The Politics of Development

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The Politics of Development

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Humans develop within multiple contexts. Regrettably, developmentalists pay inadequate attention to the political context, which, arguably, is the most potent and determinative sphere of the human ecology. The political context is crucial for three reasons.

First, its coverage is extraordinarily broad, and, in key ways binding. It includes governmental systems or structures – which often vary along a continuum of democracy – and their responsibilities for providing key services. It also includes policies, laws, and controlling actions of its agents (e.g., police, security and military personnel). In short, much of daily life – and, crucially, opportunity – is determined by the political context via its structures, policies, and operations.

Second, more so than any other context, the political provides impetus, motive, and opportunity for individuals to actively engage the context, both cognitively and behaviorally. True, individuals engage their family contexts through crucial, evolving connections and separations; and we engage our educational contexts purposefully, but temporarily, in the pursuit of learning and the acquisition of credentials. But the political offers and demands more of the individual.

Beyond the systemized regularity of behavioral engagement (e.g., electoral participation within democratic systems), individuals engage the political context cognitively as an expression of identity – whether that be as broadly as national identity, or as narrowly as a minority identity within the larger nation [Barber, 2009; Hammack, 2011]. In short, much of who we feel we are is reflected in the systems and practices of our governing; and, if it is not, we often engage through various forms of activism to assure that it is.

This elucidates the third, and arguably most potent, element of the political context; namely, the values that the political structures and actors endorse and enact. The power of this element of the political is that the values associated with governing are the most fundamental of human values. That is, the currency of the political context is control or regulation – of access, opportunity, freedoms, rights, self-determination, and self-expression. The degree and manner with which governing systems approach and affect this control has unavoidable and often determinative impact on the day-to-day wellbeing of individuals.

I began gaining these insights quite unintentionally when I responded to invitations, now exactly 20 years ago, to enlarge my research program to the Middle East. I needed no encouragement to honor culture and diversity as I was at the time deep-

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ly engaged in the study of youth and families in numerous countries across the globe, attempting in large part to revive and elaborate the construct of (parental) psychological control [Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005].

I began studying youth in regions of political conflict – first in the occupied Palestinian territories (work that has continued systematically ever since), then Bosnia, and most recently Egypt. I was wholly unprepared for what I would learn about the determining role of the political context in the lives of everyday people. For the longest time, this engrossing component of my research seemed disjointed from the other work on parent-youth dynamics. My colleagues and I wondered, "Why the shift?".

As I will elaborate below, far from indicating a rupture, it is now clear to me that this second component is and has always been fully synchronous with the former. But that clarity came only with my evolving appreciation of what ultimately matters, essentially, to children and adults. That insight came via understanding the political context.

Appreciating the centrality and reach of the political did not come naturally. This was evident in my refusal to credit the answers that young Palestinians gave when I first interviewed a small group of them 20 years ago. As I had done in all of the other cultures, I asked: "When are you happy?" Their answers were all about politics. I though they misunderstood the question. "No, when are YOU happy?", I probed. Their gentle persistence in assuring me that they, in fact, did understand my question forced me to acknowledge that individual wellbeing could indeed be centered around conditions, as they described, as broad as the state of a peace process or the health of a revered political leader. Moreover, when my probing brought forth more hedonistic moments familiar to us, such as recreation, they revealed that even those moments were politicized: by threat of arrest or restrictions on traveling [Barber, 1999].

Just published findings from our continuing work on this generation of youth move this insight well beyond the anecdotal [Barber et al., 2014; McNeely et al., 2014]. Left to define quality of life or wellbeing themselves, this cohort of now adults overwhelmingly prioritized the political domain as determinative of quality of life. In so doing, they often invoked the actual Arabic word for political, and articulated as well how political conditions spill over into all other realms of functioning (e.g., economic, social, psychological). As we review in those papers, such findings support the occasional and fragmented exhortations from disparate literatures – from economics to public health – to focus on individuals' political contexts when attempting to understand and promote wellbeing.

The readiness, indeed eagerness, of young people (as well as adults) to engage their political contexts became quickly evident in this new line of research as well. The first key insight was that youth naturally engage their contexts, cognitively, and that how they cope with the risks of being exposed to or involved in violence depends importantly on how much sensibility, morality, and efficacy they find in the conflicted political dynamics that beset their people [Barber, 2009]. This process is full of identity implications, at no time more profoundly evident to me than when recently standing with millions in Cairo's Tahrir Square one week after Hosni Mubarak was deposed. One emphatic and jubilant refrain from young and old was: "Finally, we can be Egyptian again!" [Barber, 2013; Youniss, Barber, & Billen, 2013].

As I have reviewed recently, the active, identity-enriching component of youths' experience with political conflict – well attended to in sociology, political science and political psychology – is still mostly absent in conventional developmental and clinical psychology models analyzing the impact of political conflict [Barber, 2014].

Finally, the political context can be daunting to conceive because of its multi-layered complexity and multi-faceted reach. The longer I am engaged, however, the simpler it has become. As always this clarity has come from long observation and listening. And here, finally, is the link between the two lines of research: acknowledging the essentiality of respect and dignity. Whether the interaction is between a child and care-giver or between a citizen and the governing political structures, intrusion on or violation of these core characteristics of humanity derail and injure effective and vibrant human development.

Crucially, this is not a reality limited to a mysterious Middle East. Rather, the commanding thread that weaves itself through the articulations of Palestinian adults as to the impact of political conditions, as well as the core driver behind the passion of Egyptians to revolutionize their political system – the violation of basic justice, rights, and dignity – is well familiar to any group, in any nation, that is governed unfairly. For those of us fortunate to live in respectful environments, we may be unaware of the driving influence of the political context, only because those very systems protect rather than violate these basics of humanity. However, as social scientists intent on discovering and refining knowledge for the betterment of the human condition, we miss much of the essence of human development and wellbeing when we ignore the contexts, micro and macro, that regulate identity, self-expression and access to resources we need to effectively engage our own development.

Acknowledgment

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