Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) adopted radical agendas that explicitly set out to free the poor from their subordinate client status. Building on insights from Paolo Freire's pedagogy of liberation (Freire, 1972), these organizations adopted the language of conscientisation, self-reliance, and solidarity to highlight their intention. They explicitly presented themselves as an alternative social force that could help the poor redress power imbalances and take more control over their lives. This process ultimately implied breaking free of dominating relationships and a reaffirmation of autonomy.

In her analysis of the dynamics of development-orientated organizations, Alkire (2002, 2005) argues that the level and quality of participation are key determinants of whether or not outcomes will be beneficial for participants. She identifies four aspects of participation that need to be considered (2002, p. 129-143):

- *Intrinsic value*, i.e., is participation deemed personally valuable by the participant (something which facilitates agency achievement)
- *Transitive effects*, i.e., does participation improve outcomes
- *Constructive effects*, i.e., does participation help shape values and priorities
- *Intransitive effects*, i.e., does participation fashion group identity.

These considerations are a useful reminder that not everything that falls under the umbrella of participation works to the benefit of participants (White, 2000). To link the discussion of participation with our earlier exploration of autonomy, we can argue that participation in collective action forms may encourage behaviour that is more heteronomous (e.g. coercive or subordinating) or more autonomous. The difference between these positions requires detailed empirical investigation. Our view is that to be

autonomous, the type of agency to evolve from participation in organizations like NGOs must be self-conscious and not simply a reflection of compliance with inherited institutions, or habitus. In other words, it should entail some sense of critical autonomy. Also, such collective autonomy will typically seek to influence the institutions that affect people's lives. This too can be assessed within distinct domains and at different levels.¹⁵

Evidence from Bangladesh

In this instance, our evidence from Bangladesh relates to the experience of a particular development organization called Shammo,¹⁶ which one of us has observed over a number of years. Members of the organization are poor landless farmers who for many years have lived and worked under the authority of local elite landlords in a patron-client relationship. As poorer clients, they were expected to offer loyalty to their respective patrons in the hope of receiving benefits or favours that would help them achieve a more secure livelihood. The balance of power in the relationship is so biased towards the patron that the ability of poorer clients to act collectively in their own interests is severely constrained. Thus in the area where Shammo was working, the political power of the local elites was so strong that they were able to forcibly take control over huge amounts of agricultural land that the Government had allocated by decree to the landless farmers.¹⁷ Given that the poor relied on the same patrons for their subsistence, there was very little reaction to the elites' strategy. However when Shammo began as an organization, the land that had been illegally taken from the poor became an obvious focus point for mobilization.

¹⁵ There are big issues about the relationship between collective autonomy and individual autonomy, which cannot be discussed here. However, we would claim that the weight of scientific findings and historical experience suggests that the success of challenges to oppressive social orders is proportionate to the critical autonomy of the challengers. See for example Barrington Moore's impressive study of injustice, based on class struggles in nineteenth century Germany (Barrington Moore 1978, especially chapter 3).

¹⁶ 'Shammo' is a pseudonym for this development organization. For more details see Devine (1999).

¹⁷ Agricultural land allocated to the poor in this way is known as khas land. In the area where Shammo was working there was an area of over 800 acres of khas land that had been taken over by the elites.

Beginning from a palpable sense of injustice and grievance, Shammo evolved gradually into a site where its members were able to nurture new forms of agency for themselves that often, but not always, translated into action. Three key elements facilitated the creation of this new form of agency for Shammo's members (Devine, 2004). First, the organization facilitated the construction of a new form of shared identity that enabled members to shift their allegiance away from the domination of traditional elites and to act more as a collective unit. This is close to Alkire's notion of intransitive effects. For Shammo's members the new form of shared identity was nurtured in a number of ways ranging from routine meetings and general daily interaction to more public events such as processions and rallies. Second, the organization ensured the delivery of tangible improvements to its members (what Alkire refers to as transitive effects), for example, recovering ownership of the land that was theirs by right. However with time the organization and its members also acquired positional advantage vis-à-vis political and bureaucratic structures charged with delivering key services and goods. As a result of this, members successfully managed to lobby for better and just wages, improved working conditions for sharecroppers, and a more transparent distribution of government welfare goods and services. Finally, the organization also fostered utopian spaces (de Certeau, 1984) in which the future aspirations of members and the potential for further reconfigurations of power relations are nurtured (Appadurai, 2004). This is the area of life where people formulate their ideal preferences and judgments, and then decide if and how to enact these (Madhok, 2005) – Alkire's constructive effects.

There is therefore a *prima facie* case for confirming that organizations like Shammo can facilitate new forms of agency. However, it is important to look beyond the outcomes and ask about the quality of agency that is nurtured. While Shammo has been pivotal to the task of establishing, protecting and then advancing the rights of its poor members, Devine (2002) provides evidence that this has been underpinned by a logic of preferential behaviour. For example, the entitlement rights of certain people (e.g. to land) were privileged while those of others were ignored. Thus, entitlement claims were more likely to receive a positive response if the claimant was a member of Shammo (as opposed to a non-member), and then if the claimant was known to be publicly loyal to the organization's leaders. In other words, people who were closest to the leaders seemed to enjoy stronger entitlement claims. This leads us therefore to a rather nebulous

area where the boundaries between favours and rights are blurred. The result of this is that among members as well as between members and staff of the organization, new forms of clientelist behaviour emerged as individuals tried to get closer to and publicly demonstrate their loyalty to the organization's leaders. Fully aware of this, members continued to trust the organization because they ultimately judged it as caring, supportive, and relevant to their everyday struggles. In other words, the organization helped people move from a more heteronomous condition (under the old patrons) to a more autonomous one. Using this as an illustration, Devine makes the more general argument that in contexts like Bangladesh, the right kind of dependency relationship can be an important and creative vehicle within which the poor can effectively exercise greater agency and autonomy.

CONCLUSION

The fact that autonomy is firmly rooted in Western intellectual traditions has led some to question its coherence and suitability for understanding well-being in developing countries. Using qualitative data from people's evaluation of the quality of their lives in Bangladesh, this article has shown that the concept of autonomy is a useful one in that it captures people's goals and attempts to change things in a way they consider important for their overall well-being. More technically, the concept of autonomy gives important insights into the construction and experience of people's capacities as agents. Our data supports three key arguments. First, people from rural and urban Bangladesh express what could be characterised as a need for autonomy in both explicit and implicit terms. Second, the pursuit of autonomy is iterative and cumulative in that people tend to focus on particular domains in their lives where they wish to increase their ability to exercise agency. Moreover, different people prioritize different domains and we can tentatively assume that these choices change over time. Finally, experiences of autonomy occur primarily within and through people's interpersonal relationships. While family and kin networks seem to be central, in some cases formal organizations such as community-based or development organizations can also play a crucial role.

Our choice to use data from Bangladesh was a deliberate one. First, it is one of the poorest countries in the world where conditions of subordination and adversity are ubiquitous. While people in Bangladesh may experience numerous 'lacks of freedoms' in their lives, this does not mean, our data

suggests, that they are necessarily weak in autonomy. Second, Bangladesh is often characterised as a society in which people express their personhood in more relational as opposed to individualist forms.¹⁸ Our data shows that this is not incompatible with the pursuit of autonomy and indeed it may be a medium through which autonomy is more effectively achieved. Autonomy can be directed toward either social or personal goals or both, and can be enacted individually, or by participation in groups, or both.

The analysis reported here ultimately presents a complex array of situated autonomies that embrace a wide range of covert as well as overt behaviour patterns, decisions, and actions. Rather than locate this as an argument in favour of cultural relativism, we would argue that it underlines the recursive nature of human life. In other words, autonomy is determined not only by the agential capacities of an individual but also by the nature of relationships he or she may enjoy with others. Two implications flow from this. First of all, it is imperative that we focus more research on how people in specific contexts negotiate and organize to achieve more autonomy in their lives. The distinction between individualist and collectivist contexts has thrown up important insights. But it can be distracting as even in more collectivist societies like Bangladesh there are important differences in the way people attempt to achieve autonomy and how they evaluate this. Similarly, people can achieve high levels of autonomy in particular domains (including the cognitive or intrapsychic domain) but may fail to transfer or express these in other domains. One can expect to find therefore considerable subtlety, ambiguity, and even contradiction, in the strategies people deploy to achieve greater autonomy.

This leads directly to the second reflection that is more conceptual in nature. To understand the full significance of situated autonomies, we would argue that it is important to introduce a stronger theory of power to our analysis. Actions, preferences and values are never created *ex nihilo* (Lukes, 1974) and therefore it is incumbent to reflect on the formation of values, and the processes by which people decide to express preferred choices in action or

¹⁸ The way personhood is expressed in Bangladesh is obviously dynamic. For example, the urbanization of rural life, the gradual nuclearization of household structures, and increased education are but three processes that may in time have an immediate impact on the way people see themselves.

inaction. This, we would contend, will take us towards a richer appreciation of the social and cultural construction of autonomy.

But none of this disputes the centrality of autonomy to a eudaimonic conception of well-being. Its widespread presence in normative theories of the good life, theories of common human needs and eudaimonic approaches in psychology has received empirical support in our initial qualitative research in Bangladesh. That it has resonance in such a materially impoverished yet relationally dense milieu adds support to its universality. It illustrates that there are aspects of well-being beyond hedonic satisfaction, and that our understanding of eudaimonic well-being is enhanced by using an appropriate and situated notion of autonomy.

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