



Measuring Inequality: Autonomy

Abstract

This project develops survey questions to capture and measure individuals' autonomy: the degree of choice and control they have in key areas of their lives. Reviewing the theoretical literature led to three components of autonomy: (i) self-reflection, (ii) active or delegated decision-making, and (iii) a wide variety of high-quality options. A template of questions for these components has been developed and tested. This project found that, despite limitations, survey measurement of the complex concept of autonomy is possible and revealing.

Key findings

- We adopted a conceptual view of autonomy as 'the amount of choice, control and empowerment an individual has over their life'.
- Based on a literature review, autonomy is optimally seen as consisting of three components: self-reflection, active or delegated decision-making, and a wide range of high quality options (perceived and actual).
- The barriers to achieving autonomy are: conditioned expectations, coercion and structural constraints, or a lack of information, advice and support.
- While some data on autonomy and related concepts are collected, there are few existing measures that suit the needs of the Equality Measurement Framework. Therefore, it is important that data are collected on the new measures.
- It was found that asking sequential sets of questions to addressing the three components and their barriers could lead to an understanding of autonomy in a number of specific areas of an individual's life.
- These question frames were developed into a template which can be used to measure autonomy in almost any area of life.
- Broad questions asking about levels of 'choice and control' are useful for gaining a breadth of understanding about autonomy. Follow-up questions asking respondents how much choice and control they think they will have in five years' time can be used as an indication of aspirations and empowerment.
- Scales were created to explore the interaction between the different components of autonomy. These questions can also operate as broad measures of autonomy in an individual's life overall (rather than a specific area of life).
- The areas of priority for new measures of autonomy are: household expenses, work/life balance and relationships (boyfriends, girlfriends, partners, husbands and wives).
- A separate set of questions asking solely about autonomy in relationships was developed. Testing these questions demonstrates that it is possible to obtain information about levels of autonomy in sensitive areas of people's lives.
- Despite limitations, survey measurement of the complex concept of autonomy is possible and revealing.



Background

This project was funded by the Government Equalities Office as a contribution to the establishment of the Equality Measurement Framework (EMF).

The EMF is being jointly developed by the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the GEO as a basis for monitoring inequality in twenty-first century Britain. The Framework covers the six statutory *equality characteristics*: gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation and identity, religion and belief, age, and social class. The Framework also has *domains* (for example: physical security, health, standard of living). It enables evaluation of inequalities in the position of both individuals and groups in terms of their substantive freedoms: the central and valuable things in life that people can actually *do* and *be*.

Research findings

Defining autonomy

We began with a broad definition of autonomy as *the amount of choice, control and empowerment an individual has over their life*. Achieving autonomy ensures that individuals and groups are empowered to make appropriate decisions in critical areas of their lives. This means extending the measurement of autonomy beyond simply asking “who did the choosing?” Additional measures that capture the adequacy of the options available and whether the outcomes would have been chosen if the person concerned had been given an informed choice, are also necessary. Therefore, measuring autonomy involves exploring:

- *Internal factors* such as perceptions, expectations and entrenched behavioural patterns
- *External constraints* on the formulation and exercise of choices.

Achieving autonomy does not mean having unlimited choices or operating in a completely isolated environment where the influence or

consideration for significant others is disregarded. It is recognised that a job for example, can constrain a person by reducing their free time but also facilitate other aims by providing resources. Therefore, the new questions designed must allow for these contradictions.

Autonomy as three components

Following a systematic review of autonomy and related concepts, we use the following conceptual scheme to condense what we understand to be the most salient issues for measuring autonomy:

	Components of achieved autonomy	Barriers to autonomy
1	Self-reflection	Conditioned expectations
2	Active or delegated decision-making	Passivity; coercion
3	Wide range of high quality options (perceived and actual)	Structural constraints; lack of information, advice and support

While it is assumed that a person could have all, none or some of the components of achieved autonomy, it is recognised that all three components will be necessary to have complete autonomy. The conceptual scheme above also includes the expected barriers to achieving autonomy.

Translating this into a model for survey questions with quantifiable results, we have focused on whether individuals are:

- Able to reflect on their situation with respect to a particular area of their life
- Able to be involved in the decision-making process if they want to be
- Satisfied with their situation
- Empowered to change the situation if they want to
- Able to identify what prevents them from improving their situation.



We also designed scales to represent each of the components of autonomy and tested more simple questions asking about levels of 'choice and control'.

Which areas of life to focus on?

An understanding of the coverage and gaps of relevant data collection has informed the decision about which areas to focus on. These were: major household expenses, work/life balance and relationships. In addition, we asked shorter questions on a further seven areas of life, including: health, personal safety, employment, where you live, family life, religion or belief and social life.

Creating new questions

Questions were created and iteratively redefined during cognitive testing, which involved 34 interviews. The final set of questions was then piloted in the ONS Opinions Survey with a demographically representative sample of 1,071 respondents. The survey pilot confirmed that it is possible to:

- Identify those who are potentially without autonomy
- Identify which component of autonomy they are lacking
- Explore the relationship between components of autonomy
- Create a template of questions which can be used in a large-scale survey to measure autonomy in any area of life
- Design successful questions which measure sensitive areas of life such as personal relationships.

Identifying the potential risk group

Coercion, or an inability to have active or delegated decision-making, can be identified by:

- Those who do not make decisions by themselves and whose views do not have equal weight in the decision-making process.

- Those who state that either their community, someone else, pressure from others or other people's attitudes prevents them from improving their situation.

Structural constraints, or those with a limited range and quality of options, can be identified by:

- Those whose situation is not suitable and would like it to improve it.
- Those who state that either a lack of support, advice, money, job or transport, or that their health, age, family responsibilities, debt, job, where they live or discrimination towards them prevent them from improving their situation.

Conditioned expectations, or an inability to self-reflect, can be identified by:

- Those whose situation is not suitable but do not want to improve it.
- Those whose situation is suitable but their views do not have equal weight in the decision-making process.
- Those who do not want to improve their situation and their views do not have equal weight in the decision-making process.
- Those who lack self-confidence or do not know how to improve their situation.

For example, the major household expenses section from the survey pilot results showed that: 8.4 per cent of the sample were identified as potentially lacking the ability to be active in decision-making, 32.1 per cent were potentially lacking in a good range and quality of options and 14.8 per cent were potentially lacking in the ability to self-reflect. (Note that there may be respondents who fall into more than one of these categories; the figures should not be added together).

Choice and control

In an attempt to gain information about autonomy across a variety of areas of life, respondents were asked how much choice and control they feel they have over these areas. Although cognitive interviews



highlighted some concerns with this phrase, the survey revealed large differences between groups, particularly between social classes. Asking respondents how much choice and control they think they will have in five years' time can also be used to measure aspirations and empowerment.

Self-reflection and conditioned expectations

While we have been able to identify participants who have limited ability to self-reflect, identifying this together with 'conditioned expectations' is a methodological challenge. Perceived choices and independence may not be the same as the actual choices available to an individual. Our strategy to overcome this was to combine and compare the answers to subjective and more objective, factual questions.

Comparing different groups

Survey results illustrate that there are differences in how autonomy is experienced between groups.

The scales designed to represent the components of autonomy in a person's life overall indicate that there are inequalities between disabled and non-disabled respondents. Disabled respondents were more likely to feel that they had fewer options available to them, more likely to feel coerced and more likely not to feel active in the decision-making process.

We tested the effectiveness of such questions by exploring the work/life balance of those in employment and comparing the experiences of parents versus non-parents. If parents in employment indicated limited autonomy compared to non-parents in employment, we could assume that the questions were working as intended. In fact, the survey showed that more parents than non-parents reported spending too little time across all the areas of life mentioned. Almost two-thirds of parents reported

spending too little time on their hobbies or interests and almost one-third of parents reported spending too little time on childcare or other caring activities. These results can be broken down further and for example, fathers were more likely than mothers to indicate spending too little time on childcare (31 per cent and 24 per cent respectively).

Successful questions showed that 92 per cent of those who state that they work too much would also like to improve their work/life balance. This group account for 15 per cent of the total sample.

Interpreting the data

First, it is necessary to compare different components of autonomy when interpreting the data. For example, our survey suggests that 47 per cent of those in the highest social class state that they work 'too much', but this group also claims to have a high degree of choice and control over their employment. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that such individuals who work too much have freely chosen this aspect of their life and do not have limited autonomy with respect to their employment.

Second, measuring autonomy is vital to an understanding of inequality in society, in addition to measures of outcomes and process. An individual may have a well paid job and been hired without experiencing discrimination (therefore having positive outcome and process indicators), but in parallel to this feel trapped in their job and unable to leave due to a lack of confidence (thus having limited autonomy). This can be explored by questions on what prevents them from improving or changing their situation, and can be framed to indicate whether the barrier is 'conditioned expectations', 'coercion' or 'structural constraints'.



Conclusions

- It is crucial to measure autonomy, process and outcome indicators to be able to present a complete picture of inequality in society.
- Autonomy should be understood as being comprised of three components: self-reflection, active or delegated decision-making, wide range of high quality options (perceived and actual). The concept should be measured in this way.
- It is possible to obtain information about levels of autonomy in sensitive areas of people's lives such as relationships.
- A template of questions for measuring autonomy has been designed and can be used for measuring many areas of life.
- Specific components of autonomy in a person's life overall can be explored using the scales developed in this project.

Recommendations

- The templates and scales designed by this research should be used and further developed in future research to measure the components of autonomy (for life overall, specific areas of life and relationships).
- The phrase 'choice and control' should be used to gain broad measures of autonomy across a range of areas of life.
- Asking how much 'choice and control' individuals think they will have in five years' time can be used as an indication of aspirations and empowerment.
- The following surveys have relevant questions for which data is collected and could be added to the Equality Measurement Framework: the National Patients Survey Programme, the Count Me In Survey, the British Crime Survey and the Life Opportunities Survey.

About the project

The aim of this project was to develop new approaches to the measurement of autonomy. This included designing, testing and refining a questionnaire module suitable for inclusion in a large-scale household survey. This was achieved using the following methods:

- Systematic review of existing literature
- Audit of existing measures of autonomy and related concepts
- Cognitive interviews with a purposive sample of 34 participants
- Survey pilot in the ONS Opinions Survey with a demographically representative sample of 1,071 respondents.

All research was conducted in 2009.



Further information

The full report, ***Measuring Inequality: Autonomy. The degree of empowerment in decisions about one's own life*** Tania Burchardt, Martin Evans and Holly Holder, London School of Economics and the University of Oxford is published by the Government Equalities Office (GEO).

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