

Annotations on Amitai Etzioni's "The Limits of Privacy"

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In "The Limits of Privacy," Amitai Etzioni presents a series of privacy conundrums to set forth his opinions on resolution. Underlying each of these topics is his sense of communitarianism in which individual rights may need be tempered to ensure a community's best interest. In other words, public interest (often called security) is more important to a society than one's personal choices and privacy.

While Etzioni expresses his cases using a sensible and calculated approach, I feel he underestimates human emotions and motivational factors. Additionally, while he often refers to other countries as examples, he neglects to explore the cultural contexts which elicit the different responses from Americans than other countries.

First off, in the chapter discussing proposed National ID cards, Etzioni suggests that, "American society is one of the few democracies that has no universal identification system. (page 137)" but he fails to address the universal benefits which provide incentive to be register for a national ID card.

When a country provides health insurance, integrated welfare programs, educational credits, public transportation, and the like, the incentive and reasoning for a national ID card is increased significantly. In the US, most all social programs are an administrative hodge-podge of jurisdictions in which mismanagement and contradictory policies produce many of the problems of fraud and mistrust within the welfare and other government run programs.

The only benefit to society in the case Etzioni makes for the National ID card seems to be a purported increase the effectiveness of law enforcement personnel and ease in tracking down “dead-beat” parents to extract child support payments. Even if such efficiencies did reduce the time officers spend solving a crime, there is no clear indication that such ID scheme would reduce crimes being committed in the first place – which is the aim of law enforcement.

The requirements Etzioni presents for the card suggest that security would be enhanced by the ability of “public authorities” to oblige a citizen to produce the card at command (page 113). This seems contradictory to his conclusion which says, “However, notions that universal identifiers will help usher in a police state are based on fundamental misconceptions about how such regimes arise. (page 137)” as such legal obligation to carry ID 24/7 and present such papers without cause at the behest of authorities seems to be, along with an “unfree” press, limits on speech, etc., a primary characteristic a police state.

The same lack of incentive is evident in other chapters concerning screening new-born babies for HIV with or without permission of the mother, and requiring sex offenders to register with local law enforcement.

Despite the rather brushed aside fact that any mother and fetus deserves pre-natal regardless of financial disposition, Etzioni contends that the subsequent cost to society require that babies be openly tested no matter what the mother (or father) decides. Certainly the cost benefits of the helping HIV positive children whilst young suggests Etzioni is correct but, he misses the boat in thinking that appropriately funded programs and health benefits exist to provide incentive.

If low-low income areas (or others for that matter) had adequately funded programs to deal with HIV positive babies (plus their families and communities), there would be a clear incentive for the mothers to test.

Certainly with the knowledge that care, (including counseling and life-style education) was readily available mothers would be more inclined to compromise their privacy for the greater good of the community. In a way, effecting a tacit exchange of information in exchange for assistance (both health and social related) in dealing with a debilitating illness such as HIV.

In conclusion, I think Etzioni should place greater significance on the cultural tendencies that shape our impressions of “authority” and thus our reactions towards compromising personal privacy.