Constructions of "development" in local Third World communities:
Outline of a research strategy

Thomas Jordan

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Thomas Jordan (May 1998)

ABSTRACT: This paper presents a research strategy for studying how members of Third World communities think about "development." I propose that the structures of reasoning about development is a significant factor co-determining the prospects for empowerment to pursue successful self-managed development processes. Cognitive-developmental theory is used to formulate a number of dimensions for analysing how the notion "development" is constructed. The proposed study involves semi-structured interviews with community members using a specific methodology derived from constructive-developmental psychology.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of this paper is related to a goal I think most of us can accept as desirable: Empowerment of members of local Third World communities to actively improve their own living conditions. I propose that a key factor influencing the possibilities for effective local development efforts can be found in how the community members themselves reason about development. How do individuals (or groups, if the meaning-making is shared) conceive desirable goals of development? What do they regard as possible ways to attain those goals? How do they reason about the obstacles to development?

The purpose of this paper is to develop a research strategy for investigating the structures of reasoning about "development" by members of local Third World communities.[1] The theoretical framework I propose is borrowed and adapted from cognitive-developmental psychology.

An important delimitation is that no attempt will be made to conceptualize the interplay of forms of reasoning and the nature of external restraints. Of course, the unique aspects of the social, economic and physical environment play a major role for the contents and forms of reasoning about development in a particular location. However, the approach presented here focusses on the identification of different forms of reasoning within a local community, i.e. among individuals sharing the same geographical environment, even if

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[1] The idea to this research project was provoked by my reading of Johan Dahl's prepublication manuscript of his doctoral dissertation "A cry for water" (Dahl, 1997), which deals with similar issues, but uses a different theoretical approach.

the social and economic position of each person might differ vastly.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The last few decades has seen a considerable activity in research on cognitive development among adults.[2] The core assumption of these research efforts is that cognitive development, or the evolution of the structures of meaning-making, does not stop in adolescence. Researchers using different theoretical and methodological approaches have been able to identify several significant stages of cognitive development that normally occur during adulthood. These changes in the structure of reasoning and in the construction of identities have profound implications for how an individual conceives her/his own identity and goals in life, as well as for how the social environment is interpreted. Elsewhere (Jordan, 1997), I have made a survey of a number of cognitive-developmental frameworks, as well as summarized the main characteristics of the stages of development described by them. It is not necessary to go deeper into this complex body of theories here, however. Rather, I will draw on relevant features of cognitive-developmental theory for identifying how a person's reasoning about development may be structured. A framework for identifying structures of reasoning about development may permit analyses of the differences between various ways of constructing the notion of development, which in turn might provide a valuable basis for discussing implications for empowerment strategies.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

Before going into the details of the analytical dimensions I will make a brief outline of the research strategy I propose. The general purpose is to take stock of and analyse the existing ways of reasoning about development in a chosen local community in some part of the Third World. The method for gathering the empirical material is half-structured interviews with a stratified sample of individuals with different roles in the community, carried out on-site. In the interviews, the respondents are asked a number of questions about their conceptions of development (see the interview guideline below). Each response must be screened for the need for follow-up questions, in order to probe for the underlying meaning-making (somewhat elaborated

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[2] A selection of important contributions: Alexander et al., 1990; Basseches, 1984; Broughton, 1975; Commons et al., 1984; Commons et al., 1990; Fisher & Torbert, 1995; Fowler, 1981; Gilligan, 1982; Habermas, 1981; Harvey et al., 1961; Heron, 1992; Hy & Loevinger, 1996; Kegan, 1982; Kegan, 1994; Kohlberg, 1981; Krebs & van Hesteren, 1994; Lahey, 1986; Lahey et al., 1988; Lauer, 1983; Loevinger, 1976; Miller & Cook-Greuter, 1994; Rosenberg, 1988; Rosenberg et al., 1988; Schroder et al., 1967; Selman, 1980; Steiner, 1996; Wilber et al., 1986.

below). This means that the interviewer must be thoroughly familiar with the research design, and with the theoretical background of the project. The interviews are tape-recorded, and are later transcribed and analysed.

Each interview is scored by two independent scorers, using the preliminary scoring system described below. Relevant individual parts (sentences, sections) of the interviews may be scored in different dimensions simultaneously, generating a greater number of scorings than of relevant interview sections. Special attention is given to relevant statements that seem to be incompatible with the preliminary formulation of the scoring system. These items are then used for reconstructing the scoring dimensions.

When a scoring system that seems to deal well with the interview material has been developed, it can be used as a basis for formulating a typology of constructions of "development." Such a typology can be used as a heuristic device for developing training programmes, curricula or development projects.

SCORING DIMENSIONS

I have, so far, identified five dimensions that might prove relevant to an empiricial analysis of the structure of reasoning about development. The five dimensions are:
    A. Concrete/abstract conceptualization
    B. Reasoning about causality
    C. Ingroup–outgroup (identity)
    D. Coordination of perspectives
    E. Agency

This framework is derived from cognitive-developmental theory, especially from the work of Kegan, Rosenberg, Habermas, Schroeder and Wilber, but it is not necessary to be thoroughly familiar with all the aspects of these theories in order to use the framework.

For each dimension I have tentatively specified four levels of increasing complexity. These four levels correspond approximately to four of Robert Kegan's "orders of consciousness," but they are not derived from his framework with full theoretical stringency. The resulting 5*4 framework (five dimensions and four stages) is only meant to be a heuristic starting-point in the analytic process. The analysis of the interviews might (hopefully) prompt a revision of the content and number of levels, and might suggest other or different relevant dimensions.

A. Concrete/abstract conceptualization
This dimension reflects the often observed fact that at earlier stages of cognitive development, reasoning tends to be closely related to concrete concepts

(Selman, 1980), whereas late-stage reasoning draws on abstract and complex notions.

Stage 1. No abstract development concept. Development is regarded as concrete things one has or doesn't have, e.g. food, a well, a road, a medical centre, a school. Reasoning about development only refers to concrete examples in a narrative mode. There is no notion of development as a generalized phenomenon.

Stage 2. Development is regarded as a state which can be described by comparing different regions/villages/families/persons with each other. Visions about development only refer to concrete experiences, not to hypothetical visions of what might be possible, but has not yet been seen.

Stage 3. Development is regarded as a social process that brings change not only to the state of the (observable) society, but also of the internal world of individuals, e.g. as new skills or changed attitudes. A hypothetical future may be imagined that goes beyond concretely made experiences.

Stage 4. Development is seen as something that has an infinite number of dimensions, something that has a different meaning to different persons in different contexts. At this stage definition of development is in itself regarded as an interesting problem with no definite and unequivocal solution (thinking about thinking). The meaning of development is interpreted contextually and as a notion that should be in continual reconstruction.

B. Reasoning about causality

This dimension reflects the structure of reasoning about social causality, i.e. why social events occur or do not occur (Rosenberg, 1988). The stages represent increasing levels of cognitive complexity, especially in terms of mentally representing how different elements of the social system relate to each other.

Stage 1. No opinion about causes of underdevelopment or development. Pieces of information and events remain separate, they are not integrated into a coherent conception of causal relationships.

Stage 2. Development problems are explained by a single causal factor or actor. Causal relationships are perceived in terms of unidirectional cause–effect relationships. There is no understanding of a system with complex interaction.

Stage 3. Causal relationships are seen as bilateral relationships, where both sides interact.

Stage 4. Development is regarded as a complex system made up by a multitude of circumstances and actors, where no single factor is the only decisive causal agent.

C. Ingroup–outgroup (identity)

This dimension refers to the scope of reasoning, especially what groups, collectives or societies figure as important points of reference in development reasoning. The stages represent a widening scope of attention, later stages including consideration of the society outside the immediate lifeworld in development reasoning.

Stage 1. Discussions of development only refers to one's own concrete daily life. "We" is restricted to the person to whom one has direct personal relationships (household, kin, neighbours). Outgroups are regarded as irrelevant and uninteresting.

Stage 2. Development is regarded as a problem that is common for the village or the neighbourhood. "We" includes the village, the district, or perhaps the ethnic group one belongs to. Outgroups are considered, and it is recognized that they must be included in reasoning about development options. However, the conceptions about outgroups are stereotypic, and mostly negative.

Stage 3. Development is seen as a problem for the whole region, or the whole nation. "We" includes the whole nation. The images of outgroups are relatively differentiated. Mutual learning is regarded as fruitful. It is recognized that there are large individual differences among both ingroup and outgroup members.

Stage 4. Development is a universal theme. "We" includes human beings in general. Unique individual traits are more interesting than group membership. Differences between groups and regions can be used for developing creative solutions to problems.

D. Coordination of perspectives

This dimension concerns the cognitive ability to put oneself in the position of other people and other roles, and to reason about how different perspectives relate to each other (Schroeder et al., 1967). The stages represent growing abilities to take the role of others, and to integrate different perspectives with each other.

Stage 1. Refers only to own perspective. No signs of awareness that other actors might have a different perspective on development issues.

Stage 2. Some signs of understanding that other actors might have other perspectives and interests, but this insight does not result in a modification of own perspective.

Stage 3. Insight in the perspectives of other actors influences own interpretations and attitudes to some extent. Some ability to reason about development problems from a "third party perspective."

Stage 4. Ability to reason about development without being embedded in personal interests. The perspectives and interests of other persons and groups can be considered and coordinated with the perspective of the ingroup to generate problem solutions that work for all parties involved. Uses tension between the perspectives of different actors to come up with creative solutions.

E. Agency
This dimension refers to reasoning about actions to further development, in particular the issue of who is able to initiate and realize development issues. The stages represent a growing sense of being able to intentionally influence future events and states.

Stage 1. No explicit conception of agency, life is lived as it is from moment to moment (embeddedness in the concrete present). The person reacts to what happens, and regards own actions as the only possible in given circumstances. The conditions of the environment are regarded as given. Oneself and others are perceived in terms of concrete attributes: strong/weak, wealthy/poor, woman/man; and in terms of what one has or doesn't have: arable land area, number of children, cattle, etc. No conception of people having internal resources that can be developed. Development means getting what one didn't have before. Few ideas about goals to strive for.

Stage 2. Unilateral idea of agency. Only powerful persons (e.g. politicians, foreign aid officials) can change conditions. Change is regarded as possible, but only in terms of gradual quantitative differences (more water, more food, more education, more cash). One's own possibilities to influence development are limited. Persons are perceived as bearers of internal attributes, e.g. concrete skills that might be developed (e.g. handicraft skills, business sense).

Goals are primarily conceived in conventional terms, strongly dependent on the norms and values of the surrounding culture.

Stage 3. Bilateral conception of agency. Individuals or groups can achieve development by skilful work or business activities. Development is possible by exploiting the possibilities offered by the existing system, but conceptions about fundamentally changing the way the society operates are absent. The environment is still largely seen as given. However, by own effort, e.g. development of skills, it is possible to improve living conditions. Goals are more individualized, but still primarily oriented towards conventional conceptions about the desirable life.

Stage 4. Strongly developed ability to reason hypothetically brings transcendence of the conception of a given environment. It is possible for individuals and collectives to choose path, to shape one's destiny. Life goals can be defined in very different ways, depending on individual preferences. An important aspect of development is the ability to change oneself and one's situation.

In addition to these five dimensions, several more may emerge as meaningful. One dimension that might be relevant is the type of motivation for cooperative efforts, possibly ranging from (1) short-term personal benefits, (2) fulfilling social roles (i.e. being a good citizen), (3) realizing personal visions, to (4) serving transpersonal values (working for what is generally good). Another dimension that might merit consideration is the character of interpersonal relations in work settings, e.g. if the division of labour is conceived in terms of dominance/obedience relationships, or if it is conceived as a functional relationship between equal persons, based on mutual esteem.

INTERVIEW GUIDELINE

The interview format must be very openended, since the object of the study is the respondent's own structure of meaning-making about development. The main task of the interviewer is to get the respondent to talk about development in the form and in the terms that is natural for him/her. This means that the questions should be as vague as possible, inviting the respondent to supply the issues, concepts and arguments that are native to his/her own mental world. The interviewer must then proceed to pick up salient statements, concepts, and interpretations, and probe for the meaning-making system that produced them.

Dana Ward, who has made a similar study of constructions of the meaning of "democracy" described the interview technique in the following way:

The material was collected over the course of six- to ten-hour interviews with each subject. […] The structure of the interviews was such that questions went from the abstract to the concrete in each area of concern. For example, sections on democracy, freedom, equality, government, political parties, nationality, and the like all began by asking a question on the order of "What is your understanding of the term . . ." democracy, freedom and so forth. Then in each area the questions became more and more specific, focusing, for example, on specific leaders rather than "leaders and people." In addition, specific questions designed to draw out the structure of thought were attached to each section. The central questions here asked subjects to negate the concept in question (e.g., "What would you consider to be undemocratic?") or to adjust their personal perspectives by putting themselves in the place of a political leader or racial minority, or in a different political context (e.g., "What would your life have been like if you had been black," or ". . . if you had grown up in the Third World?"). The main question, however, was simply "Why do you believe that?" asked repeatedly, producing a chain of justifications revealing the subject's reasoning about particular issues. (Ward, 1988, p. 69)

A major difference to Ward's format is obviously the comprehensiveness of the interviews. It is desirable to make comprehensive interviews, but 6-10 hours will probably be beyond the possibilities for most researchers in a Third world setting, excepting anthropologists doing longterm fieldwork. Very useful considerations about interview techniques for this kind of interviews can be found in the manual by Lahey et al. (1988).[3]

As lead questions I propose the following:
   – What does development mean for you? (Examples?)
   – Which are the most important obstacles to development?
   – Which problems must be solved in order to reach the goals of
     development?
   – Who can do something about the development problems?
   – What are the most important reasons for the lack of
     development?
   – Who are important actors in the development process?
   – Do you know someone who thinks differently about
     development?
   – What can you do yourself to attain development goals?

   Follow-up questions on, for example:
      why certain actors act as they do/don't act.
      the role of outgroups
      the role of authorities/politicians

[3] The manual can be obtained from Karen Manning, Longfellow 221, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, Ma. 02138, USA.

Normally, many contextually tailored follow-up questions are required to elicit the basic meaning-making structures.

EXPECTED RESULTS

Similar research (e.g. Ward, 1988; Rosenberg, 1988; Selman, 1980; Kohlberg, 1981; Fisher & Torbert, 1995) suggests that an investigation along the lines proposed here will result in empirical validation of the existence of structurally different ways of constructing the notion of "development" among members of local Third World communities. Furthermore, I expect that it will be possible to use the results for constructing a typology of structurally different ways of making meaning about development.

In terms of analysing the results, I expect that there will be a significant, but not perfect, correlation across the different dimensions, in the sense that low-stage scores in one dimension will imply a high probability of low-stage scores in the other dimensions. I also expect that there will be a significant relation of high-stage scoring and high levels of formal education.

On a practical level, I expect that studies along these lines will lead to a clearer analysis of the aspects of individual and collective meaning-making that are limiting the prospects for self-reliant development and general empowerment. Such knowledge can be used for designing focussed empowerment strategies, e.g. in the form of village role-plays, transformative conflict resolution using mediation techniques, as well as more conventional educational efforts.

The general approach presented above can also be used for other types of research. One interesting hypothesis is that successful examples of locally initiated development efforts may be related to high scorings on cognitive complexity for the initiators and participants, whereas stagnation may be related to low scoring.

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