Human Nature in Liberal and Participatory Democratic Theory: The Search for Personal Competence

Kay Monaghan Knickrehm

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops

Part of the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol10/iss2/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Politics at CCU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Political Science by an authorized editor of CCU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact commons@coastal.edu.
Human nature is a central concept in normative political theory. Using their conceptions of man’s nature as a building block, theorists have constructed philosophies constrained by those fundamental beliefs. From Plato’s beliefs concerning virtue to Locke’s views on rationality, a certain conception of human predispositions is central to the logical integrity of a given philosophy; for conceptions of human limitations and potentialities determine the political options available. In democratic theory, assumptions about human nature have had a major impact on considerations of the role of the citizen in government.

A major area of disagreement between classical liberal democratic theory (and its derivative, pluralist theory) on the one hand and participatory theory on the other concerns the role of citizen participation in democratic societies. For the liberal theorists, political participation is a means to an end. Its major function is to protect the individual’s interests. In participatory democratic theory, participation is to some extent an end in itself. Individuals are encouraged to participate in the policy-making process whether or not their interests are directly affected by the issues being considered.

The difference in these approaches to democracy can be traced to their different conceptions of human nature. In liberal theory, people are viewed as consumers driven by their appetites. In participatory theory, people are seen as developers, interested in creating and doing.

A concern with human nature is not limited to political theorists. The concerns which have occupied democratic theorists for the last several centuries are mirrored in recent studies in psychology. Differences in human nature among psychologists reflect the differing views of liberal and participatory theorists.

Psychologists have addressed views of human nature and human needs in analyzing personality development. There is widespread agreement among them on a need for mastery of the environment. The differences which appear in psychological theory revolve around the motivation for the mastery urge. Early psychologists argued that the ego develops to satisfy instinctual tissue needs. This view is consistent with that of man as consumer. The organism learns to master the environment in order to satisfy its appetites. Other theorists have rejected this model as inadequate to explain the

Kay Monaghan Knickrehm
James Madison University

*An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 1980 Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association Atlanta, Georgia, November 6-8, 1980.
mastery urge and have identified this urge as a motivation in and of itself. These theorists address the developmental aspects of human nature.

The debate over the quantity of involvement desirable and the quality of involvement possible in democratic societies is not a dead issue. Much of the empirical research on participation is colored by researchers’ own orientations toward democratic theory. The pluralists approach the subject from the perspective that a fairly limited citizen role is necessary and even desirable. Modern participatory theorists seek to expand this role. Psychological theory cannot provide answers in this debate; however, the models constructed by the psychologists can aid in the evaluation of each side of the argument.

The Tenison-Reduction Model

Although psychologists have debated whether or not the human urge to master the environment deserves the status of an instinct or drive, they leave little doubt that a considerable amount of human energy is spent in seeking this mastery. In Freud’s analysis, instincts create tension. The ego develops to reduce tension through its interactions with the environment. The major stimuli are internal tissue needs. While Freud’s identification of basic drives does not include an urge for personal control he does note that self-preservation is an important ego task. In order to satisfy his cravings and so reduce tension, the individual increasingly seeks to bring the environment under his or her control.¹

Other psychologists have analyzed the human need to manipulate the environment more directly while adhering to the tension-reduction model. Fenichel argues that the urge for mastery arises as a response to anxiety. The pleasure received from mastery reduces anxiety. In fact, Fenichel argues that when the organism is fully competent in a given situation, it’s actions are no longer a source of pleasure. Without anxiety there is no mastery urge.²

Stanley Renshon in building a political theory of personal control accepts the deficit model. He argues that the infant is unprepared at birth to care for itself. Learning to control the environment is essential for survival. Renshon states that the most important areas of mastery are those involved with biological satisfaction or separation anxiety.³

What these approaches share is a view of mastery as a means to an end. As such these approaches are entirely consistent with liberal democratic theory’s belief that human beings are self-interested consumers. The urge for mastery is directly tied to the satisfaction of primarily physical needs. The organism is motivated by a desire to satisfy its needs and interaction with the environment is dedicated to that purpose.
The Drives for Autonomy and Homonomy

In the 1940's, the tension-reduction model began to be criticized by a number of modern psychologists as inadequate to explain the complex mastery behavior. Andras Angyal in his *Foundations for a Science of Personality* identifies two different areas of individual interaction with the environment. Both of these lead to an increase in individual autonomy or personal control. The first, referred to as assimilation, is a process of consumption. The individual consumes those things in the environment necessary for the satisfaction of basic needs. Through the assimilation process, environmental factors come more and more under the control of the organism. Originally the balance of autonomy is heavily tilted toward the environment, but gradually as the organism learns to manipulate the environment successfully, the balance tilts in its favor. Angyal states "Thus the process of assimilation can be regarded as a specific manifestation of the general dynamic trend of the organism toward increased autonomy."

The assimilation process is entirely consistent with the tension-reduction model; however a second area, transformation, goes beyond this model. Transforming activities are those designed to create planned changes in the environment. Angyal identifies the aim of transformation as the elimination of disturbing influences and service to the individual's physical needs; but while assimilation directly satisfies immediate physical needs, transformation is directed toward long-term satisfaction. Going beyond immediate gratification, transformation aims for security. It is in the transformation process that creative and aesthetic urges receive satisfaction.

In addition to the drive for autonomy, Angyal identifies a second trend in human behavior. The drive for homonomy is a desire for union with something greater than the individual. It is a desire for community, for a sense of belonging. Homonomy like autonomy, has its roots in biological necessity. Angyal points to the need in humans for an extended relationship between mother and child after birth. This initial, biologically necessary relationship provides the individual with expectations concerning relationships with others and society. Angyal argues that human attitudes toward super-individual units are a powerful source of motivation.

Although these two drives may at times contradict one another, they often are in harmony. The drive for autonomy is individualistic while the drive for homonomy is communal; however, in practice one does not necessarily lose one's individuality by identifying with a community, rather one expands one's conception of self beyond narrow individual considerations.

The Self-Actualization Model

Angyal argues that the drives toward autonomy and homonomy are initiated by physical needs, however, the process of transformation and the
drive for homonomy are so removed from the original, natural stimuli that they are perceived by the individual as ends in themselves rather than as means.

Increasingly, psychological theory and research have come to view manipulation of the environment as fundamental to human behavior. Further, this drive for personal control or autonomy is seen as removed from direct instigation by the primary drives addressing deficits in the organism. Although some degree of mastery of the environment is necessary for human survival, specific activity in this sphere is not dictated by an immediate physical need.

R. S. Woodworth distinguishes between need-primacy and behavior-primacy theories of motivation. He views mastery of the environment from the standpoint of behavior primacy. He notes that children's play, while serving the ultimate end of preparing humans for survival in the world, is certainly not perceived as such by them. The behavior itself is perceived as important, rather than the biological end it serves.

Robert White notes that if the human individual waited until his or her physical needs demanded manipulation of the environment, human survival would be threatened. Survival skills must be learned before a need for them arises. The urge for mastery of the environment is divorced in time from its natural cause and thus is perceived by the individual as an end in itself. He refers to the ability to interact effectively with the environment as competence and concludes:

... it is maintained that competence cannot be fully acquired simply through behavior instigated by drives. It receives substantial contributions from activities which though playful and exploratory in character, at the same time show direction, selectivity, and persistence in interacting with the environment. Such activities in the ultimate service of competence must therefore be conceived to be motivated in their own right.

The model developed by Woodworth, White and other is consistent with the view of human nature as that of a developer or creator. Important basic motivations exist which are not directly linked to material satisfactions. This model has serious implications for democratic theory. This model will be referred to as the self-actualization model.

Classical Liberal Democratic Theory and the Tension-Reduction Model

Liberal democratic theory and pluralist theory view man as a self-interested consumer. Each individual competes with others to satisfy his or her appetites. Intensive political activity is expected to be related to one or two salient interests. It is rational to refrain from political activity if one is basically satisfied with the status quo or if one feels that government has little immediate effect on one's primary interests. That large numbers of in-
individuals do not participate regularly is seen as largely a matter of individual choice and has been interpreted as support for the system. Mass participation is limited in practice to electoral activity. Such activity performs an essentially protective function. The citizen is protected from excessively bad government by the power to remove from office those policymakers that are perceived to have acted against the best interests of the voter. Although it is tied to the satisfaction of individual interest, electoral activity does have some additional intrinsic value. Citizens are expected to receive psychic satisfaction from exercising their voting rights, regardless of the election's outcome.

Liberal and pluralist theory recognize a human need to manage the environment, but this need is considered largely within the context of self-interest. Participation is a means to an end. The interest group system provides a mechanism for individuals to further intensely held private interests and electoral activity allows the citizen to express more general interests.

If the tension-reduction model is accepted as an adequate explanation of human motivation to master the environment, then liberal democratic and pluralist theory provide ample opportunities for political mastery. Political activity is a means for acquiring values from the political system. When the individual's interests are threatened, he or she may become active in the interest group process or through electoral activity. When these interests are not threatened, passivity is a rational choice. Salience is a key factor in determining levels of political activity.

Renshon in developing a need theory of political efficacy and participation argues that there are three conditions of political salience. Two of these, political reward salience and political punishment salience are relevant to the tension-reduction model. Political reward salience occurs when the individual perceives that the political system is the major source of desired benefits. When the policy decisions of government are viewed as interfering with the individual's goals, a condition of political punishment salience exists. Renshon identifies a third area of salience, political obligation salience, which exists when an individual has a strong sense of citizen duty.  

Approaching the need for control from a deficit model, Renshon argues that salience leads to increased participation as individuals try to satisfy their demands. As government expands, politics becomes increasingly salient. Therefore more and more citizens are experiencing a need to participate. Renshon is an advocate of participatory democracy, arguing that the pluralist system does not provide ample opportunities for participation, if salience increases. His argument for a need to participate is a persuasive one, however, his arguments for a participatory system are weakened by his reliance on the tension-reduction model. Pluralist theory does provide opportunities for self-interested participation. If the interest group process as it exists does not provide ample opportunities for influence, then it can be enlarged and equalized without being dismantled. As long as the need to
participate is tied to specific interests, then the pluralist system can provide the necessary mechanisms for that participation. It may even represent the best model under that condition. Purely self-interested participation in a participatory democracy, which allows direct participation in policy-making, may seriously overload the system. It is when we consider other motivations for participation and human nature not limited to self-interest, that the pluralist system becomes inadequate. Voting is not an effective management tool. It is intermittent activity that does not involve the citizen directly in day to day decision making.

Participatory Democratic Theory and the Self-Actualization Model

Participatory theory views the opportunities for participation in liberal and pluralist theory as inadequate because it establishes functions for participation other than the satisfaction of specific interests. The human need to master the environment is tied to the developmental aspects of human nature. In the long run, the development of personal control is important for the satisfaction of material needs, but the individual receives satisfaction from the exercise of control independent of its immediate effect on his or her interests. Even when the citizen’s needs are satisfied without it, the individual benefits from political activity and is subject to alienation if denied this activity. Participatory theory does not divorce participation from its immediate ends. Participation must be perceived as meaningful by the individual in order to provide any positive benefits, however, participation provides benefits far beyond the immediate satisfaction of material needs.

Under participatory theory, one of the primary functions of political participation is developmental. By increasing the individual’s sense of personal control, it increases his or her self-esteem. In addition, the participant actually becomes more skillful as his or her experience in government grows. In this way, participation aids individuals in developing their human capabilities to the fullest. The opportunity for personal development through participation is as important a function of participation as is the regulation of the political process.

A second function identified in participatory theory is related to the first. Political participation is expected to have an educative effect. Through participation the individual learns to be a public as well as a private citizen. In addition to learning to be a more effective participant, one learns values of compromise and cooperation and so becomes a more democratic citizen.

Participation limited to occasional electoral activity is not considered sufficient to perform these functions. Infrequent visits to the polls, where one’s vote is lost in hundreds of thousands; one’s choice of candidates limited; and one’s information as to candidates’ issue positions is small are
not intensive enough activity to increase significantly one's sense of personal control. Nor can this activity be expected to aid in the formation of democratic or citizenship values. For political activity to perform the functions ascribed to it by participatory theory, the citizen must be directly involved in the give and take of policymaking.¹²

This type of sustained political activity can be considered as an example of transformation activity. It is not necessarily directed toward immediate gratification. In a participatory system, citizens participate in decision-making even when it is not immediately salient to their narrowly defined, short-term self-interests. They are involved in the day to day decisions of government.

Recent psychological theory supports the assumptions of participatory theory. It provides persuasive arguments for a basic need for personal control in the human organism. This need for manipulation of the environment is not limited to one's immediate self-interest, thus the pluralist system does not provide ample opportunities for the development of a sense of personal control.

Mediating Structures Theory

Even those who accept the participatory view of human nature question the practicality of direct democracy in a large nation-state. Given the size and complexity of modern government, the average citizen cannot be effectively included in governmental decision-making. Participatory theory addresses this criticism by calling for decentralization. Mediating structures theory similarly addresses the size and complexity problem. A combination of the two theories provides a democratic alternative which is fully consistent with Angyal's model of personality development.

The theory of mediating structures can be summarized using three points. First is the notion that there exists a dichotomy between private and public life. From the private sphere the individual derives his identity of self and his psychological satisfaction. Theorists argue that sense of fulfillment is expected to come from private life alone and yet the public aspects of life intrude more and more into the private sphere. To the extent that public life is devoid of personal meaning and structures mediating between public and private spheres are weak or nonexistent, the individual is left to find fulfillment on his or her own. This aloneness produces anxiety. The burden on the private sphere to provide necessary psychological gratification for the individual is a heavy one.

Among theorists concerned with mediating structures, a second important area concerns the alienating aspects of the public sphere. Berger and Neuhaus speak of megastructures, Kornhauser of mass society and Nisbet of the remoteness and impersonality of power.¹³ Berger and Neuhaus identify big business, big labor, and big government as the principle megastruc-
tures with which the individual must interact. This interaction can be alienating. Kornhauser argues that when the individuals in the society are related to one another only in their relationship to the state a condition of mass society results. Mass society is characterized by alienated, atomized individuals. Meaning and sense of identity cannot be realized from such large and impersonal institutions as society and the state.

Third for each of these theorists the role of mediating structures is to combine the public and private aspects of life. It is from these structures that the individual gains his or her conception of the outer world and his or her position in it. Mediating structures provide a buffer protecting the individual from the alienating effects of the large impersonal institutions of society. Berger and Neuhaus define mediating structures functionally in this way, and discuss four mediating institutions: Family, church, voluntary associations and neighborhood. The individual can relate to these institutions in a personal way both imparting his or her values to them and receiving and strengthening his or her values from them. To the extent that these institutions are themselves participatory, the individual will learn democratic values and increase his or her self-esteem and sense of personal control.

In addition, if these structures enjoy some power in their relationships with the large powerful institutions of society, then they may aid in combating the alienation brought on by these institutions. Such impersonal, anonymous institutions may exist without distressing the individual. They become alienating when the individual must deal with them to satisfy vital life functions. Because of their size and impersonality, these institutions make the individual confronting them feel impotent and inconsequential. According to Berger and Neuhaus: "One of the most debilitating results of modernization is a feeling of powerlessness in the face of institutions controlled by those whom we do not know and whose values we often do not share."

The feeling of powerlessness and the feeling of insignificance may result in a sense of estrangement or alienation. Kornhauser associates alienation and powerlessness with the social structure known as mass society. The separation of the individual from major social processes separates the individual from himself. He quotes Fromm on this point. Fromm defines the self-estranged as powerless. The self-estranged individual, Fromm notes,

... does not experience himself as the active bearer of his own powers and richness, but as an impoverished 'thing' dependent on powers outside of himself unto whom he has projected his living substance. The individual who has no opportunity to participate in society does not receive support for a sense of self-worth.

Morris Rosenberg in looking at what he terms sense of personal inadequacy gives two possible sources of this feeling. The first is a situation in
which the individual feels he or she is only one in relation to many. In the second case, the individual feels weak in relation to strong powerful others. 18 Both of these characteristics could be ascribed to relationships with those institutions identified by Berger and Neuhaus as megastructures. Indeed, these characteristics could be used in a definition of the term megastructures.

If the mediating institutions are to decrease alienation, then two conditions must be met. First, the individual must be able to exercise some degree of personal control through his or her involvement in the mediating structure; and the structure itself must be able to exercise some degree of control in its relationship with the megastructures and the society at large.

Mediating structures theory and participatory theory come together in their consideration of community. The community can perform as a mediating structure where individuals in a neighborhood have a sense of belonging and where the neighborhood exercises some power in its dealings with society. Nisbet argues that community is lacking where power is externalized or centralized. Residents are not expected to become as involved in a community which lacks sufficient power to make such involvement effective in fulfilling the individual’s needs. 19 For both theories there must be control within the community exercised by the residents. Berger and Neuhaus state “Neighborhood governance exists when . . . in areas such as education, health services, law enforcement, and housing regulation . . . the people democratically determine what is in the interest of their chosen life styles and values.” 20 To satisfy the requirements of participatory theory, this democratic process must directly involve the citizen in policy-making. Then he or she will experience the developmental benefits of participation.

Conclusion

Liberal and pluralist democratic theory with their emphasis on self-interest as the major motivation for political activity satisfy the requirements of the tension-reduction model. As politically relevant deficits are felt, the individual becomes politically active in order to satisfy his or her needs. Those who are satisfied may refrain from political activity. As long as the need for personal control is viewed as resulting from a perceived deficit, electoral politics coupled with the availability of interest group activity is sufficient to meet the needs for control.

More recently psychologists have argued that the drive for autonomy does not arise from a deficit. Although it ultimately is a means for survival, the urge to master the environment is perceived by the individual to be an end in itself. A deficit is not necessary to motivate the individual toward mastery. Personal control is seen as a basic human need. Participatory theory addresses this need. Political activity is expected to give the individual a sense of control over the political environment whether or not im-
mediate, narrowly defined self-interest is at stake. Mediating structures theory addresses the problem of developing a continuing sense of personal control within a complex, modern society. Mediating structures can enhance individual power by collectivizing it. Interest groups can be mediating structures, but are not necessarily so. A participatory mediating structure can reduce alienation by increasing sense of personal control and by giving the individual a sense of belonging. The community can fulfill the requirements of the self-actualization model if the individual exercises power within the community and the community exercises power in the society.

The development of the self-actualization model in psychological theory raises serious questions concerning personal control in a democratic society. Electoral and interest group activity cannot provide the individual with a continuing sense of control over the political process if the need for control goes beyond the satisfaction of narrowly defined self-interest. More personalized, participatory structures are required to satisfy a need for personal control arising not as a response to a deficit but rather as an end in itself.

Notes


15 Ibid., p. 4.
17 Ibid., p. 108.
19 Nisbet, *Quest for Community*, p. 52.
20 Berger and Neuhaus, *To Empower People*, p. 15.