
4 Self-Determination from a Pacific Perspective

Patricia L. Ewalt and Noreen Mokuau

Separation from external influences in one's decision making is so highly valued in the United States that autonomy is considered to be a benchmark of one's maturity. However, self-determination without consideration of group-oriented values is discordant with non-Western and some Western orientations. Using examples from Pacific peoples, this article highlights the complex loop of self-determination in which an emphasis is placed on group welfare in individual decision-making. Implications for social work practice are discussed.

Key words: group values; group welfare; Hawaiians; Samoans; self-determination

Self-determination is viewed as a fundamental principle of social work. Indeed, Levy (1983) observed a "reflection in the social work literature of a preoccupation, if not an obsession, with the concept and ramifications of client self-determination" (p. 904). An examination of such a fundamental principle provides an opportunity to assess its relevance and applicability for multicultural populations.

It has been proposed that the principle of self-determination is universal. However, in its current use, the term "self-determination" is overly reliant on Northern European-American individualistic values; therefore, the practice implications for social work are substantial. Practice that urges individuals toward self-realization without consideration of group-oriented values is discordant with non-Western orientations (Budman, Lipson, & Meleis, 1992; Inclan & Hernandez, 1992; Pedersen, Fukuyama, & Heath, 1989; Tung, 1991) and may be inappropriate for many Western people as well (Papajohn & Spiegel, 1975).

This article examines prevailing interpretations of self-determination as suggested in the literature and also presents the high valuation on group

preferences among Pacific peoples using case examples. The article suggests how social work practice can be improved through a reinterpretation of the meaning of self-determination.

Interpretations of Self-Determination

Separation from the Group

Weick and Pope (1988) summarized *self-determination* as "clients' right to make their own decisions, their right to actively participate in the helping process, and their right to lead a life of their own choosing" (p. 10). Freedberg (1989) provided a similar definition: "self-determination, that condition in which personal behavior emanates from a person's own wishes, choices, and decisions" (p. 33). In composing this definition, Freedberg relied on an essay by Berlin (1975), "Two Concepts of Liberty," in which the author discussed the freedom or liberty to do or be what one wants to do or be without interference by other people and the idea that humans are capable of rationally determining their own actions.

Thus, self-determination is clearly linked with the literature from which the prevailing

middle-class American ethic of individualism is drawn:

The feeling of being in control is especially important to people whose parents and grandparents lived lives so dominated by insecurity that control—and self-reliance—became the prerequisites for nearly everything else. Greater control spells more security, and with sufficient security people can start to loosen unwanted social ties and to make more of their own choices about their lives. (Gans, 1988, p. 2)

Rooted in individualism, self-determination is discussed in terms of freedom of the individual to exercise self-direction and choice (Hollis, 1966) and of full development of the personality and an inner capacity for knowing what is best (Weick & Pope, 1988). Indeed, as Gans (1988) delineated, freedom from group expectations is regarded as self-reliance, a sign of strength. Separation from the group, as contrasted with belonging to the group, is viewed as providing the security that people desire (Schwartz, 1989).

Equivalence to Maturity

Separation from external influences on one's decision making is so highly valued in the United States that autonomy is considered to be a benchmark of one's maturity. Personal control is viewed as fundamental to one's self-development (Gans, 1988), and the assumption exists that the more a person feels and acts autonomous of the group, the more healthy and mature the person.

In the individualistic view, external forces are enemies of self-determination. External forces of society are seen as constant threats to the individual's freedom to choose (Lemmon, 1983; Levy, 1983). Rarely is contributing to the group's well-being considered integral to self-determination, and rarely is placing the group's well-being first seen as signifying maturity.

Group Well-being as a Component of Self-Determination

A more complex understanding of self-determination, extending beyond identity solely with individualism, is provided by cultures other than those descended from Northern Europe. Inherent in many cultures are values that emphasize the collective over the individual as a perspective on self-determination. In addition, populations of color have experienced histories of oppression

that have further affected their ideas of autonomy and maturity.

Oppression and Self-Determination

Dana (1981) emphasized the contrast between the views of middle-class, white Americans and people of color about self-determination:

The core belief of middle-class, white America in autonomy, or immanent self-sufficiency, has never been a major component of the heritage of minority groups [American Indians, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans].

All four of these minority groups differ from most white, middle-class people in their world view. They typically experience less personal power, feel less control over their own lives, and they may also feel that they should not be directly responsible for themselves or experience greater control over their own lives. Such world view differences suggest that many current mental health and rehabilitation practices requiring responsibility, initiative, and personal involvement for their success simply will not make sense to many minority persons. (p. 354)

Pinderhughes (1983) provided insight into the relative meaninglessness of self-determination when people, their families, and their social groups are powerless: "The existence or non-existence of power on one level of human functioning . . . affects and is affected by its existence or nonexistence on other levels of functioning—for example, intrapsychic, familial, community-ethnic-cultural, and societal" (p. 332). Gutierrez (1990) explicated "the effect that [group] powerlessness has on reducing the ability to exercise personal control" (p. 149). Whereas white, middle-class people may desire self-reliance, people of color may "go it alone" out of despair. When the stresses become extreme and families are totally overwhelmed, they learn to function in an autonomous fashion and to value going it alone. This comes not from a goal of self-actualization and realization but from feeling a sense of being alone and without any help (Pinderhughes, 1983).

Yet this very separation from the group causes the family to become vulnerable through isolation. Enhancement of connection to and strengthening of the group is indicated as contrasting with strengthening of autonomy (Pinderhughes, 1983).

Through considering the condition of oppression, one can appreciate that discerning appraisal is required to comprehend how the concept of self-determination may apply to each person. Self-expression is an insufficient criterion. Individual achievement, attained competitively and through deciding what is best for one's self or immediate family, may in fact be devalued both by the person and the group. As paradoxical as it may seem from an individualistic perspective, self-directedness may require a strengthening rather than a dissolution of the person's connection with and commitment to the group.

A Pacific Perspective

Self-determination for the cultures of the Pacific region is defined by values of collective affiliation rather than by individualism. Pacific cultures are scattered across 64 million square miles of Pacific Ocean (Quigg, 1987) in the geographic areas of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. There is a rich diversity among Pacific island cultures in historical origins, languages, social organization, levels of political integration, and lifestyle practices (Linnekin & Poyer, 1990; Oliver, 1988). Diversity also exists in acculturation and the degree to which Pacific peoples adopt the worldviews and values of American culture. However, within this diversity, there is a common emphasis on group affiliation that is the basis for a unique perspective on self-determination.

An essential element of Pacific island cultures is the affiliative nature of relationships: "The person is not an individual in our Western sense of the term. The person is instead a locus of shared biographies: personal histories of people's relationships with other people and with other things. The relationship defines the person, not vice-versa" (Lieber, 1990, p. 72). An individual is characterized by social relationships and a shared identity that comes from "sharing food, water, land, spirits, knowledge, work and social activities" (Linnekin & Poyer, 1990, p. 8). Illustrations of the importance of Pacific Islander group identity and cohesiveness are plentiful. For

example, Micronesians such as the Trukese have traditionally relied on the matrilineage as a source of identity (Hezel, 1989). Polynesians such as the Maoris talk about "group rhythm" (Kanahele, 1986) and the importance of the gathering and uniting of people (Stirling & Salmond, 1985). The Chamorros of Guam in Polynesia emphasize traditional values of role interdependence and reciprocity (Untalan, 1991) in identity formation. The identities of the Solomon Islanders in Melanesia originate in strong attachments to the land and the interrelationships of the family system (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 1985).

The pronounced value of group identity and cohesiveness among the diverse cultures of the Pacific region undergirds other major values and permeates lifestyle practices. The following sections examine the dominant position of values and practices of group affiliation among the two largest Pacific Islander populations in the United States—Hawaiian and Samoan.

Hawaiian Culture

In Hawaiian culture, the individual is viewed in the context of relationships. A person is defined by others and defines himself or herself by the quality of his or her relationships with family members, the community, the land, and the

spiritual world (Ito, 1987; Mokuau & Tauili'i, 1992). According to Handy and Pukui (1977), the Hawaiian concept of the individual is most clearly depicted in the matrix of the 'ohana (family). The family, which consists of relatives by blood, marriage, and adoption, extends on a genealogical continuum binding people from the past, present, and future. Emphasis is consistently placed on the needs of the family unit rather than on the needs of any individual member.

Three values that reflect the strong emphasis on relationships in the Hawaiian family and group are *laulima* (cooperation), *kokua* (helpfulness), and *lokahi* (unity). Kanahele (1986) described the integral nature of these values in Hawaiian culture:

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The term *laulima* means many hands, and it expresses perfectly the Hawaiian sense of all persons in the family working together for a common purpose. Once established in the behavior of the basic 'ohana unit, cooperation was easily transferred to working with other 'ohana in a communal setting. . . . Inseparably linked with cooperation is the value of *kokua*. . . a willingness of individuals to work voluntarily with each other. (p. 347)

Each member of a family or group has a defined assignment, and members "collaborate in unity (*lokahi*), subordinating personal glory to reaching the goals of the whole group" (pp. 347-348). Contributions to unity and harmony are more valued in Hawaiian culture than are competitive success or self-satisfaction (Howard, 1974).

Lifestyle practices that support the value of group affiliation are numerous and include honoring commitments to family and friends, providing aid to people in need, and engaging in situations of cooperative fellowship, even when these situations incur material deprivation for oneself (Howard, 1974).

Vignette 1. Leialoha, a Hawaiian man, is a skilled automobile mechanic who is consistently called on by family and friends to repair their personal cars. He is not known for turning people down and has willingly serviced relatives' and friends' cars at the end of his work day and often on weekends. He refuses monetary compensation, even though he still struggles with his own financial worries, and is most appreciative of the companionship and food that are shared with him once cars are repaired. Sometimes his generosity has extended to giving away special and costly automobile tools that family members or friends have admired. The frequent requests by family and friends are testimony to people's confidence in Leialoha's skills and their recognition of his inclination to help others.

Vignette 2. Debra, a Hawaiian woman, was interested in practicing medicine in the community in which she had recently completed her medical education. Here she was offered a physician's position with a reputable family clinic and a good salary. Combined with her comfortable living quarters and her network of friends, remaining in this community was an attractive option for Debra. However, her family, and in particular her parents, wished for Debra to estab-

lish her practice in the community in which she was raised. To do so would require her to move from the city back to her native community. Although there were a few moments of hesitation, Debra quickly adjusted and aligned her values with those of her family. She reasoned that by returning to her native community she would be reunited with her family and be available to provide medical care to members of her family and a community with severe health problems.

Samoan Culture

Samoan culture places a strong emphasis on relationships. "Dominant values . . . in Samoan culture focus on the family, communal relationships and the church" (Mokuau & Chang, 1991, p. 159). The family is viewed as the most important agency of human interactions (Territory of American Samoa, Office of the Governor, 1990).

Life is organized around the *aiga* (family) or the *aiga potopoto* (extended family), which are hierarchal systems with clearly defined roles. The highly structured organization of the family defines an individual's roles and responsibilities and guides the individual in interactions with others. In Samoan culture, older people have status over young people, titled people such as *matais* (chiefs) have status over untitled people, men have status over women, and men and women have status over children (Brigham Young University, Language and Intercultural Research Center, 1977).

One Samoan proverb captures the importance of the family: "*Sei fono le pa'a ma ona vae*" (Let the crab meet with his legs). According to Fuhrel (1980), the crab is the family and the legs are the different members of the family. The proverb means that when there is a gathering of families and a decision is not made, a chief may indicate that he has to consult with his family before he can decide his answer.

Each family member works for the well-being of the entire extended family, which sometimes may be as large as an entire village (Mokuau & Tauili'ili, 1992). The church assumes a pivotal role in reinforcing the closely structured social order and harmonious functioning of the family. In turn, families support the activities and practices of the church through attending regularly and donating financial contributions and volunteer time. The values that support this group orientation include reciprocity (the mutual exchange

of services, goods, and privileges), interdependence, and cooperation (Mokuau & Tauili'ili, 1992).

Several lifestyle practices reflect and reinforce the importance of relationships in Samoan culture. One of the best known ritualized practices of Samoan culture is sometimes referred to as "trouble" (*fa'alavelave*) (Calkins, 1962), the practice of mutual support during lifecycle events such as weddings, christenings, and funerals. It is referred to as "trouble" because of the constant depletion of resources to support the collective.

Sharing is also an inherent part of Samoan culture. Attached to sharing, however, is a cultural expectation that the person who receives a gift will reciprocate the act at some later time: "Families share with their neighbors and friends. . . . We give or share something with someone and they give something in return" (Tusa, 1982, p. 17).

Vignette 1. Pita, a Samoan man, moved to the western United States about six years ago with his wife and two children. When members of his extended family travel to the United States, they often stay with Pita and rely on his household for shelter, food, and other assistance. Last year, Pita's household of four expanded to include one uncle, two cousins, and four nieces and nephews. In addition to assisting and caring for extended family members when they visit, Pita also sends money back to his family in American Samoa for special events. Several *fa'alavelave* occurred last year, including the birth of a first son to his sister, the marriage of another sister, and the death of an elder, and each time Pita sent money home.

Vignette 2. Susan brings to her new home in the United States a sense of sharing and relationship that draws from her Samoan heritage. Examples relate to her generosity with Samoan products such as *tapa* (cloth), coconut soap, and fine mat that she has brought from Samoa to her new home. When a non-Samoan friend visited Susan's home and admired a *tapa* wall hanging that covered a large portion of the hallway wall, Susan went into her bedroom and came back with another large *tapa* product and offered it to her friend. The friend, very surprised and a little embarrassed, finally accepted the gift and desired to reciprocate Susan's gracious gesture.

Context of Oppression

As populations of color, Hawaiian, Samoan, and other Pacific Islander groups have historically ex-

perienced oppression from colonizing nations that have undermined the efforts of Pacific nations at self-government (Trask, 1989). The sovereign nation movement of Hawaiians in the 1990s is an example of a people collectively asserting their rights for self-governance (Mokuau, in press). Hawaiians are recognizing that political, economic, educational, and health benefits and privileges cannot occur as long as the entire population is disenfranchised. Self-determination for Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders has greater meaning in the sense of the entire population's empowerment. As social work pioneer Bertha Capen Reynolds suggested, the self-directing potential of individuals cannot be increased without considering economic and political realities (cited in Freedberg, 1989).

Implications for Social Work

Definition of Self-Determination

Self-determination has two definitions. One is concerned with self-direction—that "only the individual knows or can come to know what he or she needs in order to live and to grow fully" (Weick & Pope, 1988, p. 13). In this connotation, the client's self-direction for what to do and be is held preeminent over decisions that the professional authority might prefer. The burden of proof for a departure from this rule rests with the professional person.

The second definition is that one should be free to do or be what one wants without group restraints (Berlin, 1975; Freedberg, 1989; Gans, 1988). However, reference to one's own wishes separate from one's social ties is not necessarily appropriate. Decision making is more complex than separating into exclusive categories what is in other people's interest and what is in one's own interest. It is necessary to appreciate how contributions to group interest may ultimately strengthen the person as well.

In addition to non-Western peoples, reference to group rather than individual interests may be a dominant feature with Western people of lower socioeconomic class and women. For example, according to Schneider and Smith (1987), "whereas the middle class lays strong emphasis upon the self-sufficiency and solidarity of the nuclear family against all other kinship ties and groupings, [in] the lower class . . . the emphasis is upon keeping open the options—upon

maximizing the number of relationships which involve diffuse solidarity" (p. 221). Similarly, women are more inclined toward a more collectivist orientation than are men (Benhabib, 1987; Gilligan, 1987; Kaplan, 1984; Leventhal-Belfer, Cowan, & Cowan, 1992). In this respect, there may be a convergence of feminine values with non-European values (Harding, 1987). The situation, however, is not so clear-cut as to support the notion that women necessarily desire to be collectivist in orientation. Indeed, in some definitions of feminism, it is deemed that "women should become more competitive, assertive, individualistic, and self-directed" (Nes & Iadicola, 1989). Costin (1992) attributed a decline in interest in the problem of cruelty to children to a diminishing connection between women's and children's issues within feminism, seemingly indicating an increase in individualism and a lessening of relational qualities within at least some forms of feminism. Variations related to gender nevertheless re-emphasize the importance of careful identification of the pathway each person desires to take toward self-determination. For some this may be a renewal, not a shunning, of obligations to others.

Assessment, Goal Setting, and Intervention

The principle of self-determination, in the sense of freedom from imposition of the social worker's goals, continues to apply from the earliest moments of contact with individuals, families, and groups. As Pinderhughes (1989) commented, traditional approaches have tended to emphasize diagnosis and cure as "fixed entities not dependent on the individual's perception of what is wrong and what needs fixing" (pp. 13-14). Hence, the assessment may tend to be based on what the professional thinks clients ought to view, rather than what clients do view, as wrong.

Self-determination, however, may include fulfilling group obligations, not necessarily ridding oneself of them. Part of the assessment entails assessing the extent of clients' identity with their cultural group of origin and whether they wish to strengthen this identity (Pinderhughes, 1989). Goal setting may include strengthening ties with extended family and community as ends in themselves and also as a support for achieving other desired goals.

Methods of choice in working with clients toward their goals are also an aspect of self-determination. As described by Dana (1981), actions in

conjunction with and under the influence of the extended family may be most desired. Therefore, observance of self-determination should be enhanced in all aspects of practice. The principle should, however, be separated from any inherent connection with self-directedness apart from group relationships.

Practice Theory

It appears that the fundamentally valid principle of self-determination has acquired, through use in a particular context, a culturally biased interpretation. Independence was prized over interdependence, individual status over group achievement. Instead, the values of interdependence should be given equal weight with independence as people define their problems and goals. Independence from group goals is not necessarily a measure of health or maturity.

Furthermore, each fundamental principle of social work should be subjected to scrutiny to assess cultural bias. Gould (1988) suggested a "recognition of ideological value imperatives and prescriptions underlying practice models" (p. 145). A systematic reanalysis is required of universal practice principles to determine if they are fundamentally flawed or culturally biased. ■

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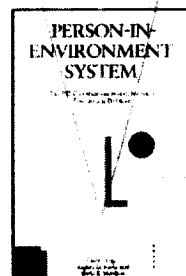
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