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Autonomy as a foundation for human development: A conceptual model to study individual autonomy

Mirtha R. Muñiz Castillo*

Abstract

This paper presents a conceptual model of autonomy grounded in the theories of human needs and capabilities. The analysis suggests that autonomy can be considered a human need that requires satisfiers to secure a sufficient level of competence to effectively participate in social life, and a combined capability to make choices in significant matters and achieve positive results in one's life.

The model allows analysing individual experiences of autonomy, through attention to three determinants of autonomy: agency as an internal capacity, entitlements, and structural contexts. It highlights the relations of individuals that negotiate their entitlements and options in specific contexts. Personal and contextual, subjective and objective factors explain people's conditions for and their feeling of being autonomous.

The paper also discusses the relation between human development and autonomy and asserts that initiatives that aim at fostering human development should promote the expansion of individual autonomy and empowerment.

Keywords:

Autonomy, human needs, capabilities, human development, and empowerment.

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1 Introduction

Human development refers to the expansion of people's opportunities to lead the lives that they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). To reach this goal, people require capacity to reflect about and to choose among alternative lifestyles. Can people with this capacity effectively lead the lives they value? Not necessarily; their options could be limited by their specific contexts. In this paper, autonomy refers to that capacity to choose *and to achieve*.

The paper presents a conceptual model of autonomy, formed and modified during a study focused on how foreign aided projects could support the autonomy of individuals in communities (Muñiz Castillo, 2009). The paper proposes a multidisciplinary notion of autonomy and highlights that people experience autonomy in relations. The concepts are illustrated with examples from infrastructural projects in rural Central America.

In general, individuals exercise autonomy when they rely on their own judgement about how to act, guided by an authentic (not extrinsic) motivation. However, personal and contextual, subjective and objective factors determine autonomy. Understanding institutions and relations between social actors is crucial to study autonomy.

Human development is promoted not only by providing resources to people, but also by supporting their autonomy so that people themselves can sustain their gains in well-being and promote further enhancements once aid flows are withdrawn (Muñiz Castillo and Gasper, 2009).

Section 2 discusses autonomy in relation to freedom and independence. Section 3 reviews autonomy in the theories of human needs and capabilities. Section 4 presents the conceptual model. Section 5 analyses the relation between human development, autonomy and empowerment.

2 The concept of autonomy

Autonomy is a special type of freedom

First, Berlin (1969/1999) distinguished freedom into negative and positive. Negative freedom is 'freedom from' or the absence of interference (p. 39) to act in a significant way. This is an opportunity-concept or *formal* freedom. Positive freedom means being one's own master (p. 44) or exercising control over one's life. This is an exercise-concept or *effective* freedom that 'can be promoted... by putting [people] in a position to do things they would not otherwise be able to do' (Swift, 2004, p. 56).

In contrast, MacCallum (1967/1999) affirms that freedom involves both aspects. It is 'always *of* something (an agent or agents), *from* something, *to* do, not do, become, or not become something' (p. 102). Then, freedom is 'always one and the same triadic relation' (p. 100): X is free from constraint Y to do (become) Z. Scholars all have the same concept of freedom but they differ in what they identify as X, Y, and Z.

Even so the distinction proposed by Berlin is useful. Autonomy is a positive notion. People can restrain their negative freedom when they are committed to certain causes, while pursuing their own conception of the good. Furthermore, a person can define himself or herself via those commitments (Dworkin, 1988, p. 26).

Second, autonomy is not freedom 'to do whatever one wants to do'. Frankfurt (1989) defines two types of freedom: 'freedom of action' and 'freedom of the will'. An individual with freedom of action could act in response to random wants or alien desires, not necessarily to reach a valued goal or to fulfil priority needs. In contrast, freedom of

the will is related to autonomous desires; the individual endorses these desires with reflective self-evaluation.¹ The concept of autonomy is closer to freedom of the will.

Third, autonomy refers to significant aspects of life. Autonomy is not exercised in every matter but only on those aspects that have importance (Taylor, 1979/1999; Doyal and Gough, 1991). Kabeer (1999) refers to ‘strategic life choices’ that are critical for people such as the choice of livelihood, residence or family situation. When those decisions cohere with their true self, individuals are acting authentically, not merely doing whatever they want (Ekstrom, 1993).

Autonomy does not imply independence

Autonomy is different from independence (Deci and Ryan, 2000). One can rely on others for guidance and support or access to resources. One can also depend on another person by choice. Individuals care about others and their commitments with others are evidence of autonomy, not of dependence (Christman, 1998). Furthermore, people who identify with a group may adopt values or behaviours ‘that lend priority to that group, and, in doing so, they can be acting autonomously’ (Chirkov *et al.*, 2003, p. 107).

Autonomy is in no way coherent with a view of human beings unattached and isolated who only rely on their inner capacities and self-conceptions, for these are clearly related to others’ perceptions (Christman, 2003). Autonomy and dependence do not conflict with each other, except when certain ‘factors and influences... disrupt or destroy one’s ability to function as a unique person’ (Christman, 1998, p. 386).

Following a *relational conception*, autonomy is ‘both defined and pursued in a social context [that] significantly influences the opportunities an agent has to develop or express autonomy skills’ (McLeod and Sherwin, 2000, p. 259). The authentic self is constructed throughout the process of exercising one’s autonomy (Barclay, 2000), for which one requires ‘socially supportive conditions’ in conjunction with the internal sense of being autonomous (Anderson and Honneth, 2005, p. 129-130).

3 *Autonomy in the theories of human needs and capabilities*

The theories of human needs and capabilities study the nature of human life, which concerns not only feelings but also the content of living well and doing well. Both theories are eudaimonic approaches to well-being that relate good life to fully human functioning (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Although there is no full consensus on the criteria for a good life, there is great overlap between the particular lists (see Alkire, 2002; Quizilbash, 2002).

Autonomy is a priority human need that requires certain conditions

Doyal and Gough (1991) develop a ‘theory of human need’ (THN) to assess quality of life according to the degree to which a series of needs has been satisfied.² These needs must be achieved if people ‘are to avoid sustained and serious harm’ (p. 50) that would result in dramatically impaired social participation in a form of life.

In order to achieve full social participation (universal goal 1), they identify two basic universal needs: (a) physical health, and (b) autonomy as freedom of agency. In order to

¹ Frankfurt’s proposal is part of a family of ‘hierarchical models of autonomy’, which identify autonomous desires with personal endorsement at the highest order of reflection. See Taylor (2005) for discussions on these models.

² Doyal and Gough propose a complete framework which distinguishes several levels of needs, satisfiers (objects, activities or relations) and societal preconditions for the adequate fulfilment of needs.

promote critical participation (universal goal 2), individuals must fulfil the two previous needs and develop critical autonomy. Then, the THN gives a central role to autonomy and distinguishes two levels (see Table 1).

Table 1: Elements of autonomy in the THN

Level of autonomy	Elements
1) Autonomy as freedom of agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Level of <i>understanding</i> a person has about herself, her culture and what is expected of her as an individual within it. - The <i>psychological capacity</i> she has to formulate options for herself. - The objective <i>opportunities</i> enabling her to act accordingly.
2) Critical autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The capacity to compare cultural rules, to reflect upon the rules of one's own culture and to work with others to change them. - The capacity to move to another culture if all else fails (<i>in extremis</i>).

Source: Doyal and Gough, 1991 (p. 60, 67, 187-188).

Freedom of agency is the first level. Here, *agency* has a specific meaning; the ability to deliberate, choose and act purposively. To reach this level of autonomy, individuals have to fulfil to some extent the 'intermediate needs' or universal satisfiers: adequate nutritional food and clean water, adequate protective housing, a non-hazardous work environment, a non-hazardous physical environment, appropriate health care, security in childhood, significant primary relationships, physical security, economic security, appropriate education, and safe birth control and child-bearing (for women). The satisfaction of universal satisfiers requires local, (time and cultural) specific satisfiers. The expansion of autonomy depends on its continuous *exercise*, which is possible by minimising constraints for meaningful social activities.

Critical autonomy is the second level. It requires that individuals exercise freedom of agency with higher levels of reflection and that they enjoy *political freedom*. At this level, they can promote significant social change in cooperation with others.

The degree of autonomy depends on personal and contextual factors

The self-determination theory (SDT) identifies three basic human needs: competence, relatedness and autonomy. It refers to how people endorse and experience responsibility for their behaviour (cf. Frankfurt, 1989). Individuals' degree of autonomy depends on their perceptions of contexts and events, their reasons to act, and their motivations.

Contexts are *autonomy-supportive* when they encourage the process of choice, or *controlling* when they pressure behaviour toward specific outcomes. Events can be informational if they promote competence and autonomy (e.g., offering choice and positive feedback), controlling if they exert pressure or condition behaviour (e.g., rewards, deadlines, and evaluations), or amotivating if they promote perceived incompetence.

However, contexts affect the perceptions of certain events such as positive feedback. In a reconstruction project, participants working in a team to get a house (i.e., a performance-contingent reward) can feel more competent and motivated if the relation with project staff is respectful and they learn valuable skills (i.e., an autonomy-supportive context). In addition, events in such a context may have different individual interpretations and effects on motivation and autonomy.

Regarding reasons to act, the SDT differentiates between 'locus of control' and 'locus of causality'. Locus of control refers to individuals' expectations about their power to control outcomes. Locus of causality concerns not only who controls the outcomes but also who causes the behaviour and why (Deci and Ryan, 1985). For instance, in a water project, community leaders could supervise the construction of home sanitation systems and feel competent (i.e., controlling the process); however, if they were not convinced

of the systems' value, they could feel forced by outsiders to build them (i.e., not causing the behaviour).

Each perceived locus of causality (PLOC) corresponds with a *causality orientation* (Table 2). These orientations are relatively enduring aspects of personality; each one exists within each person to some degree, but one will prevail in a given life domain.

Table 2: Causality orientations in the SDT

PLOC	Causality orientation	Explanation
Internal	Autonomy	People experience a large extent of choice with respect to the initiation and regulation of their behaviour, acting on basis of interests and self-endorsed values.
External	Control	People experience events as controlling; they behave according to external influences or how they should.
Impersonal	Impersonal	People behave not intentionally because they feel that cannot affect outcomes.

PLOC means perceived locus of causality.
Source: Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000).

Regarding motivations, actions can be externally or internally driven. *Extrinsic* motivation refers to goals that extend beyond the activity itself and are separable from this, such as pursuing rewards or avoiding punishments. *Intrinsic* motivation refers to doing an activity for its inherent value, because one feels that can extend or exercise one's capacities, explore and learn (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 70). Ellerman (2006) expands the latter notion to include 'activities undertaken due to one's identification with a larger social group and one's own judgment about what is best for that community' (p. 37).

Nevertheless, not all externally driven action is controlling per se. People can internalise external reasons to act and so consider their behaviours as important and originated by them (i.e., autonomy causality orientation). This *internalisation* is fuelled by a process of social integration. However, 'autonomy must emanate from oneself and can therefore only be facilitated by contextual events' (Deci and Ryan, 1987, p. 1027).

Contexts and events can influence motivation when people engage in project activities. For Ellerman (2006), autonomy is supported when intrinsic motivation is in the foreground, although extrinsic motivation could be in the background. For instance, people could work in self-construction activities for the welfare of their community (in the foreground) but also be receiving a minimum payment (in the background). If their subsistence need was threatened because the tough work conditions made it impossible for people to carry out other activities, the extrinsic motivation would pass to the foreground because it would be *what* helps to satisfy that need. So it is possible to introduce extrinsic motivation as long as it does not change the perceived locus of causality.

Autonomy is a human capability that fuels development

Sen often stresses the importance of reasoned choices by individuals given their own values and objectives. A capability set reflects options or freedom to achieve a combination of functionings (doings or beings). It refers to freedom 'in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you want to lead' (Sen, 1987, p. 36).

Moreover, agency has a crucial and transformative role in his capability approach. Agency is 'the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world' (Sen, 1999, p. 18). This definition differs from the one in the conceptual model (section 4).

Nussbaum (2000) includes 'practical reason' in her list of central human capabilities. It is defined as 'being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical re-

reflection about the planning of one's life' (p. 79). She refers to a suitable threshold level of each central capability to be reached by every person and below which no one capability is negotiable (Nussbaum, 2000; 2003). In an earlier version of her approach, she defined a lower (minimum) threshold for practical reason related to being able to choose and to evaluate and to function accordingly (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 78).

Furthermore, she considers practical reason and affiliation as the two most important capabilities because individuals shape their lives in cooperation and reciprocity with others. Then, the exercise of autonomy is possible in relations with others and could be constrained by others, not only by internal powers.

Her notion of combined capability is relevant to underscore the role of social relations and contexts. She considers three types of capabilities: basic capabilities, which are innate but underdeveloped capacities that must be nurtured over time (e.g., children's capacities); internal capabilities, which are the matured capabilities ready to be used; and combined capabilities, which are the internal capabilities supported by the external conditions that allow their exercise. Autonomy can be understood as a combined capability so that changing the contexts in which people interact could effectively foster their individual autonomy.

How do previous theories compare to each other?

Human needs and capabilities are similar terms when understood as valuable aspects of life that (i) require to be fulfilled at an appropriate level (negative notion) and (ii) demand to be actualised so that individuals can achieve a worthwhile life (positive notion). They can more properly be called human potentials (cf. Max-Neef *et al.*, 1991).³

Table 3: Comparison of levels of autonomy

	Nussbaum 'Practical reason'	Doyal and Gough 'Autonomy'	Deci and Ryan 'Autonomy, self-determination'
	Other important life aspect: Affiliation (*)	Other basic need: Physical health	Other psychological needs: Competence and relatedness
1 st . Level	For human functioning: Being able to choose and evaluate, and to function accordingly. <i>Requires:</i> Material and social conditions (to train the internal capability and let it express).	Autonomy as freedom of agency: The ability to make informed choices about what should be done and how to go about doing it. <i>Requires:</i> Optimum fulfilment of intermediate needs and societal preconditions.	Inner endorsement of one's actions so that they emanate from oneself and are one's own. <i>Requires:</i> Integration (through which the self develops) and autonomy-supportive contexts.
2 nd . Level	For human flourishing: Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection concerning the planning of one's life. <i>Requires:</i> liberty of conscience and religious observance.	Critical autonomy: Being able to adopt personal projects, accept commitments, evaluate cultural rules, and participate in changing them or move to another culture. <i>Requires:</i> freedom of agency and political freedom.	Relative Autonomy: There are different degrees of autonomy according to how the person has internalised his or her motives to act.

(*) Practical reason and affiliation are part of the list of ten central human capabilities.

Source: Nussbaum (1995, 2000), Doyal and Gough (1991) and Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000).

³ Max-Neef *et al.* (1991) consider that needs do not only imply deprivation, and cause poverties or pathologies when they are not fulfilled, but also 'to the degree that needs engage, motivate and mobilize people, they are potential and may become resources' (p. 24). Hence needs are not only satisfied or fulfilled: they are realised, experienced or actualised through time and space (*loc cit*).

Table 3 compares the conceptions of autonomy reviewed. It does not include Sen’s approach because it spells out neither a list nor a hierarchy of capabilities. Nussbaum and Doyal and Gough (THN) share a two-level structure for autonomy. However, autonomy receives higher importance in the THN. In contrast, the SDT does not present two levels but several degrees of autonomy.

Summing up, autonomy is promoted when individuals’ life options are enlarged. It is necessary that they have covered their intermediate needs, developed social networks, experienced choice in previous occasions (i.e., they are aware of their own skills), and interacted in autonomy-supporting contexts. Autonomy is more than being in control, it is to be leading one’s life. Thus, people may explore their potentials and pursue goals coherent with their true self, even pushing toward the change of current cultural rules.

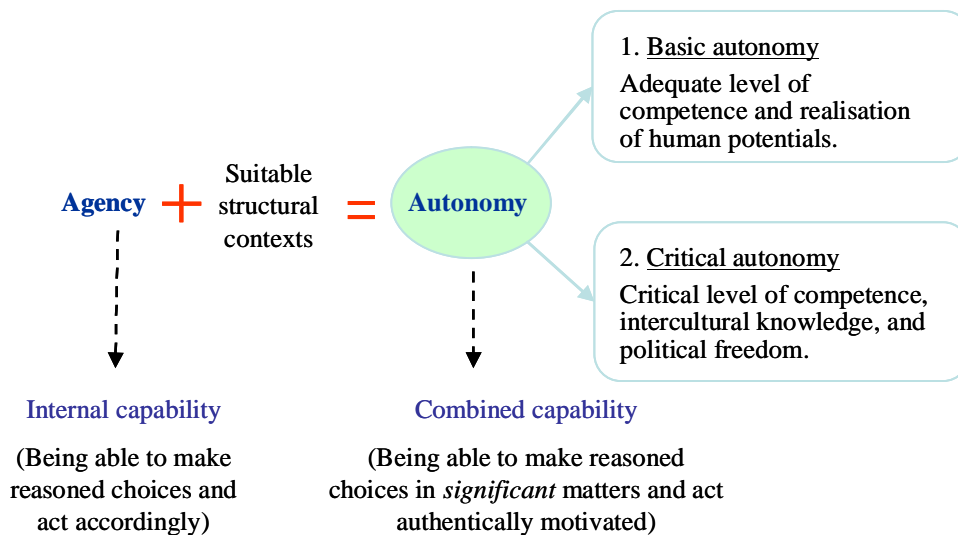
4 A conceptual model of autonomy

There is a long debate about determination of agency and structure and which aspect has priority (Alexander, 1992; Archer, 2002; Booth, 1994; King, 2004; Long, 1992, 2001). The conception put forward here is that both agency and structure are important and that autonomy depends on both.

In this paper, *agency is the internal capability of social actors to make reasoned choices and act accordingly*. Agency is an internal capability and autonomy is a combined capability (in Nussbaum’s sense) because autonomy is exercised in external contexts.

This definition of agency is at a half-way point between Sen’s notion and agency as a human ability to act purposively. Sen’s notion is closer to autonomy in this model, but it explicitly acknowledges the role of structural contexts. Following Nussbaum and Doyal and Gough, the model differentiates two levels of autonomy (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Autonomy as a combined capability and the levels of autonomy



Basic autonomy requires a certain level of competence and achievement in human capabilities so that people can effectively participate in social life. This level of competence depends on the particular cultural setting. In terms of the THN, basic autonomy corresponds to autonomy as freedom of agency. However, agency in this conceptual model is an internal capability, while agency in the THN is a combined capability because it requires certain societal preconditions.

Critical autonomy, the second concept from Doyal and Gough, requires a higher level of competence, intercultural knowledge, and political freedom so that individuals can realise the capabilities that they choose, in structural contexts that may support or restrict their goals.

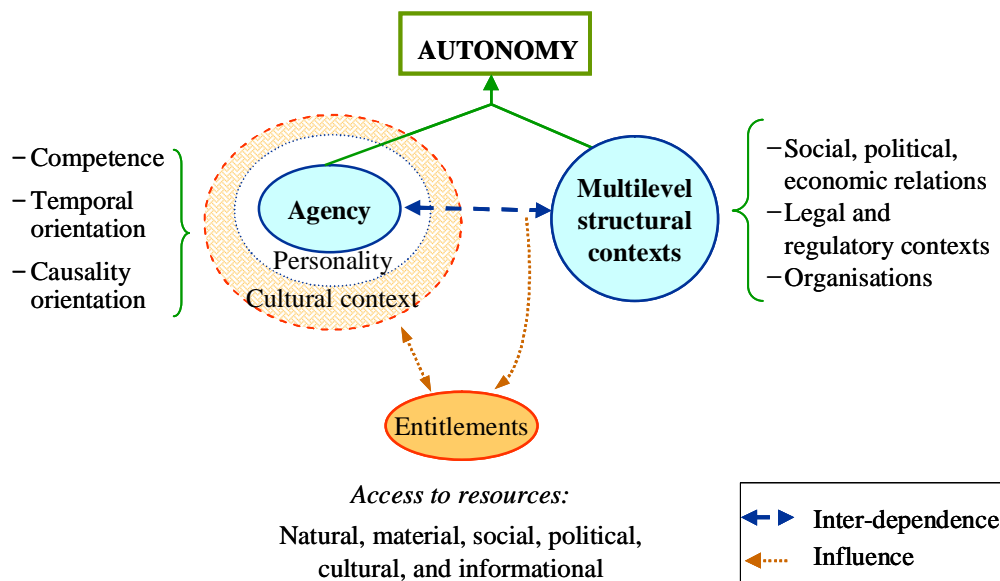
At a conceptual level, autonomy is qualified effective agency. It is *effective* agency because individuals can take action to advance their goals, if they so decide, given that the influence of the contexts is already taken into account – this is the idea of capability as possible reachable outcomes. The nature of institutional arrangements and interpersonal relations is important, not only the internal capacities.

Autonomy is *qualified* agency because the relevant decisions concern significant aspects of life, valued by individuals, which cohere with their values and personality so that they are authentically motivated (section 2). No person exercises autonomy in *every* decision that is made.

In this study, *autonomy is the combined capability of social actors to make reasoned choices in significant matters, authentically motivated, and achieve positive results in their lives.* They apply their agency in structural contexts that may promote or restrict autonomous action, affecting these contexts to different extents.

At a practical level, autonomy as a capability (feasible to be exercised) can be analysed in terms of three determinants: entitlements, agency and multilevel structural contexts, which are to be studied individually and in interaction (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: A conceptual model of autonomy



Agency is determined by personal competence, internal contexts that influence the nature and range of possible actions, and orientations of agency that enable and explain the initiation of action. These factors and the individual entitlements (negotiated in structural contexts) are the inputs to any action.

Personal competence is a foundation of agency

Competence is the capacity to use one’s personal capacities and perform well. These capacities can be physical, intellectual or emotional. Physical capacities include bodily health and strength and the absence of lasting disabilities. These capacities require the provision of universal satisfiers (THN) such as food, protective shelter, basic services,

and health care services. Intellectual capacities include abstract thought, self-reflection, self-knowledge, literacy skills, and so on.

Emotional capacities influence action significantly. Positive emotions support the sense of self-efficacy (Clever, 2007) and aspirations, while negative emotions could block other capacities. Some people could manage and express their emotions in different situations more intelligently and empathetically than others. However, both conscious and unconscious emotions characterise a person's subjectivity and promote connectedness with others (Mumby and Putnam, 1992).

Every adult human being is endowed with *minimum competence* to make choices (Doyal and Gough, 1991; Nussbaum, 1995). As Feinberg (1989, p. 29) explains:

Some competent persons are no doubt more richly endowed with intelligence, judgement, and other relevant capabilities than others, but above the appropriate threshold they are deemed no more competent (qualified) than the others at the 'task' of living their own lives according to their own values as they choose.

Two qualities latent in all human beings require to be supported in order to fuel autonomy: self-confidence and the capacity to aspire.

Self-confidence is essential for autonomy because how individuals regard themselves and their efficacy will partially influence their objectives, aspirations, and perceptions about the opportunities and risks in the external environment (Bandura, 2000). Self-confident people trust their capacity to make appropriate choices, to act on these decisions and generate outcomes (McLeod and Sherwin, 2000). They are more likely to pursue their goals and to be happy (Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2005).

The capacity to aspire is a 'cultural-meta capacity' (Appadurai, 2004, p. 82) because it results from social interactions of individuals over time and place, and it fuels the building of other capacities by individuals themselves. This capacity is reinforced when autonomy is enhanced as authentically motivated people devise plans to realise their aspirations in the world. In this way, 'the boundaries for their actions' can expand. For instance, projects could foster individual aspirations when participants feel that they helped themselves and can continue doing it in the future. They could organise themselves to plan, manage or supervise new projects based on their needs and values.

Internal contexts and orientations of agency give character to autonomy

The model includes two internal contexts (Alexander, 1992, 1993): personality and cultural context. Figure 2 presents them as concentric circles around agency to indicate that these contexts influence agency. The cultural context (larger circle) is filtered by the personality of each individual that gives meaning to the cultural and external contexts.

The cultural context shapes the individuals' motivations and strategies to reproduce and transform meanings and resources in order to pursue their goals in society (Clever, 2007). Since values are informed by culture, autonomous actions that are value-laden decisions also depend on culture (Kabeer, 2000), but individuals endorse values to different degrees because they have unique histories and personalities.

Moreover, agency is influenced by two types of orientation: temporal orientation (Emirbayer and Mische, 1995) and causality orientation (SDT). Table 4 presents the variants of each type.

Table 4: Types of orientations of agency

Temporal orientation	Causality orientation
Iterative (past)	Control (external reasons)
Projective (future)	Autonomy (internal reasons)
Practical-evaluative (present)	Impersonal (no reasons)

Source: Emirbayer and Mische (1995); Deci and Ryan (1985; 2000)

Temporal orientation is the tendency of individuals to give more weight to the past, the future or the present when they analyse possible actions, that is, if they act following past patterns of thought or habits, make judgements in response to events in the evolving situations, or imaginatively generate possible future trajectories of action.⁴ Individuals use the three kinds of orientation to different extents, but one orientation prevails.

Action occurs through time. People understand their own relation with the time differently and show varying degrees of creativity and reflection when engaging in contexts. Their insights change over time so that their behaviours may adjust. Moreover, individuals interact with others in different situations at the same time. Then, a person's temporal orientation may vary with the area of life to which the decision refers and the specific situation. For instance, in the societal domain, people can make family decisions with iterative orientation (e.g., endorsing norms and not deviating) and they can make business decisions with projective orientation (e.g., envisaging alternative trade scenarios for an agricultural project).

Causality orientation, a concept from the SDT, refers to the reasons of a person to act (section 3). He or she could act without intention (impersonal orientation), driven by external reasons (control orientation) or internal reasons (autonomy orientation).

Looking at causality orientation in a study of autonomy is crucial because people can make reasoned choices and act accordingly (i.e., exhibit agency) even when their choices are based on rewards or punishments. It is necessary to understand the reasons why people make certain decisions. For instance, a person who collaborates in the maintenance of communal social infrastructure because donors would visit (control orientation) is much likely to stop this behaviour if he or she perceives that visitors would not arrive anymore. This brings consequences to the sustainability of that infrastructure, in addition to reflect a lack of group identification. Moreover, self-confidence is not an indication of autonomy when it results from 'having behaved as expected'.

Entitlements to resources support individual agency

In contrast to empowerment frameworks (e.g., Alsop *et al.*, 2006) and livelihood approaches (see Carney *et al.*, 1999) that directly refer to assets or capitals, this conceptual model makes explicit that individuals require *entitlements* to develop their competence and exercise autonomy.

Entitlements are resources accessible to the individual that he or she owns or can get through market (e.g. working for a wage to buy food) or non-market channels (e.g., public goods, social transfers, relations). Entitlements are based not only on legal ownership or rights, but also on social legitimisation (Devereux, 2001). In this model, entitlements are to commodity bundles and to intangible resources.

⁴ Each kind of orientation has elements of the past, present and future. Individuals led by an iterative (past) orientation contrast their past experiences to current contingencies in order to produce stable expectations. Likewise, individuals led by a practical-evaluative (present) orientation take into account the consequences of their actions, when selecting how best to achieve their goals.

Entitlements are negotiated in specific contexts and their meaning is given by the use that individuals make of resources, which is culturally influenced. As people engage in interdependent but unequal relations, their access to resources is also unequal. Personal characteristics and circumstances define conditions of negotiation and constraints – ‘entitlement relations’ (Sen, 1982). Hence, the opportunities to enhance agency and autonomy also differ for individuals within contexts.

All aspects related to human skills that allow the exchange of entitlements are part of personal competence in this model – other approaches introduce human capital and psychological assets to the portfolio of resources. In contrast to natural resources, material resources result from the action of human beings so that these include physically-transformed resources based on natural resources, human skills and technology.

Structural contexts may promote or constrain individual autonomy

The *structural contexts* are the external contexts in which individuals negotiate their roles, meanings systems and entitlements (Alexander, 1993). These contexts can be analysed at different levels (e.g., household, local, national or international). They comprise all sets of social relations (economic, political and associational) coordinated with stable or sporadic, formal or informal rules. Organisations with their embedded rules of communication, membership and sovereignty (Hodgson, 2006) are part of these contexts.

Individuals exercise autonomy to different degrees depending on their agency and specific contexts. It is *perceived agency* more than actual agency (based on competence) what influences behaviour. Contexts affect individuals’ self-perception, entitlements and orientations of agency. Consequently, personal and contextual, subjective and objective, factors together explain the initiation of action.

Regrettably, the exercise of autonomy often faces opposition from powerful actors. It is then necessary to look at *options* for significant choices in specific contexts. Autonomy is not merely a reflection capacity that guides value-oriented decisions; it is about being able to enact those decisions and change one’s circumstances, if one so chooses.

At this point, it is worth stressing that although contexts shape values and opportunities, autonomy is an individual feature of unique human beings with their own biographies, emotions, aspirations and commitments. As Christman (1998) affirms, ‘the autonomous person is one who acts, chooses, and judges for herself (however complex, embedded and interconnected with others that self turns out to be)’ (p. 387).

5 *Human development, autonomy and empowerment*

From an evaluative point of view, human development refers to an improvement in people’s lives and the opportunities to achieve that improvement (Gasper, 2004). Well-being refers to the quality of those lives in multiple dimensions: what people are, what they do, what they can become, what they feel, in which relations they engage, and so on. Hence, *human development* is seen when people experience a positive change in their well-being (i.e., outcomes), including objective and subjective aspects, or an expansion of their capabilities or valuable human potentials (i.e., opportunities).

Human development is a process, not a fixed destination with a pre-determined path. Human beings are in continuous pursuit of exercising their potentials and they do this in different ways in specific contexts.

Autonomy fosters human development

Autonomy is intrinsically valuable for well-being. People value helping themselves in significant aspects of their lives and they do exercise autonomy, to different extents (Long, 1992). Nevertheless, the poorest and most excluded people in many occasions cannot choose and access certain crucial resources. Promoting a truly human development requires helping them to exercise their voice and changing the terms in which development as merely material progress has been pursued (cf. Carmen, 2000; Max-Neef *et al.*, 1991).

Autonomy is related to human development in two ways. First, human development promotes autonomy because it expands human potentials and people's opportunities to participate in social life. Second, autonomy supports human development because the more autonomous people are in better position to expand the potentials they most value. If necessary, they can enact significant social change in coordination with others to pursue common goals, improving their present and future well-being.

Therefore, the promotion of autonomy and human development can go in parallel. Development initiatives should explicitly promote the expansion of individual autonomy (Muñiz Castillo and Gasper, 2009).

Empowerment is a special type of expansion of autonomy

Empowerment has been broadly discussed (e.g., Narayan, 2002; Alsop *et al.*, 2006) although sometimes overused given its relatively imprecise meaning. In this model, empowerment refers to the exercise of autonomy, considering the effectiveness of decisions. Three questions are useful to evaluate if there has been empowerment:

- (i) Do people act in pursuing their objectives? (Process freedom)⁵
- (ii) Do external influences produce the expected results? (Opportunity freedom).
- (iii) Does the action produce the expected results? (Process and opportunity freedom)

The analysis of empowerment focuses on the third question, but the other questions are also relevant. For example, a housing project is important because it provides physical security, even if the project beneficiaries did not elaborate the project proposal, did not choose the house design or did not work in the construction activities. It is desirable that people enjoy positive outcomes even if they do not participate in the process to achieve them. Their well-being and agency will be enhanced.

For this reason, 'the expansion of autonomy' and not only 'empowerment' is important for human development. However, empowerment should be of priority because it supports the capacity of people to effect change in their own lives.

Autonomy can be expanded by improving its determinants as a capability (agency, entitlements and structural contexts) or supporting its exercise (i.e., the functioning). Empowerment goes beyond. It is seen when individuals *exercise* decision-making in valuable aspects of their life, they feel responsible for the consequences of such decisions because they were authentically motivated, and (i) they are able to defend these deci-

⁵ Sen (1985; 1996; 2002/2003) classifies freedom in two types: process and opportunity freedom. *Process freedom* is the control that a person has over the process of choice. The person has relevant options and takes decisions, although he or she might not achieve his or her goals. *Opportunity freedom* is the power that a person has to achieve his or her goals because either the person makes successful choices or the outcomes are caused by others.

sions in the face of opposition (Drydyk, 2006) or (ii) they are able to make reinforcements, so that positive *outcomes* are sustained.

Given that many contextual factors can explain outcomes and people make decisions based on (incomplete) information at their reach, autonomous actions might not be effective. However, people could still *feel empowered* if they perceived that the causes for failure were beyond their control. Nonetheless, recurrent failures could harm autonomy causality orientation and aspirations. People could search for 'compensatory activities or substitute fulfilments' and 'step up their efforts' to exercise autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p. 231).

Because for poor people, individual effectiveness is difficult (as they lack entitlements, relatively speaking), collective action is often the major way to exercise claims and pursue goals. Actions such as maintaining local sanitation system, cleaning common roads, denouncing thieves or solidary agriculture work can result in expanded capabilities for individuals (Comin and Carey, 2001; Evans, 2002), and intrinsically enhance individual self-respect (Stewart, 2005) and perceived agency. However, not all kinds of collective action promote individual autonomy, only the one that supports human learning and cooperation does (Carmen, 2000). This kind of collective action also fuels a sense of collective influence on the social conditions of one's life (Clever, 2007).

Empowerment is related to power; it is not a neutral concept (Drydyk, 2006; Chambers, 2004; Lyons *et al.*, 2001). In this model, empowerment refers to 'power to' or positive freedom to pursue goals, but also includes the idea of 'power over' (Eyben, 2004) as actions could affect power relations and social arrangements. However, empowerment of some is not always at the expense of others. Power is not possessed, accumulated or depleted, but it emerges out of processes of social interaction (Long, 1992).

For example, beneficiaries of a water project, who have more options to use their time and money and feel more competent (healthier), may be interested in community issues. If they discussed their ideas with their neighbours, they could positively affect everyone's welfare and collective action could be more effective ('power with'). In this case, leaders could have to re-negotiate roles (e.g., who sits to discuss what) and entitlements (e.g., who benefits from new projects and how much in relation to others). During the process, if leaders helped others to participate more actively in relevant issues by making relevant information available and opening spaces for discussion, the power of leaders would not be lower than before but of a different nature. It would turn from 'power over' to 'power to empower' (Chambers, 2004, p. 27).

6 Conclusions

This paper has presented a conceptual model to study autonomy. It asserts that autonomy is intrinsically valuable because it is part of well-being and is also instrumental to promote human development.

Because human lives and individual perceptions about the world are shaped in society, autonomy is different from independence. Furthermore, entitlements are negotiated in structural contexts and their meaning is culturally influenced.

Autonomy is promoted when individuals acquire meaningful and attainable options to reach alternative lifestyles, when their intermediate needs are covered (THN), when they interact in horizontal social networks with relevant information sharing, when they trust themselves and their competence because they exercised autonomy in the past, and when they face structural contexts that promote choice instead of coercion or controls.

Moreover, individuals themselves are the ones who actualise their potentials when they take opportunities exercising their autonomy. It is necessary to promote the opening up of opportunities by influencing multilevel structural contexts, supporting self-confidence and the capacity to aspire, and enhancing 'the personal but learned skills of reasoning and acting' (Gasper, 2000, p. 998) that are foundations for autonomy.

Empowerment is a special type of expansion of autonomy that fosters human development. If people make significant decisions that are effective, their self-confidence and autonomy causality orientation will improve. Enhancements in autonomy can go in parallel with the promotion of human development because autonomy improves the quality of human development when people live the development process as their own.

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