
When first recognized in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), cultural rights represents a category of human rights that primarily concerns the development of one’s personhood and self-fulfillment. Article 27 of the UDHR provides that ‘[e]veryone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits’ – an element considered essential for an individual to fully realize her personality and character. The aim of the right to take part in cultural life is to provide the opportunity for every individual ‘to obtain the means of developing his personality’ including through the pursuit of artistic, literary, and intellectual excellence. Subsequent expansion of the right to include, for instance, sports reflect the same rationale – that individuals may develop his personality and find meaning in and through sports.

The right to take part in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sports is recognized in article 30 of the CRPD and the connection between the right to take part in cultural life and self-fulfillment remain strong. Article 30(2) of the CRPD, for instance, requires States to ensure persons with disabilities ‘have the opportunity to develop and utilize their creative, artistic and intellectual potential.’ By situating self-fulfillment in the context of the CRPD, one is also better able to recognize that setting aside our biases derived from our able-bodies, our innate capacity and desire to pursue and attain intellectual, artistic and creative excellence are equal. As persons with disabilities are often perceived as ‘incapable of living even “minimally satisfying lives”’*, the notion of self-fulfillment is indispensable to the replacement of the traditional ‘medical approach’ to persons with disabilities.

But as one speaks of self-fulfillment/realization, what do they mean to persons with disabilities? Is self-fulfillment for them experienced in ways quantitatively or qualitatively different from that of bodily-abled persons? How do persons with intellectual disabilities experience or achieve self-fulfillment? Consequently, how should human rights law and practice approach these issues? Lawyers are unlikely able to answer these questions.

This is a proposed inter-disciplinary project whose aim is to articulate the concept of ‘self-fulfillment’ within international human rights law and theory and explore its application in the context of the CRPD.

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* Carlson L, ‘Music, Intellectual Disability and Human Flourishing’ in Blake H et al. (eds), Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies (OUP 2016)